



The Captain's Wicked Widow (Sinners and Scoundrels #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: Captain Starling is a rogue who knows how to get what he wants, but this wicked widow will not be won so easily. No, she intends to make him beg before the night is through.

Captain Starling has one job, expose a certain notorious lady as a cheat at the gaming tables and save his employer from debtors' prison. Instead, he finds himself increasingly fascinated by his enigmatic quarry... Is the widow as innocent as she appears, or is she the passionate hellcat he suspects beneath that cool exterior? Either way, Starling can't keep his eyes off of her. Or his hands, or his mouth... This might be a more dangerous game than he anticipated.

Fiercely independent widow Helen Montrose is deadly at the card table and determined to fleece the peerage of as much blunt as she can. Never again will she be at the mercy of another, and she is determined to use all her wiles to build a fortune big enough to buy the life she always dreamed of. But, carefully laid plans tend to go awry, especially when a tall, arrogant stranger appears and sends all her good sense flying with just a flash of his impish smile.

But, she is determined to come out on top in this game of wills, and if it takes a sexy wager to get the best of him, so be it. After all, Helen always wins.

This is a high-heat, regency novella featuring a mischievously sexy captain and a widow who learns the secrets of pleasure under the right man's touch. Get out your fans, it will be scorching hot.

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CHAPTER ONE

LONDON, 1815

Helen sensed she was being watched long before the man stepped into view.

Keeping her eyes down, she pretended to rearrange her cards carefully while examining him from the corner of her eye. One had to keep their wits about them when playing deep at the Palais du Poussant, a gaming hell notorious for high stakes. Helen took a deep breath and focused again on the game at hand, keeping her attention on the men seated around the table. Commerce was a game of wits, strategy, and a large helping of bluff, and she needed to use each of those skills tonight.

Helen found that the men who congregated around the card tables at such places naturally tended to underestimate her, no matter that time and again she fleeced the lot of them before the night was through.

Apparently, Helen had built up a bit of a reputation, but that didn't stop the gentlemen who frequented the club from trying to best her whenever she sat down at the table. Although, considering that some men of the ton took gaming so seriously, they would lay a bet on even the most trivial of things, she couldn't really be surprised.

Boredom must be such a burden to the upper crust of society.

Just the other day, she had heard of a ludicrous wager based on which raindrop would make its way fastest down a window pane. Utterly ridiculous.

The Red Widow , was the name whispered behind her back, according to her friend, Amelia, an acclaimed singer and lady of the demi-monde who frequented such establishments. Apparently, it was a reference to Helen's penchant for wearing a daring shade of red, but secretly she preferred to imagine it referred to the fact that night after night she sent the arrogant twits away with a metaphorical bloody nose.

Helen loved the thrill of winning as much as she enjoyed watching those who challenged her sullenly slink away with empty pockets.

Never in her previous, respectable life, had she imagined she could ever become so mercenary, but finding out your beloved husband had harboured an entire other family , complete with a nursery of children, had a way of changing a woman.

Helen would never forget the day the solicitor called her into his office a week after James' passing, explaining that the bulk of the estate had been set aside for the illegitimate son she had not been able to bear him. The will had left Helen with a mere pittance to survive on.

It had been especially heart wrenching since James had never once made her believe he was anything but happy with her. Holding her tight and soothing her as she lost first one babe, then another.

As childhood sweethearts, Helen had imagined the pair of them would weather all the storms of life together, but it seemed James had chosen to rather find his happiness elsewhere.

But that was then, and this was now.

Now, Helen was building a life, and a fortune, on her own wits. With no one to depend on, or disappoint her again.

When one was left penniless and heartbroken, there was nothing left to lose.

Helen glanced briefly around, searching for the man again. There was something about him that was out of place here. Maybe it was the easy air about him, or the sardonic smile that quirked his lips while watching the play. Whatever it was, it was clear he was not there for the stakes.

He was there for something else entirely. But what?

There were of course other pleasures to be found in the Palais, but those were tucked away in the deeper rooms that Helen had only ventured into once, long ago. The sensual pleasures indulged in there had not been to her interest at the time, but the longer she spent in this new, hedonistic world, the murkier her previously held beliefs seemed to get.

Sometimes, late at night alone in her bed, Helen imagined taking a lover.

Why should she not?

But in the harsh light of day, she always shrugged off the idea as nothing more than a moment of weakness.

No, it would not do to entangle her emotions with a man again.

Helen turned her attention back to the game, raising her bet and accepting another card from the dealer before throwing one away. Careful to keep her face as impassive as a still pond as she glanced down primly at her hand.

Although she might appear unmoved to an observer, inside, her limbs tingled with excitement.

Her odds of winning had just improved significantly.

Helen pretended to sip at her glass of wine, noting that the man next to her was deep into his cups, slurring slightly as he turned to the men standing behind him observing the action. He bragged loudly to the room, and the assembled spectators guffawed with laughter as if their good sense had long ago been drowned in excess and drink.

All the better. It was at this late hour that a fortune could be made, as arrogance and pompous impulsivity had the lords assembled here throw outlandish sums into the pot.

She leaned slightly forward, allowing a flash of cleavage in the low neckline of her wine-red silk gown. It was perhaps an underhand move, but Helen had no longer any qualms about using her feminine charms if it would further her cause.

She had learned the hard way that there was no such thing as fair play.

There was a suitable amount of ogling from the group assembled, in the place of serious play, and Helen noted with pleasure her opponent's distraction.

The stranger moved closer, standing almost directly across from her now, behind the dealer.

Helen couldn't help a small frown of consternation wrinkle her brow. She really couldn't afford to be diverted at this crucial stage.

And distracted she was, as she flicked her gaze again up to his, the two of them like twin pillars of calm amongst the raucous cacophony of the gaming room.

He stared back at her with an intensity that made Helen want to squirm in her seat, but she ruthlessly crushed the impulse, narrowing her eyes as she boldly returned his

look.

The strange man was undeniably attractive, with a roguish glint to his eye and an unruly mop of dark blonde hair, a hint of evening beard glinting along the line of his jaw in the candlelight.

The way he was looking at her sent an unexpected sizzle of excitement through her veins, her belly tightening with something she didn't care to examine too closely.

A most interesting reaction.

His attire was also outrageously vulgar, the yellow paisley waistcoat and burgundy evening jacket almost seemed chosen to offend the senses. No less than three elaborate watch fobs dangled from his pockets.

Really.

The man winked at her, a brazen expression on his face as his lips curled up into an impish smile, and Helen blinked in surprise, dropping her gaze quickly as an embarrassing wash of heat rose up her neck and flushed her cheeks pink.

Despite the unexpected distraction, she somehow managed to complete her play, winning a sizeable sum with a small smile of satisfaction.

She should have been pleased, but instead, she found herself inexplicably put out.

Never before had she found herself pulled out of the concentration she brought to the game.

Some whispered that Helen must beat the deck somehow, as it was impossible for a woman to be so good at play, or so lucky.

But the truth was Helen was simply good at cards. Whether it was the strange way she could remember the smallest details or the fact that she had a passion for strategy, she did not know.

Perhaps it was the fact that, of everyone here, she had the most to lose... and also, to gain.

Whatever it was that gave her the edge, she intended to use it for long enough to achieve her one desire.

Freedom.

Helen rose from the table in a swish of ruby silk, melting into the crowd as she made for the edge of the room, away from the thick hovering cloud of cheroot smoke that hazed the air above the tables.

She found she was no longer in the mood for cards, and she had learned to pay attention to such things. She couldn't afford to make a mistake.

Unlike the young dandies and pompous lords who frequented such establishments, she was not here for thrills.

No, Helen was here to win cold, hard blunt. As much as she could.

She was here to build her fortune so that she would never again be at the mercy of fate.

Helen found a convenient couch away from the tables and seated herself with a newly refreshed glass of wine, taking a real sip this time and fanning herself against the heat and smoke that lingered in the stifling air. She idly wondered if Amelia was performing tonight, but the thought drifted away like pollen in a breeze.

She stubbornly resisted the urge to look for her stranger. No matter the attraction she felt.

No, that was certainly not the reason she was still seated here, instead of seeking out her bed.

Her stranger. What an absurd idea.

Sipping her drink, Helen watched ebb and flow at the tables, unconsciously noting each hand dealt and the odds of the cards being held.

She had always had a head for numbers, and cards were no different. Her father had taught her to play at a young age, despite her sex, and she had quickly surpassed him in skill. It was the one thing he had done right by her, as laughable as it seemed.

The crowds parted, and the man came again into view, leaning against a wall across the room.

He still had his eyes on her, an intensity to his look that had Helen sucking in a shuddery breath.

She sipped her wine, allowing her gaze to linger on his face and slide down his body.

It was immediately apparent that this was no dissolute peer of the realm. Despite the foppish attire, his body was lean and graceful. Almost catlike, as he smoothly crossed his arms and blatantly returned her look.

A sinful fantasy crossed her thoughts, of her reaching up and dragging that arrogant mouth down to hers, letting those hands touch her while she nipped teasingly at those lips.

Was this unnerving feeling lust?

Helen had never had such a reaction to a man.

Perhaps not even in the faraway days of courting her late husband, had she felt this intense quivery excitement in her belly. The restless impulse tightened low, between her thighs, a slight throbbing in time to her elevated pulse.

Of course, Helen and James had both been chaste before their marriage, and Helen had not yet understood what she felt then at sixteen, in her innocence.

But at twenty-seven, widowed these last three years, she was astounded by this sudden flare of desire.

Whatever it was, It was dangerous, Helen knew, so she stood, cutting the brief moment off as she made her way towards the outer rooms of the establishment.

She would go home, go to bed and forget all about this feeling.

Tomorrow she would tally her winnings and perhaps enjoy a night at the theatre. It might be best to take a break from the Palais, all things considered.

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CHAPTER TWO

Helen asked the doorman to call her a carriage, choosing to wait in the fresh air of the small courtyard just outside the ballroom.

She wrapped a light cashmere shawl around her bare arms, feeling suddenly light-hearted now that she was free to relax. Happy, almost, as she stared up at the dark night sky. The sooty London air hid the stars she knew to be up there, but the knowledge did nothing to dim her enjoyment.

Soon.

Soon she would have enough put away in investments to leave places like this, and London town, behind forever. Find somewhere new to start afresh. Bath, or Brighton perhaps.

It felt like anything was possible at that moment.

A crunch on the gravel behind her alerted her to his presence, his form obscured in the gloom as the only light shone from inside, through the windows.

“I know you are there, I have felt your eyes on me the entire evening. Who are you, and what do you want?” said Helen, still looking up at the sky.

The man stepped out of the shadows, throwing a cheroot into the gravel next to the path and grinding it out with the heel of his boot.

“I think it’s quite obvious, what I want,” he drawled, his voice refined but with a rough edge to it that Helen couldn’t quite place.

He took a languid sip of the drink which dangled nonchalantly from his fingers. “Who I am is of little consequence.”

Helen laughed softly, a mere huff of breath, throwing propriety to the winds as she turned her head to shoot him an ironic look. “It might be of little consequence to you, but trust me, to a woman, who you are is of tantamount importance.”

“Why,” he asked, cocking his head. “Would it help matters along if you could judge the size of my annual income against the length of my cock?”

Helen stared, shocked at the blunt words. Although she hid her reaction automatically as she shuttered her expression into the bland look she normally wore.

“Oh, I see now what kind of man you are. Good evening to you,” she answered with a tight smile.

She had had enough of men’s insufferable ways to last her a lifetime. She wanted no more.

Just because this one stated his thoughts and desires boldly, did not mean he would be any different.

“Wait,” he said, catching her arm as she moved to sail regally past him.

Helen twitched her skirts and sniffed, staring down at the place where his warm palm cupped her skin. “Unhand me, sir.”

He dropped the hand, running it through his hair. Unbelievably, he only looked more

handsome with that dark blond hair tousled and in disarray.

“My apologies, I am saying all the wrong things. It is a cursed habit of mine.”

He flashed her an apologetic smile, but Helen sensed there was more to it than that.

“Let me introduce myself,” he said, placing a hand to his chest and offering her a polite bow, as if they were in a formal drawing room and not standing in the dark outside a gaming hell.

“I am Captain Starling.”

Helen eyed him warily, searching for the slightest hint of insincerity.

“Very well, I am-”

“I know who you are, Mrs Montrose.”

His eyes glittered in the light of the torches, throwing the rugged curve of his jaw and the sensual cant of his lips in sharp relief.

Helen shivered, aware that he still stood extremely close. It was far more intimate than the game of glances they had played all evening, for some strange reason.

“And what do you want?”

“As I said, you know what I want.”

Captain Starling was shockingly blunt, and for some irrational reason, it excited her, her body still tingling from their sensual game of glances.

She decided to meet his bluntness with a measure of her own.

Merely to see what he would do, she told herself firmly.

“You want to go home with me,” she said, carefully enunciating each word. “To fuck me, I assume.”

His pale blue eyes widened briefly, then narrowed on her with heated intensity.

“Yes. But I didn’t intend to wait to get you home.”

She gaped at him, her usual composure deserting her at the audacity of that simple statement.

“You are presumptions, Captain Starling,” she gasped, her heart skipping in her chest.

“Yes. I suppose I am. But you have been driving me mad all evening, and my sense of propriety has deserted me. I want you. And I think you may want me in return.”

“Arrogant too,” she retorted, with a tight smile that was more teeth than sweetness.

Determinedly not allowing herself to acknowledge the frisson of excitement his words elicited in her.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither seemingly in a hurry to be the first to break the silence, hot and thick with electric tension.

Helen made a decision.

Why should she not indulge herself for one brief moment?

She never let her control slip, it seemed. Perhaps, she could take her pleasure, and be done with it. Carry on as if it had never happened. Amelia did it all the time, why shouldn't Helen taste a different sort of excitement for once?

“Very well. You may have me. But no kissing.”

“What if I want to kiss you?” Starling said, reaching up and tracing the curve of her lower lip with his thumb, pressing down on the dent in the centre so that she felt it brush the tip of her tongue.

Oh, he was good. Wicked in fact.

It suited her just fine, she found with surprise.

If she was to take a lover, he would do nicely.

“You may fuck me, or you may kiss me. Take your pick.” She knew not where the words came from, but they tumbled boldly from her lips nonetheless.

“Very well,” he growled, stepping close, placing the glass down carelessly on the low wall beside them and ducking his head to hover his mouth over hers for a brief, heart-stopping moment, then pressing his lips just to the side, to her cheek.

His scent washed over her, the masculine heat of him radiating through the thin silk dress to warm her skin as the shawl slipped from her shoulders.

Starling skated his lips along her jaw, tantalisingly slow, then down over her throat as Helen fought to draw breath against the rush of want that flared in the wake of his almost caress.

A large palm cupped the nape of her neck, drawing her head back for him as her

hands rose of their own accord and dug themselves into his shoulders.

His mouth continued its sinful journey, kissing her pulse points with hot, open-mouthed kisses, the flick of his tongue against her skin sending a lick of heat straight to the place between her thighs.

Then he moved to her jaw again, teasing his mouth tantalisingly close to the corner of her lips, before retreating again.

It was maddening, how much she wanted to feel his mouth on hers , against all reason.

She didn't want to be kissed, did not want anything remotely close to tenderness.

Helen realised she wanted to be taken, ravished, and then left alone again.

Just the way she liked it.

His arm curved around her waist, bending her back against it as his mouth dipped to the bare skin of her shoulder, the length of her collarbone, his fingers splayed beneath the swell of her breasts.

So close, she could imagine how good it would feel to have him touch her there.

He pulled back, staring down at her for one charged moment, their chests heaving together, matching flames of desire flaring in their shared gaze.

“I want to kiss you,” he said finally, even as she frowned in confusion, his lips wasting no time as they crashed into hers, stealing her breath with the passion of his mouth as it devoured with hot, sensual sips, his tongue tangling with hers with a raw sensuality that stole her breath and had her leaning in for more.

When their lips finally parted, she drew back, flustered and confused.

This was not how it was supposed to be.

He should be backing her into a shadowy corner, not kissing her as if he would die if he didn't.

It was too much. And yet, not enough.

Helen pulled away, her pulse hammering madly in her veins, and, without thought, she felt her palm connect with his cheek in a stinging slap.

“There. You have had your kiss,” she hissed, angry beyond reason, both ashamed and embarrassed as she stumbled back from his arms. Starling sucked in a breath and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Good night, Captain,” she muttered, then turned on her heel and walked away.

CHAPTER THREE

Captain Colin Starling sipped his drink slowly as he waited for his latest client at the coffee house off Bond Street. As he kicked his heels, he watched the other patrons of the establishment with half an eye, as was his habit.

People fascinated him, and it was amazing what small daily dramas of life one could observe if only one paid attention.

Over the years he had found himself becoming known as a fixer of sorts. The man you called on when a more discreet approach was needed to solve a problem.

It was certainly a better avenue of employment than soldiering, and Starling enjoyed a challenge. There was normally also a level of subterfuge needed to resolve such sensitive issues that appealed to his puckish nature.

However, now that he was approaching five and thirty, it might be time for him to consider taking less risky work and focus on something more stable. It appeared that was the expected thing to do, at least.

Just last month he had assisted his friend, Lord Benedict, Viscount Seton, in resolving a distasteful blackmail affair. It had been enormous fun, for Starling that was, to find and flush out the fiend behind the scheme. It had also been decidedly dangerous.

Oh, dear father, if only you could see me now.

Starling was the son of the esteemed Earl of Selbourne, albeit born on the wrong side

of the blanket, and the old earl had dispaired when Starling sold the commission he had bought for him in the cavalry.

But fighting on the peninsular had left a sour taste in his mouth, and Starling had decided to take his fate into his own hands, rather than expire at the hands of others.

He flicked open his gilded gold pocket watch, glancing briefly at the time as he sardonically admired his ostentatiously extravagant waistcoat. Deep ruby silk embroidered with gold threaded bees, the colour perfectly offset the dark grey of his morning coat.

Starling did so enjoy making an impression, if that was indeed his objective. Unless he was in disguise for a case, of course. And it was, admittedly, an irreverent delight he took in dressing in a manner that would send most matrons of the ton to reach for their smelling salts in distress. Perhaps it was another way of reminding his father of his annoyingly continued existence, but Starling chose not to examine such thoughts too closely.

Starling snapped the timepiece closed, annoyance making itself known.

Lord Holsen was more than an hour late, but it was perhaps for the best.

The problem was, that Starling didn't quite know what he was going to report to his new employer.

Y es, I know I was supposed to prove that Helen Montrose is somehow cheating at cards, since you owe her a simply astounding amount of money. But instead, I kissed her senseless and then she slapped me through the face.

Hell's teeth , but that kiss had been worth it.

Starling had strolled into the Palais du Poussant last night with hardly any expectations. All the information he had gathered on Helen Montrose had focused on her notoriety at the gaming tables, gathered through various conversations with disgruntled gentlemen, many of whom couldn't accept that a lady had bested them at cards. Not once, not twice, but many times over.

There were of course ladies who frequented such establishments, but it was far more difficult to get them alone and entice them to spill their secrets.

It had soon become apparent that Mrs Montrose owned the markers of many of the ton's most extravagant gamblers, and Starling had found himself developing a begrudging sort of admiration for the woman who had appeared seemingly from nowhere, but was now almost a fixture in the underworld of London.

The one thing he had taken note of, was her apparent lack of romantic entanglement - at least none that he could find any mention of. There had never been any discussion of her attractiveness or lack thereof, so Starling had built a picture in his mind of a woman approaching thirty who was somewhat nondescript, her only distinguishing feature being a penchant for wearing the colour red.

It had amused him somewhat, to imagine her manner of dress as like a metaphorical flag to a bull.

Starling had been woefully unprepared for the sight of her when he did finally spot her at the commerce table last night.

Never had Starling been more wrong about something in all his life.

Helen Montrose was... alluring. Entrancing.

Absolutely stunning.

Her dark lustrous hair had been piled high above a face that seemed made to send a man into a frenzy of lust. Mysterious olive green eyes had shone with intelligence under long sooty lashes, her lips red from more than the wine she had pretended to sip all evening long.

And the dress.

God help him, the fucking dress .

Starling had carefully examined the faces of her gaming companions, noting the way their eyes flickered unerringly to that sinfully low bodice cut from ruby red watered silk.

Not once had she paid any of them a single iota of attention.

It had immediately become apparent that the lack of mention of her appearance was simply down to the fact that no one would care to admit that they had fallen prey to her charms, or that she was not inclined to share said charms with a single one of the gentlemen that surrounded her.

Her beauty was the perfect lure, and the perfect trap.

Mrs Montrose had remained unmoved throughout the game, completely sure of every move she made, every bet placed. Each movement was elegant and unhurried as her fingers tipped the cards up for the merest second on each play.

Oh yes, Helen Montrose was easily the most fascinating woman Starling had encountered in a very long time.

She had been wary of his attention at first, but Starling had been persistent, and it had been thrilling to watch her careful control slip for just a moment.

What a hellcat the lady was under all that composure .

He hadn't enjoyed himself so much in, well, years.

Whistling, the smile lingering on his lips, Starling strolled out onto the busy street, tipping his hat at a passing lady and watching her blush prettily with a smirk.

He didn't intend to wait around all morning for some dissolute lord who couldn't drag himself out of bed.

But, he did intend to see Mrs Montrose again.

And this time, she wouldn't slap him.

Now, he just had to consider how this spark between them would tie into his investigation.

Starling found he wanted to know all Mrs Montrose's secrets now, and not just for the sake of his employer.

CHAPTER FOUR

That unnerving kiss in the dark courtyard had stayed in her thoughts all night long, as Helen tossed and turned in the tangled sheets of her bed with irritation.

Who was this scoundrel that had ruffled her feathers so? And why did she feel a tinge of regret that she hadn't stayed to find out?

Finally, it was light enough for her to rise, washing and dressing quickly without bothering her maid, and then calling for tea as soon as she heard movement downstairs in the kitchen.

Sipping a bracingly hot cup of Ceylon, Helen decided to pay her friend, Amelia, a call. She was a fixture at the Palais, and if anyone might know who Captain Starling was, and what he was after, it would be her.

It was late afternoon when she lifted the heavy knocker at the door in Grosvenor Square, but Amelia never rose before noon.

A burly footman opened the door, his jacket straining across a broad back and strong biceps. Helen stifled a smirk as he ushered her upstairs into an intimate parlour.

It was clear that footman was not the man's foremost duty in this household.

Amelia did love to surround herself with male beauty at its finest. Her hedonistic approach to life was one of the things that Helen loved about her, as it was rare to find another woman who indulged her desires without giving a fig for what the world

thought.

Amelia smiled when Helen appeared in the doorway, waving her in with one pale dainty hand as she lounged in elegant dishabille on a chaise before the fireplace.

“Helen, dearest,” Amelia cooed, rising up to buss her on the cheeks with an extravagant flourish.

The footman moved to pour Helen a glass of sweet wine, as Amelia followed his movements with hungry eyes.

When the man finally left, Helen raised her glass to her friend, a knowing look in her eye.

“You are shameless, Amelia,” she laughed, taking a sip of her drink.

Amelia smirked, fanning herself dramatically as she pretended to ogle the footman’s arse on the way out. “You should let me send some new staff your way, Helen. You have no idea what you are missing out on.”

“Oh, but I do. You have no qualms about telling me all the sordid details, as I recall.”

“La, it is not my fault you don’t allow yourself to have any fun. It is practically expected of a wicked widow such as yourself to indulge in a scandalous affair.”

Helen sighed. This was a familiar debate between them. “Is it my fault there is a dearth of interesting men to be found? Besides, I have other means of getting my satisfaction.”

“Like fleecing Lord Burton at the tables last night?” asked her friend with an amused hitch of her brow.

“Precisely.”

They relaxed companionably for a moment, enjoying the wine as Amelia nibbed at a biscuit.

Amelia sighed, reaching out to stroke the long fluffy white fur of the cat that lounged in her lap. “And how close are you to your goal now, dear friend?”

“Close,” admitted Helen, tapping her fingers against the arm of her chair with barely concealed excitement.

“I think you will miss it, you know, the thrill of it all, when you retire,” said Amelia, cocking her head.

“Perhaps, but I suppose I will worry about that when the time comes.”

Amelia sat up, rousing the cat who flounced off across the room with a flick of its tail.

“I worry for you, though. I must admit.”

Helen frowned, setting down her drink. “What do you mean?”

Amelia bit her lip, nibbling it between her teeth. “There are those who are not happy with your run of success. Many powerful people owe you money, my friend, and they are not inclined to lose their fortune to an upstart widow.”

“Why, what have you heard?” asked Helen, leaning forward with a frown.

She shouldn’t be surprised, but still, it was unnerving to think that such talk was circulating at all.

“Nothing really. But the whispers are there. I would not like to see you come to any harm.”

They shared a look of mutual understanding. Amelia had been there when Helen first made her foray into the underbelly of London society. She knew all the horrid details of her husband’s betrayal and had been a great help in introducing Helen to the realities of her newly chosen lifestyle.

“I will speak to my solicitor. He will be more circumspect in collecting on my winnings. But I will not back down,” said Helen, raising her chin determinedly.

Amelia nodded. “And I will speak to Madame, ask her to keep an eye out for you on the floor.”

“Thank you,” said Helen, overcome suddenly with affection for her friend. Never had she met someone so loyal as Amelia.

She rose and joined Amelia on the chase, giving in to the compulsion to wrap her arms around her in a quick hug.

“Gah, enough maudlin thoughts,” said Amelia, squeezing Helen’s hand. “Tell me, who was that divine man I saw making eyes at you all night?”

Helen felt her cheeks heat, avoiding her friend’s eyes. “You noticed that, did you?”

“Of course,” said Amelia with a sly grin. “I have never seen you look so unsettled.”

She gripped Helen’s hand, tugging on it with excitement. “Tell me, did you take him home? Please, tell me you did.”

“No. Well, almost.”

Amelia gasped, her eyes sparkling with scandalised amusement. “No? Good Lord, Helen, you are not a nun. Stop behaving like one.”

“His name is Captain Starling, have you heard of him?” asked Helen, both embarrassed and relieved that the topic had arisen.

Amelia tapped her lip, staring off into the distance. “Hmmm. I have a feeling I have heard that name bandied about before. Captain Colin Starling, if I recall correctly. I will ask around.”

She flashed Helen a knowing look. “Will you say yes, next time he approaches you?”

Helen flushed red, biting her lip. “He was abominably rude...”

“But, you liked it, you liked him, didn’t you?” said Amelia with a knowing wink.

Helen laughed, she couldn’t help herself. Amelia’s lust for life was contagious.

“We shall see. Perhaps I never see him again.”

“Somehow I doubt that. Not after the way he was looking at you, as if you were a sweet cake he wanted to devour.”

“Amelia!” gasped Helen, slapping her friend’s arm in mock horror.

“What, darling? I only speak the truth.”

Amelia downed her drink, rising to ring the bell for more wine.

“Now, tell me, what are you wearing to Lady Caroline’s card party next week? You need to look more entrancing than usual, since you have declared that this will be

your last foray at the tables before you retire. Although the thought of you deserting me makes me quite blue.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” smiled Helen. “I wanted to ask if you would come and help me choose some fabrics at the modiste, then perhaps later we could go to the theatre? And, of course, I expect you to visit me when I am settled in Bath.”

Amelia clapped her hands in glee. “Ooh, a shopping trip? Certainly, any excuse to order a new gown. And don’t you worry, my dear, I am looking forward to a holiday. I fully intend to discover all the pleasures to be found in Bath.”

The two of them dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“You are incorrigible,” gasped Helen, as Amelia waggled her eyebrows suggestively at her.

“You love it, though,” replied her friend with a saucy wink.

CHAPTER FIVE

Helen arrived at Lady Caroline Lowell's lavish estate outside London with anticipation. If she did well over the next few nights of play, she could leave this life behind her once and for all.

Or, at least, any future time spent at the tables would be for pleasure only, not for profit.

Helen couldn't deny that she had found freedom in this life, away from the stifling propriety of polite society. And, of course, she had never been welcome in such lauded homes as this as a mere wife with little to no connections.

Now, she was invited to some of the most scandalous parties thrown by the ton, attended by the fast set who lived life without a care, except to explore and indulge all the pleasures that life had to offer.

Helen knew she had other options. She could even find herself a protector, if that is what she desired. Or, live like Amelia, flitting from one alliance to another.

But the thought did not appeal to her as much as the draw of independence. She did not want to be cast aside when someone younger, or more alluring came along. The thought brought up too many uncomfortable memories.

Unfortunately, she was somewhat reserved with her affections, and now it was rare for the men she met to make any advances her way, anticipating the rejection she had shown in the past.

Although, Helen had never really been tempted by any of them, to tell the truth.

A pair of startling blue eyes flashed in her memory, as they had stared down at her the other night outside the Palais.

It was impossible to deny, she was attracted to Captain Starling.

If only he hadn't been so ... infuriatingly sure of himself.

Helen suspected she had denied him simply to enjoy the look of surprise on his face.

As she was shown up to her room by one of the many waiting footmen, Helen noticed that some of the guests were already engaged in enjoying the delights on offer. It seemed the wine was flowing freely, and inhibitions were to be left at the door.

Lady Caroline always threw the most scandalous house parties of the season.

Amelia would be arriving soon, and Helen looked forward to seeing her friend's expression when she saw the finished dress they had chosen together.

It was Helen's one extravagance, fashion. Never would she wear anything that did not make her feel beautiful again.

The memory of her husband's tightfistedness surfaced. James had kept Helen on a tight allowance, always criticising her for purchasing a new bonnet or gown. Always deeming her vain, too immodest. Too... everything.

Meanwhile, his second family had seemingly wanted for nothing. The other woman had been dressed in the finest black silks and lace when she appeared in mourning at the solicitor's office that dreadful day.

No. never again would she apologise or ask for anything from a man.

Make herself small, so that they could feel big.

Damn the lot of them.

Helen took refreshments in her room as her lady's maid unpacked with brisk efficiency, watching the late arrivals through the window of her second-story bedroom as she leisurely sipped a cup of tea.

Here came Lord and Lady Dunworth, their well-sprung carriage rolling up to the front of the house piled high with suitcases. Then, of course, Mr Barton, who was a staple at such occasions.

A smile broke her face as she watched Amelia descend her conveyance, accompanied by two ridiculously handsome footmen. She had been invited to sing for the gathering, and Helen looked forward to her performance. Once Amelia had been a famous actress and celebrated soprano, but now she was retired from the stage and only sang for the most exclusive events.

Then, Lord Holsen pulled up the drive, his blade-like nose preceded him from the carriage, and Helen chided herself for the uncharitable thought, as he had been so kind as to owe her six thousand pounds from their last encounter at the tables.

Another man followed him out from the carriage, a tall black beaver hat obscuring his features, an ebony cane dangling from an arm as he tugged on his gloves momentarily, before glancing up at the facade of the house.

Helen almost jumped back from the window in shock, as she recognised the dark blond hair curling at the high points of his collar, those arresting azure eyes flicking momentarily in her direction.

Calming her breath, Helen reminded herself Starling couldn't see her, despite that it felt like his gaze had sought her out, almost instinctively.

What in the blazes was Captain Starling doing attending this party? Helen had never seen him in Lady Caroline's company before.

Her mind racing, along with her pulse, Helen determined to seek out Amelia at her earliest convenience.

She needed her friend to steady her, she realised with a hint of annoyance.

Drat the man.

Too much rested on this weekend's outcome to allow him to get under her skin.

CHAPTER SIX

Dinner was a boisterous affair, the guests were many and eclectic, and Helen was grateful that she was seated far away from the man who had unnerved her so.

So far, she had not had to acknowledge his presence, and that suited her just fine. She felt a confusing sense of irritation whenever he crossed her thoughts.

With the number of guests assembled, it was possible they might avoid each other entirely for most of the weekend.

Or at least, one could hope.

Amelia sat across from her, tucked between two wealthy lords who spent the meal vying valiantly for her attention, to much amusement. At intervals, the two women shared meaningful glances as they silently entertained themselves by examining their fellow guests and the scandalous goings on.

Amelia glanced meaningfully to her left, shooting Helen a quick smile. Of course, Helen already knew what she was about.

Look at Mrs Cathcart's attention, it strays far too often to that of Lord Hemsford, don't you think?

Helen raised her eyebrows in acknowledgement, hiding her grin behind a napkin and relaxing as her own dinner partners chattered away about the matched bay chattel they had just purchased, boasting about careening through the street of London on a

dare.

Finally, the meal was done, and the ladies of the company withdrew to the large formal drawing room. There was a troupe of musicians assembled in one corner, and the door to the games room stood wide, the front rooms of the house seemingly lit with a hundred sweet-smelling beeswax candles.

Gosh, the expense of it.

It was enough to make a lady gawk, although that would be far too gauche.

It soothed Helen's conscience somewhat, to witness such displays of wealth. Really, what she won was a drop in the ocean to someone such as Lady Caroline, who could spend as much in one night as Helen could win in a month.

Helen, as was her way, kept to one side of the gathering. Allowing Amelia and the other young bright things to dominate the conversation as they were all served sweet sherry.

Amelia made her way over, cheeks already pink with the effects of the wine and the diverting conversation.

"Helen, my dearest, have I told you yet how absolutely divine you look tonight?"

Helen smiled shyly, running her hand lovingly over the fine fabric of her dress. "Yes, Madame Blanchet certainly outdid herself, don't you think?"

The gown was made up of rich red tissue, overlaid over gold silk and gathered at the sleeves with a spray of artfully worked flowers. The bodice hugged her generous bosom before the skirts flared out to waft around her like a cloud as she walked, outlining the length of her thighs quite shockingly.

It was the most gorgeous gown Helen had ever owned.

“Not your usual striking red, but I think it complements you all the better for it. I know a certain pair of eyes has not been able to look away all evening,” said Amelia with a knowing sparkle in her eye.

Helen blushed, and, as if fate was laughing at her for her boldness, the men chose that very moment to enter the room.

Captain Starling was last to step through the door, but as soon as he did, his eyes scanned the room until they found her in the corner.

His heated gaze ate her up from across the crowded space, and Helen resisted the urge to press a gloved hand to her cheek.

“My, my. Speak of the devil,” murmured Amelia, watching avidly as the man started to make his way towards them through the crush.

He looked... God, what was that he was wearing?

Helen felt a snicker of disbelief lodge in her throat.

His jacket was a suitably refined black wool superfine, the perfectly tied cravat and high pointed collar a starched snowy white. But his waistcoat...

It was red, embroidered all over with a riot of flourishes and golden embellishments. Totally at odds with the other gentlemen in their staid grey or cream silks.

The man looked like a bloody pirate.

Amelia glanced between them, amusement sparkling in her gaze as she sipped her

sherry blithely beside Helen.

“Does he... match you?” Amelia asked with bemusement.

Oh heavens . Please, no, thought Helen desperately.

She turned herself away, working her fan frantically over her cheeks as she stared at Amelia incredulously. Her friend merely smirked, then, pretending to see someone behind Helen, she moved away.

“Traitor,” murmured Helen as her friend retreated, steeling herself against the moment she would have to acknowledge him.

“Mrs Montrose,” came a low, smooth as velvet voice from behind her.

Helen turned with a disapproving frown. “Captain Starling,” she murmured, desperate for her host to call them into the card room.

Anything to get away from this man.

His eyes lingered on her face as he made an elegant bow in her direction. “How fortuitous to see you here.”

Helen resisted the urge to pull a face at the incorrigible man.

Instead, she smiled politely, flashing her teeth in a most unladylike manner. “And just how did you acquire an invitation to this particular event? It is almost as if you are following me.”

“Perhaps I am,” he quipped in reply, turning his back to the room and dropping her that signature wink. He pressed a hand to his heart. “Although I am quite wounded at

the thought that you imagine me out of place at such a lofty gathering.”

Helen tipped her head, interested despite herself. “What could you mean?”

Captain Starling smirked. “I am often invited to such events to add a frisson of scandal to the atmosphere, being the notorious bastard son of an earl has that effect.”

Helen frowned, looking the man up and down with fresh eyes. Yes, there was that entitled attitude that often hovered around a member of the upper crust, but it was tempered with a heavy dose of disillusioned sarcasm. Captain Starling was telling the truth.

“You are the firstborn, but not the heir,” she said without thinking.

Starling’s gaze shuttered momentarily, a dark cloud that parted as he grimaced in acknowledgement of her barb. “You have me at a disadvantage, madam. Now, what other secrets might you win from me, hmm?”

Helen tapped her fan across her palm, intrigued by the last part of his comment despite herself. “It seems you think we are engaged in some kind of game, Captain. What do you imagine is at stake?”

Starling stepped closer, bending down so that his breath ghosted across the bare skin of her neck. “Secrets are powerful, Mrs Montrose. You have one of mine, now it is only fair I have one of yours.”

Helen felt her skin flush with heat at the nearness of his body, a shamefully wanton reaction to the feel of him towering over her.

What would it feel like to have that lean strength pressed tight against her?

“I have no secrets,” she whispered, feeling as if she was suddenly adrift, with no solid land in sight.

His hand moved to brush along the skin of her upper arm above the edge of her glove, the movement hidden from the gathered guests by their position.

Gods above, he was utterly shameless.

“Oh no, I think you might have some very intriguing secrets, Mrs Montrose. And I intend to win them from you.”

With that, he stepped back, flashing her a charmingly polite smile, before moving away into the crowd.

Helen shivered, still reeling from the feel of his touch and the confusion his words had elicited.

What on earth could he mean?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Not even at the card tables could Helen escape Captain Starling, as he seemed to appear at the most inopportune moment to smoothly insert himself into the game of whist she sat down to. Sliding himself into the seat opposite her with a honeyed smile that made her want to storm off in a huff.

She took a steadying breath, trying to find the focus that had always come so easily to her before.

It would be too rude to outright refuse him, so Helen picked up the deck with lips pressed tight together in displeasure, shuffling the cards angrily.

He would be her partner in the game, and they were to play against Lord Seldon and his wife.

Lady Caroline was holding court over her own game of whist one table over, and a group of young bucks had set up a game of hazard in the corner.

Overall, the night appeared to be a lovely warmup to deeper play later in the weekend.

Helen should be moving amongst the games, charming the gathering in her own quiet way. Ensuring that none would see her as anything more than just another guest who loved to indulge themselves in a bit of harmless fun.

She should not be fixated on the man seated across from her, who had somehow

wrangled himself an invitation to this exclusive party.

Ruining her composure in the process.

And now, she would have to play whist with him as if he hadn't kissed her practically senseless in a darkened courtyard not a few nights past.

Your partner was a vital part of whist play, as you had to work as a team to earn the most trumps.

The thought of having to rely on this man was maddening. Exasperating.

Bloody inconvenient.

Helen would have to stare into his handsome face with each fall of the cards and she loathed the heat that rushed through her at the thought.

Helen offered the deck to Lady Sedon to cut, then proceeded to deal the cards, laying out the first trump with a crisp snick of the card as it settled in the centre of the table.

Captain Starling fingered his tokens, running the small ivory disk of one through his fingers over and over again.

Helen blew out a huff of annoyance and glared at his movements. Unfortunately, the datted man would not take a hint, and Starling merely smiled mildly at her in return, continuing to distract her with his long, neatly manicured fingers as they flipped and caught the token.

The game was a disaster from the start, with Lord and Lady Seldon easily taking the trumps as Helen struggled to focus.

Whist was a game where, if you had a head for numbers, one could easily guess at the cards that were still left in the deck. It was not so much chance, as a skill that could take the game.

Normally Helen could work with her partner, no matter who they were, as whist was an inherently competitive game and it was easy to team up with another who shared the thrill of victory.

But with Captain Starling, it was different. Instead of working with her, he seemed to want to constantly one-up her. Helen was furious to admit that he was not as unskilled as she had imagined, and she was soon lagging behind the others.

It irked her, that she was not winning.

Helen always won. Always.

She could not remember the last time she had tasted the bitterness of defeat on her tongue in such a manner.

By the end of the game, she was a tangled mess of nerves and overwrought emotions. Excusing herself from the table as soon as she politely could, Helen left the gaming room with the aim of taking a slow, calming walk through the halls of the manor.

Helen sucked in slow, deep breaths, willing her hands to stop shaking with what must be anger.

After a time, she arrived at the large, vaulted picture gallery. A few sconces were lit along the walls, allowing for the viewing of the artwork and sculptures on display. Although the light was dim, she slowed her steps, allowing herself to linger before the portraits and country scenes, enjoying the rich colours and pretending for a moment that she was swept away into one of the decadent settings.

She sometimes longed to be somewhere else, somewhere she could start over, without having to mould herself for the comfort of others.

But that was a girlish fantasy, and there was no point in dwelling on what could never be.

One of the paintings at the far end caught her eye, and Helen moved closer, her hand coming up to cover her lips as she spied a racier scene than before.

The painting depicted a couple entwined on a low couch, the lady with her bare back to the viewer, glancing enticingly over her shoulder as her lover gazed at her with adoration.

Such paintings were normally held in more private rooms, and Helen wondered if this one had been placed here on purpose to entice any visitor that came upon it into similar sensual activities.

She would not put it past Lady Caroline to engage in such mischief.

Helen felt the heat that had simmered in her body all evening flare hot at the wicked thoughts the painting inspired.

Of Captain Starling, looking at her just like that, while she...

An insidious idea snaked its way into Helen's thoughts.

Why shouldn't she indulge herself? The man certainly seemed interested.

Nobody here would bat an eyelid if she engaged in a tryst. In fact, such house parties were often organised for the sole reason of engaging in illicit liaisons away from the social whirl of London.

If Helen needed to concentrate, to take back her power and her control with it, she should seduce Captain Starling and take him to her bed.

Once her body was sated, the tension eased, surely her mind would once again be able to focus on the matter at hand?

Earning her freedom.

Helen tapped one white-gloved finger against her lip, considering.

Yes. It was an appealing idea. She already knew what Amelia would say, if Helen asked her opinion.

There were many things she had seen at places like the Palais, carnal things that she had never done with her husband. It would be intriguing to see how Captain Starling reacted to such activities. Something told her the rogue might be the perfect man to indulge her curiosities.

As if summoned by her devilish thoughts, footsteps sounded behind her in the gallery, and the smell of cigars and sandalwood washed over her as a certain incorrigible male came to a halt behind her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Do I vex you, Mrs Montrose? Surely you did not quit the games room just to get away from me,” murmured Starling, stepping closer to his quarry as she lingered at the far end of the picture gallery.

Mrs Montrose glanced at him briefly over her shoulder, her brows drawing together with a look of frustration before she dismissed him again.

Oh yes, his instinct had been correct. Mrs Montrose did not like losing one bit.

The lady sniffed, raising her chin and pretending to examine the paintings lining the gallery as she wandered further down the hall.

“Not at all, Captain Starling. That would imply that I felt some way about you. No, you do not vex me. Although, your choice in waistcoats might come close.”

Starling grinned at the retort behind her back, admiring the delicate line of her spine as her neck curved into her shoulders above the dusky red gauze of her gown, a single tendril of dark hair trailing down over her nape and begging him to swipe it aside with his thumb.

It had been an amazing coincidence that his choice of attire had so closely matched her gown. He was sure it had galled her immensely.

God, he wanted her. It burned inside of him like an elemental flame.

Their earlier conversation had done nothing to douse his ardour. If anything, the thought of learning all of Mrs Montrose's sensual secrets had tied him in knots all evening.

"You might not feel something for my person, but I know you respond to my presence. I can feel the connection every time our eyes meet," Starling said in return, hoping to goad her into some kind of response.

Anything but the remote disdain she had projected his way since their hushed conversation earlier.

She stiffened, turning her head slightly to glance at him from under her eyelashes.

Waiting.

Starling decided to take the lead.

You needed to reach for the thing you wanted in life.

"What was that you said to me that night at the Palais? You may fuck me, or you may kiss me." Starling smiled as he said the words, stepping right up behind her so that he could smell the sweet rose scent of her skin.

"Perhaps we could revisit that conversation? I might choose differently this time."

Helen's shoulders rose as she took a shuddering breath, her head tipping back the barest hint as he lowered his voice, soothing her as he would a skittish filly.

Fuck, had he ever had to work this hard to convince a lady to lift her skirts? Or care so much if he failed, for that matter.

For some reason, the outcome of this conversation felt momentous. Starling had never wanted anything more desperately, it suddenly seemed.

She turned to him slowly, her gaze rising to his with a challenging glint, then leisurely working its way down over his body.

His muscles trembled with erotic tension, jumping with desire as the woman looked her fill of him, lingering on the bulge that was making itself painfully obvious behind his fall.

“Very well, I will have you, sir. For one night only, and on one condition.”

Starling felt the breath leave his lungs in a woosh, his hand already reaching out to trail its way down her arm, so desperate was he to feel her skin against his.

“Anything. Name your stakes.”

Helen’s mouth tipped up in a sphinx-like smile. “Stakes? What a wonderful idea.”

She tapped a finger against her lips, pretending to consider. Finally, she spoke again. “It is quite simple, really. Whoever begs the other first, wins.”

Starling grinned in victory, then quickly composed his face into a more suitably serious mein. “Wins what, madam?”

Helen shrugged, seemingly nonchalant. “The winner may choose the prize.”

Godamn. The woman had been sent to torture him. She had him by the balls, and she knew it well.

She was absolutely glorious.

“I agree to your terms,” he smiled, watching his hand skate back up towards her shoulder, fingering the silk flowers that embellished the curve of skin there. “And when shall we begin?”

“Right now,” she said, her voice husky with something that sounded delightfully like desire.

Thank Christ.

Starling wasted not a second more, glancing quickly around to make sure they were alone, then taking her hand and tugging her further down the gallery, towards a conveniently curtained alcove in the dark far recess of the hall.

The rest of the party was engrossed in their play, and he knew no one would care where they had disappeared to.

That was the beauty of seducing a scandalous widow, there was no need to consider anything but the pleasure at hand.

Starling dragged Mrs Montrose inside the alcove, tugging the curtains closed with haste and then he turned, all his attention fixed on the object of his desire.

Her dark eyes glowed above cheeks flushed pink with excitement, those red lips parted as if begging him for a kiss.

Backing her up against the wall with his body, he did just that, groaning as the taste of her flooded his senses, his hands moulding themselves to her curves as he crushed her against him, the thin fabric of her dress revealing every delectable line of her body.

She kissed him back for one eternal minute, her tongue sweeping against his, licking

and sucking on his lower lip until she pulled away with a nip of her teeth.

Panting, Mrs Montrose stared up at him, her hands finding their way under the cut of his jacket, exploring the line of his flanks.

“I thought you were not supposed to kiss me?” she gasped, even as her nimble fingers stole their way under his waistcoat, tearing at the hem of his shirt until she could skate her palms under the fabric and then up over his skin.

“I never agreed to that, Mrs Montrose, if I recall correctly,” he answered, voice rough with need, dropping his mouth to the curve of her neck and licking his way up her throat, searching for that tender spot that would make her knees buckle for him.

He was suddenly consumed with the desire to brand her with his mark, suck hard on her skin, and devour her whole until she moaned with pleasure.

Until she begged for him.

Suddenly, he understood the appeal of the deal they had made, the thought of her breaking under the pleasure of his touch incredibly arousing.

Under his shirt, Helen dragged her thumbs across his nipples, reaching up to tease him with her own mouth as he groaned against her lips.

“Helen,” she whispered against his lips, her curious hands dipping lower, exploring the flat plane of his stomach until, saints preserve him, she boldly cupped his rigid length over his breeches.

“Helen,” Starling groaned, letting the sound of her name roll over his tongue like fine wine.

Why had he imagined he would be the one in control here?

Helen dropped to her knees, skirts puffing up around her as she tugged one long white glove from her hand, reaching for his fall, all the while keeping that mysterious gaze fixed on his as she licked her lips suggestively.

Starling vaguely realised they were approaching dangerous territory, far beyond a secretive moment of heavy petting behind the curtains.

If anyone chanced upon them now, there would be no mistaking the carnality of the moment. He tried valiantly to keep an ear out for footsteps in the gallery, but Helen was making it so incredibly hard to think.

Starling watched her through a haze of lust, as she slowly undid each button, his hands finding their way to the back of her carefully coiffed hair as she drew the moment out with tortuous restraint.

Finally, she slipped her hand inside and gripped him firmly at the base, drawing the hard length of his cock out as she flicked her eyes down to examine him.

Yea gods . She was far better at this than he had anticipated, as he watched her lick her lower lip, stroking her palm up his shaft until she squeezed the crown of his engorged cockhead.

Starling closed his eyes against the erotic sight, already his resolve was weakening.

How weak was a man's flesh in the hands of the right woman?

He felt her touch her tongue lightly to the bulge of his crown, and his eyes flew open, staring open-mouthed as Helen slowly teased a circle around the ruddy tip, his hips already bucking slightly into her touch. She bunched a hand in the hem of his shirt,

tugging him closer, then slid her tongue down the length of him, exploring every ridge as she circled the girth with her bare hand, fingers barely closing around the base of the thick stalk.

By the time she made her way back up to the tip, he was slick with seed, and the sight of her dipping her tongue out to taste his excitement had Starling hissing with pleasure.

“Are you ready to capitulate, Captain Starling?” she breathed against him, closing her lips briefly around the head of his cock and giving it a light suck.

Santa Maria .

“Colin,” he croaked, his fist tightening in her hair, fighting the urge to hold her in place and thrust himself into her mouth. “And no, I do not submit.”

“Very well,” she murmured, sucking him fully into the delectable heat of her mouth, curling her tongue around him as she dipped down over the bulge of his crown and then tongued that sensitive line below.

Oh, he was a goner. He was done for.

No man could withstand such torture for long.

“Do you want more?” she asked, pulling her mouth away with an obscene pop so that she was free to look up at him, her lips swollen from his kisses and the act of stretching around his cock.

“Yes, no. I can’t-” Starling was apparently incoherent with need, his balls aching with the need for release.

Helen blinked innocently up at him, holding his gaze as she dipped her head and sucked him deep into her mouth, swallowing him down with a hum of satisfaction as he groaned above her, his knees threatening to buckle at the pleasure of it.

She dragged her mouth up and down his length, each pass taking him deeper, smoother, until he bumped against the back of her throat.

Starling couldn't control himself any longer, and he started to pulse his hips in time, holding her head in place with shaking hands as his release twisted and seethed low in his gut, fighting to be let off the leash.

Just when he felt his vision dim, his climax beating at the door, she dragged her mouth free once more, her lips glistening.

“Fuck.”

He couldn't hold back the expletive, and Helen smiled impudently, pumping him lazily in her fist.

“Do you think that is what it would feel like?” she wondered aloud, examining her handwork as she twisted her palm over his glistening crown. “Do you think it would feel that good to sink into me, take me right here, right now?”

The image of her bent over the cushioned bench, his cock buried to the hilt in her hot cunt burned itself across his mind, the words rushing from him before he could even think to halt their flow.

“Christ, no. It would be so much better. Please, Helen, put me out of my misery.”

She cocked her head, victory flaring in her eyes. “Are you begging me, sir?”

“Yes.” Fuck.

“Yes, I am begging you.”

She rose, or he dragged her up, it didn't really matter. All that mattered was the feel of her flush against his body, his hard length digging into her soft belly through the silky gown as he devoured her mouth, tasting the salt of his essence on her tongue as he hastily rucked up her skirts, sliding his hands up over smooth, plump thighs to find them wet with her desire, the slippery heat at her centre like liquid silk under his fingertips as she moaned against his lips.

For one brief moment, he caught himself, even in the craze of his fever.

“Do you want this, Helen? Are you ready for me?”

“Yes,” she gasped against his lips, turning to face the wall, raising her hems and balancing one knee on the bench, just as in his fantasy.

“Take me.”

He needed no more urging, kicking her legs apart and throwing the skirts up over her bottom, lining the head of his cock at her core in one swift motion and pressing himself desperately into her heat with a harsh groan of relief.

She was as tight as a vice, and Starling had to pause for a moment, his head spinning, running one hand up along her spine as she moaned and arched herself like a cat to take him deeper.

With a series of short, ragged thrusts, he obliged, working himself into her tight sheath, then driving himself home with a final snap of his hips as his load threatened to erupt at the perfection of their joining.

Had it ever felt this good? He couldn't say.

Every other encounter was burned away in the wake of the sublime feeling of being inside this glorious woman.

God. He was going to spend, too fast. Too. Fast.

He reached around the slight curve of her belly, finding the swollen pearl of pleasure between her folds and forking his fingers over it, determined to have her with him.

Working his fingers there in time to his thrusts, Starling teased a sobbing cry of pleasure from Helen's lips as she spread her legs wider, clutching the window frame as he pounded helplessly into her, unable to stop the animal lust careening through his veins.

It was impossible to hold back the surge of his seed, and with a ragged grunt, he dragged himself free of her clasp heat at the very last minute, grinding himself helplessly against the soft curve of her bottom as his release shot out and coated her creamy skin.

Even as he embarrassed himself like a green lad, his hips still humping against her in the throws of his climax, Starling curled his fingers into her channel, slicking his fingertips with her essence and dragging them up and down through her folds, rubbing and circling them over her swollen flesh until she arched her back and shuddered in his arms, her hips rocking into his hand as she followed him into her crisis.

After a few ragged breaths, Starling managed to drag himself off the woman.

"Well, that was embarrassing," he muttered, pulling out a handkerchief and quickly wiping away the evidence of his lack of control.

She would think him a boor. A cad of the lowest order.

But when she turned to look at him, he saw only sated victory in those large green eyes. Not the disappointment he had expected.

Helen's lips twitched with a hint of amusement, but she rose and pushed down her skirts and adjusted her bodice without a word, flashing him a long loaded look as she pulled back the curtain and stepped out into the hall, turning her back on him and making her way towards the lighted doorway at the far end where the sounds of the party could be heard vaguely in the distance.

"I demand a rematch," called Starling, watching with bated breath as her steps slowed, her head turning towards him and then dipping into a small nod.

"Very well," she smirked at him over her shoulder, her generous hips swaying seductively as she strolled on without sparing him another glance.

CHAPTER NINE

Starling burned with the need to hear the widow beg for him, and he intended to achieve his goal no matter what.

The fantasy of Helen gasping his name, pleading with him to take her hard and rough, had him aching and stiff with need all night long.

This was not the reason he was here, Starling reminded himself sternly, giving in as the first hint of dawn light appeared on the horizon, taking himself grudgingly in hand and stroking roughly with his palm until he spent in a hot rush all over his fist.

The slight release helped, but it did nothing to scrub the memory of her mouth sliding over his cock from his mind.

Goddamn. He was well and truly hooked.

At least he could honestly say that he didn't think the woman was cheating at the card tables. He had observed her closely for most of the evening, despite the galling way she had refused to acknowledge him hardly at all.

It seemed she was merely an excellent strategist, who knew when to bet and when to hold. It was not her fault that others were not so careful in their play.

Good lord, everyone knew that just last month, Lord Harding had had to ask his father to pay his debts to the tune of ten thousand pounds or forfeit his standing in society.

Why should the widow not get her share of the coin being thrown around when such sums, even whole estates, were lost in a moment at gaming rooms on any given night?

Starling would just have to tell Lord Holsen that he would have to find the funds to pay his dues, or flee to the continent. After all, the widow was not the only one he was in debt to, and if word surfaced that Holsen was unable to honour his debts, all those who held his markers would start calling in their interests.

Perhaps she was merely the one who wrangled Lord Holsen the most, and as such had become the focus of his temper.

No, Starling found all his attention had been eclipsed by the need to make the widow admit that there was something simmering between them that made him want to steal her away somewhere so he could lock the door and return the favour with his mouth.

And his lips, and his tongue.

She might be the perfect woman for him. He felt it in his bones.

Perhaps she would enjoy joining him on some of his jobs? With her intelligence, intuition and sharp eyes beside him, the pair of them could have London, even the continent, at their feet.

Starling rolled from the rumpled sheets at the invigorating thought, stalking to the washbasin to scrub the evidence of his body's weakness from his skin.

Yes, perhaps that was the way forward.

Show her that as much as she enjoyed trouncing the ton and scooping up her winnings, he could offer her so much more.

Together, they could gather up all the naughty secrets of the rich and powerful until they held all the cards, literally and figuratively.

Starling just had to get Helen Montrose to see the possibilities.

CHAPTER TEN

Helen awoke in the dim light pre-dawn light, to the sound of footsteps padding towards her bed.

Despite the late night and her exhaustion from the excitement of the evening, she had always been a light sleeper.

She lay still under the blankets, trying to keep her breath slow and even as a figure came to stand beside her bed.

“Helen,” came that smooth, coaxing voice, and at once she knew the Captain had stolen into her rooms.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered, scandalised, drawing the covers up to her breast as the maddening man moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

He leaned down, his unshaven whiskers grazing her cheek as his mouth hovered beside her ear.

“You promised me one night, did you not? It is not yet dawn.”

Helen sighed, but even she had to admit he was technically correct.

“Have you decided what to claim as your prize?” he asked, nipping her earlobe teasingly.

Immediately her blood started to sing, her traitorous flesh already warming at the memory of their risky tryst in the portrait hall.

“I thought you had requested a rematch?” she managed to whisper around the desire clawing its way up her throat.

“Ah, yes. I am glad you recall granting me my wish,” he replied, nipping her earlobe playfully as he rose and stalked to the door of her room, the sound of the key turning in the lock making her press her thighs together in excitement.

Why had she not done something like this sooner?

It was... unnerving, how much she wanted him. Even though it had been mere hours since he had first taken her.

Starling returned to her side, clambering onto the bed and pulling steadily on the covers until they slipped from her fingers, falling to the floor in a whoosh.

He wore nothing but a loosely buttoned shirt and a pair of light lawn breeches, his broad, smooth chest exposed to her greedy eyes as he bowed over her.

Helen could see his face now, the light shining slightly brighter through the curtains. Starling looked as hungry as a wild beast, his eyes roving over her form as her nipples hardened into tight peaks beneath her shift under his inspection.

“Christ, look at you,” he murmured, reaching out to tease his fingers over one nipple, making her arch on the sheets, then dipping his head to nuzzle his face against her belly, dragging his nose down over her navel and unerringly to the place between her thighs that burned with want for him.

Starling breathed deep against her mound, his nose nudging the nub hidden in her

folds as he smothered himself between her shaking thighs.

With a groan he dragged himself free, his hands already skimming up her legs, urging them to open for him as he settled his shoulders between them.

Helen knew what was coming, of course, he intended to torment her as she had done to him, but the shock of his hot, hungry tongue lashing its way through her core still had her gasping for air, her throat tight with the cry of amazement she desperately tried to hold back.

“You taste exquisite,” he breathed against her heated flesh, kissing his way across her inner thighs before diving back into her heat, exploring every inch of her with that wicked tongue as his fingers dug into her skin, holding her still for him as she thrashed and moaned on the bed.

Helen was lost, overcome. Her hands somehow found their way into the short, silky strands of his hair as she arched like a bow under the onslaught.

Starling growled possessively as she dragged her nails over his scalp, pressing closer, spearing his tongue into the well of her opening as his fingers spread her wide, then licking his way up to the bud of her pleasure and latching onto it with his lips, sucking lightly, then deeper, his tongue fluttering over the sensitive flesh in a way that made bright shards of light explode behind her eyelids.

A euphoria she had never felt before rushed from her core and out through her limbs, her entire body quaking as the pleasure built towards an impossible height, her body tensing for the fall that would surely destroy her.

Suddenly, his mouth left her, and Helen bucked on the sheets with a cry of dismay.

Starling crawled up her body, lifting her shift as he went, until he drew it up over her

head and flung it away, lowering himself over her.

A smooth, hard ridge came to rest against her wanting flesh, and Helen realised the devil had opened his fall, his cock now nudging its way through the sensitive, slippery mess between her thighs as she panted and moaned, her legs closing greedily around his hips as his face rose above hers.

His smile was wicked as he gazed down at her, those blue eyes flashing as he dipped down to kiss his way along her jaw, teeth grazing her skin as she arched and clung to him.

“Tell me you want me,” he groaned, rolling his hips so that the thick head of his crown nudged against her slick opening.

Helen turned her head and claimed his mouth with hers, tasting the tang of her pleasure on his lips even as they teased each other with their bodies. She tore the shirt from his body, her fingers nerveless with the need to feel the heat of his form without any barrier.

Oh God. Never had she felt this unhinged with desire, all shame or rational thought burned away in the wake of the feel of his skin against hers.

Her nipples scraped against the fine hair that covered his chest, her heart beating fiercely.

“I want you,” she breathed, raking her nails down his spine and dipping her hands under the waistband of his breeches, feeling his buttocks flex beneath her palms as he shuddered.

“Say my name,” he commanded, pulling back at the last moment, and Helen sobbed, his name rolling off her tongue like a plea for mercy.

“Colin,” she cried, as he growled in approval and started to press forward, filling her, stretching her with heart-stopping perfection as her eyes fluttered closed in bliss.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, urging him deeper, but he resisted, slowly inching his way into her clasp as fierce, impatient need beat inside her with every thump of her heart.

Helen opened her eyes, looking straight up into his heated gaze as Starling cupped her face in one hand and pinned her to the bed with his weight, using his size to still the roll of her hips as he dragged himself torturously through her depths, sliding and grinding into her channel with maddeningly small pulses of his hips until she was gasping and whining with need.

Move. She needed him to move. To take her hard until this unbearable tension would finally explode and consume her whole.

“Please-” The entreaty escaped her lips before she could realise what she said.

But once the words were free, there was no stopping them.

“Please, please, please...” Her head thrashed on the pillow as she twisted below him.

Starling flashed her a grin that melted her insides, and he nipped at her lips, his hips surging forward with a kick that had her moaning in satisfaction, even as he pulled away again.

“Helen, do you want me to make you come?”

“Yes. Please,” she cried, trying to lift her hips into his.

“Are you begging me?” he asked, his voice low and victorious.

The bastard.

“Yes.” Her stubborn nature warring against her voracious desire.

“Yes, what?”

“Please, Colin. Please, make me come... I’m begging you.”

He surged deep again, grinding the base of his cock roughly against her bud, and Helen felt wetness flood her core, molten heat boiling over with each fresh drive of his hips.

“You want me to fuck you, take you hard, just like this?”

The words skimmed over her skin like the touch of the devil himself, making her burn in places she had never experienced before.

Helen reached up and bit his lip in retaliation, making him hiss as she groaned against his lips.

“Fuck me, Starling... Colin. Please.”

“Thank Christ,” he rasped, ducking his head against her shoulder and driving into her with jagged, desperate pumps, his hips snapping against her with delicious jolts of pleasure as she raised herself eagerly to meet him.

Low, sobbing moans wrung themselves from her throat, and Helen clawed at his back.

She needed more.

With a growl, Starling pulled back, flipping Helen onto her side and pressing her upper thigh to the mattress, notching himself to her core and sinking once more into her greedy heat.

“What are you doing?” whimpered Helen, her eyelids fluttering as she felt him surge inside from this new and unknown angle.

“Watching my cock slide into you,” he growled, moving faster, pinning her to the bed with those strong hands on her knee, her hip.

His eyes flicked to hers, devouring the passion etched on her face, then back to where she was spread for him. “Watching you take every inch as you moan for me.”

At those words, Helen did moan, her breasts crushed to the sheets as she squirmed and arched to take him deeper.

His fingers slid over the slick flesh where he speared into her, then up towards a place no one had ever touched her.

“Colin,” she mewled, tethering on some dangerous edge, as his thumb brushed against that secret place.

Sweat slicked her skin, legs tangled with his as they strained and surged together, a long desperate cry building in her lungs as the pressure between her thighs threatened to explode.

Starling covered her with his body, rolling her flat to the mattress as he shoved her legs apart and plundered between them with his hard length, ragged breath harsh against the damp hair curling at her nape.

“Scream for me, Helen,” he groaned, his hips starting to lose their rhythm, grunts of

pleasure rumbling against her back as he finally lost control.

The angle of his cock drove deep, rubbing against a place inside that tore through the final barrier of her defenses, pleasure surging and crashing, then rising again like a wild ocean swell. Leaving her breathless, her throat raw, his name a chant of exquisite relief as her crisis sucked her under and stole away every sense but the unbearable pleasure.

With a shout, Starling shuddered behind her, heat flooding her core as he pressed deep and held himself taut, head falling against her shoulder as he pulsed his release into her depths.

Finally, he rolled to the side, and Helen found herself splayed across the rumpled sheets, her body wracked by small shivers of delight in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

Starling leaned over her, pressing a light kiss to the back of her neck, his lips brushing down her spine.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, “I couldn’t control myself at the end. Are you displeased?”

Helen vaguely felt the old pain of her childless state resurface, but she quickly brushed it aside.

“There is no need to worry, I am not able to bear children,” she whispered against the pillow, keeping her eyes closed as his fingers explored her back softly.

Starling said nothing more, but his touch was a comfort. He didn’t withdraw, as she had expected.

After a long moment, he pressed a hard kiss to her shoulder, falling back on the bed beside her.

“There, now I know one of your secrets,” he said, a faint hint of a grin hovering around the edge of the words.

“What?” asked Helen, momentarily taken aback.

He pulled her towards him, dragging her closer to sprawl across his chest. Lifting her chin, he stared into her eyes, his own glinting with something soft, then sparkling with mischief.

“You secretly love it when I tell you what to do,” he smirked.

Helen gasped, smacking him across the shoulder as her temper flared.

“What, you deny it?” he growled, pulling her closer, his mouth hovering over hers.

“The way your body yielded to my every command begs to differ.”

He plundered her mouth with his, telling her something, without words, that made her heart thump in her breast.

“You have me wild for you, did you know that?” he sighed, pulling away at last.

“You are absolutely insufferable,” Helen sighed, curling up against him in defeat, her body warm and relaxed as he cradled her in his arms.

She dared not name the feelings that swirled within her in the wake of that kiss. The words that had followed.

“Helen,” came his voice as if from far away, exhaustion claiming her swiftly. “There

is something I would like to discuss with you...”

“Later,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to the skin above his heart. “Much later.”

And then, there was only sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Later that morning, after sneaking out of the widow's room barely in time to avoid detection, Starling strode through the halls of the estate, his expression fixed in a satisfied grin at the memory of the night's activities.

It was quite ridiculous, but he felt as pleased as a cat that had eaten the cream. There was no chance in hell that Helen would refuse his proposal after the passion they had just shared.

Now he just had to get the woman to listen to him for five minutes, before they ripped the clothing from each other's bodies with barely restrained lust.

Twirling his cane jauntily, Starling made his way to the billiards room in search of Lord Holsen.

It was time he broke the news to the man that there was no way he could dodge his responsibilities.

Some small part of him was glad to tell him the truth of it.

It was that petty part of him, the remnant of the naive youth who didn't understand why he was less than the other boys, the unspoken pain that had both pushed him towards this life and allowed him to excel at it.

Starling no longer felt pity for that part of him, though. Life was a sordid business, and he had come to terms with that a long time ago. Neither did he feel pity for those

who landed themselves in hot water through their own decisions.

Why should he, when they felt nothing at all for their transgressions?

For just a moment, Starling wondered what Helen would think of him if she knew the truth of his life. Would she turn away from him with disgust, when she learned what manner of man he was, or would she appreciate his resourcefulness?

If only he had managed to tell her earlier, he might know already.

But, it didn't feel right to have this job hanging over their heads. She might easily get the wrong idea. No, it would be better if he ended this nasty scheme before he approached her at last with his offer of a partnership, in all ways.

Starling strolled into the dimly lit billiards room, examining the rich wood-panelled walls, the silk tapestries, and the assortment of illicitly obtained spirits that lined the sideboard.

This room, the whole house in fact, was a testament to the quality of life that only money could buy.

The type of wealth he fully intended to have for himself one day, one way or another.

Holsen stood at the far side of the room, watching the balls roll smoothly across the felt as he sucked on a cigar.

Starling inclined his head to the man, his grin dimming only momentarily, as he stepped out into the hall for the lord to join him.

Holsen made him wait of course, but Starling knew the game better than he, and he cooled his heels with a sardonic twist of his lips, examining the tasteful artworks that

lined the hallway as if he had all the time in the world.

Finally, Holsen appeared, stomping his way into the passage blustering about the irritation of having his game interrupted.

Starling raised a hand, cutting the man off with a sharp look. “You have paid me to look into certain matters for you, and I am ready to make my report. Would you prefer I presented the information in front of the other guests?”

Holsen snarled, his portly form pushing past Starling brusely as he made for a more private room.

Starling strolled along behind, his arms loosely clasped behind his back as if there was nothing more pressing he needed to attend to.

Holsen turned into a small parlour, fidgeting with his watchchain as Starling calmly followed.

“Well, what have you to report?” snapped Holsen.

Starling smiled. He would enjoy this more than he should.

“The widow is not cheating. You shall have to pay what you owe.”

“What?” the man blustered, his jowls growing ruddy as anger washed over his face.

“I paid you to find evidence of her treachery, I expect you to deliver!”

Starling cocked his head. “You expect me to fabricate a reason for you to weasel your way out of your debts?”

“Now listen here, you bloody bastard-”

Starling winced and raised his brow in warning. That was a blow a bit too close to home, even for his taste.

“You were recommended as someone who made problems disappear. Now make this one go away.”

“No.” Starling’s voice was hard, cold. He was dangerously close to losing his temper.

“No! No? ”

Holsen stared at him in disbelief, meaty fists bunching at his sides. “You will regret this, I promise you that. Don’t think for a moment that someone like you has any recourse but to obey your betters.”

Starling whistled through his teeth, noting with satisfaction the way his lack of reaction did nothing but anger the man in front of him even more.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you look at the widow,” added Holsen with a note of scorn in his voice.

Starling narrowed his eyes at the implication. “I would be careful what kind of threats you throw around, my lord . One never knows when the proverbial birds might come home to roost.”

Holsen’s jaw worked, and the man drew himself up to his full height, staring haughtily down that unfortunate nose of his.

It was magnificently proportioned for the affectation though , mused Starling, as he waited for the words he knew would come next.

“I will ruin you,” hissed Holsen, storming past Starling towards the hallway.

Starling stared up at the ceiling, rocking on his heels as he waited for his blood to cool.

“You won’t be the first, or the last, to try,” he muttered to himself, his habitual grin reappearing on his lips as he smoothed a hand down over his cerulean blue flocked waistcoat.

Slipping his hands behind his back, he strolled back into the hallway. Already his thoughts were turning once more to the widow.

Perhaps he could persuade her to leave with him, today if possible. It might be best if Starling departed before things got ugly.

Besides, Holsen needed to be taught a lesson in manners, and Starling intended to be the one to do it.

Seton would help him, Starling had no doubt in the integrity of his friend. It was only a matter of time before some unfortunate consequences caught up with Lord Holsen.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Helen was taking an early morning turn around the lavish and fragrant gardens when she spotted Lord Holsen appear at the foot of the path.

She had craved a moment alone to gather her thoughts in the aftermath of her shocking indiscretion.

Shockingly wonderful.

She sighed, straightening her shoulders as she pretended to study the small folly that crumbled elegantly in the centre of the rose gardens.

“Mrs Montrose, I am so glad I caught you,” huffed the man as he drew alongside her.

His colour was high, and Helen wondered what had put the man in such a state, after all, it was hardly past noon. Not time enough yet to be in one’s cups.

She carefully clasped her hands at her waist, waiting calmly for the man to continue. She did not usually find herself in conversation with Lord Holsen away from the tables as they had little else in common, and she could not imagine what he might have to say to her.

The lord swiped at his forehead with a lacy handkerchief, and Helen watched the motion with a small frown.

Something was wrong, she felt it in her gut.

“Can I assist you with something, my lord? Perhaps you are looking for Lady Caroline? I had heard that the afternoon entertainment will start with a game of lawn bowls after luncheon.”

“No, no, I was looking for you.” He glanced over his shoulder, then back at her, and Helen felt her stomach twist, that deep-down intuition making itself known.

“I have something I need to confide in you,” Lord Holsen muttered as he slipped a hand inside his waistcoat and rocked on his heels. “I had debated whether or not I should tell you, but I find my conscience outweighs my sense of propriety in this case.”

“Is that so?” said Helen carefully, her eyes narrowing.

“I have observed you keeping company with a certain...Captain,” he said, his mouth twisting with something like a facsimile of pity.

“Is that so?” repeated Helen, keeping her tone mild.

Inside, her heart sped up. Who else had noticed her interest in the man?

“It has come to my attention that he is an agent of mischief, a proverbial cat amongst the pigeons,” Holsen said, leaning close in a conspiratorial manner.

Helen bit back a smile.

Oh, you wouldn't believe the sort of mischief the man could get up to, she thought to herself.

Instead, she raised a brow questioningly.

Holsen frowned in her direction. "I heard him mention you by name. Quite by accident, I assure you. But, it was rather ominous what else was said."

"And what exactly was said?" asked Helen slowly, her pulse picking up as her senses pricked with foreboding.

"He was talking to someone, I know not who, about a seeming plot to discredit you. Paint you as dishonest, perhaps even cheating at cards."

Helen blinked, stunned at the idea. It was utterly preposterous.

"You heard him say that? That he is going to set me up somehow?"

Holsen pursed his lips, nodding. "Yes. Quite. That is exactly what I heard."

He looked around again, then reached for her hand.

Helen steeled herself not to flinch. Why was she always so unsettled by Lord Holsen's manner?

"Of course, I don't believe it. But I can only imagine the damage that could be done to your reputation, the strain it would place on you if word got around that you were somehow gaming the table."

Helen pulled her hand firmly from his grip, her heart careening in her breast as she absorbed the meaning behind his words.

Ruined. She would be ruined.

All her outstanding winnings could be withheld, perhaps there would even be a case to sue her for what had already been paid.

It mattered not that she was innocent, it only mattered what those in power chose to believe. And it would be in a lot of powerful men's interest to have her completely discredited.

She raised her chin, flashing Holsen a strained smile. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I don't know how to repay you."

Something flickered in the older man's gaze, and Helen knew before he opened his mouth what would come next.

"Oh, I am sure you could think of something, my dear. After all, I am in your debt, and now you are - in a manner of speaking - in mine."

"Of course, I completely understand," said Helen, swallowing hard against the tight panic in her throat.

It was to be blackmail then. Pure and simple.

She should have known better than to let her guard down.

Bloody men. To hell with the lot of them.

Helen quickly made her way to Amelia's rooms using the back passages. She had no wish to come across another guest in the state she was in.

With every step, she turned over Lord Holsen's words in her mind, searching for the slightest nuances.

Whichever way she looked at it, she had been betrayed.

By Starling, certainly. By Holsen, it seemed, opportunistically. By unknown forces

that she should have known would come for her sooner or later.

She was a woman in a man's world. What else did she expect, really?

A hysterical gasp of laughter escaped her throat as she wavered on her feet, the passage appeared to recede before her as she reached out with a trembling hand to steady herself against the wall.

One breath in, one breath out.

Helen had survived disaster before, she could do it again.

She needed to find Amelia. Her friend would know what to do.

Gathering her anger to buoy her up, Helen straightened and marched on down the passage.

Finally, the rage was making itself known.

Buggering blasted-

Damn him . Damn Captain Starling and his mischievous glinting eyes that promised so much. Damn his hands and his mouth that had her trembling for him just hours ago.

Goddamn her stupid heart for leaping in her chest at the thought of him, of seeing him again. Even now.

Even now, after what she had just learned.

Helen was weak. She had let herself have.... desires. More than those of the flesh.

Desires of the heart.

Her stupid heart had secretly thought there was something more behind his carnal interest in her. That she had found someone who saw her for who she was inside.

That might even want her. All of her.

She should have never taken him to her bed again. It was folly the first time.

Pure insanity, the second.

The worst of it, if Helen was honest with herself, was that she would do it again. They were not finished yet.

A small part of her frantically held onto a scrap of hope. That it was all a mistake, that Holsen was lying.

Please, oh please, let him be lying about Starling.

Finally, just as her sense was threatening to escape her completely, she found herself at Amelia's door and she knocked, hoping that her friend was inside.

A sweet voice called her to enter, and Helen stumbled through the door gratefully, throwing herself into Amelia's arms with a gasp.

Slowly, as her friend rubbed her back in soothing circles, Helen calmed, her ragged breaths evening out into deep sighs.

"What is it, dearest?" asked Amelia with concern, pulling back and leading Helen to sit beside her on the couch.

“Oh, it is too terrible,” Helen whispered, dashing away the tears that threatened to spill at the thought of what she had just learned.

Gritting her teeth, she explained what Holsen had told her, watching as Amelia’s face darkened with growing anger.

“He did what?” Amelia cried, springing to her feet and stomping one dainty foot on the carpet.

Helen bit back a small smile at the display of ire, beyond grateful that she had someone on her side.

“We will return to London immediately,” declared Amelia, moving to the bell and ringing for her maid.

“But what about your performance?” asked Helen, watching her with alarm.

Amelia shrugged. “It will merely whet their appetites for me if I disappear mysteriously.”

She stared off into the distance, her mind already moving on to the plan at hand. “I will go and speak to Lady Caroline, she will stand behind you, and no one will dare question her opinion in public.”

“But the story will get out, and then I will be ruined at the tables,” murmured Helen, picking at the fabric of her skirts with frustration.

Amelia waved her hand dismissively. “And so what? You intended to retire anyway. Now you will merely do so a bit prematurely. Once you depart for Bath, the scandal will die down as soon as another catches the tons interest.”

Helen pouted, as petulant as a child at the thought of leaving under a cloud of scandal. “Why should I run? I have done nothing wrong!”

A sad smile flickered over Amelia’s face, and she stepped close to clasp Helen’s hand in a tight squeeze. “I know. I know. But it would be for the best.”

“And what of Captain Starling?” asked Helen.

Amelia flashed her a surprised look from under her lashes. “What of him?”

“Well, erm...” Helen scanned the room, desperately searching for the words to frame her thoughts.

Amelia’s brows rose, as her lips quirked. “Would you like me to have him painfully dispatched? I assure you I know just the right men for the job...”

“What? No, I-”

“I am just teasing, sweeting,” Amelia huffed, planting her hands on her hips. “But I assure you I will get to the bottom of this. If he is guilty of such a level of deceit towards you, he will have to deal with me.”

Helen rose wordlessly and wrapped her arms around Amelia, hugging her tight.

“Thank you,” she whispered, seating herself once more and letting Amelia take charge of the situation.

It was a strange feeling, to know that she was not alone, after all.

But wonderful too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Starling wandered the halls of the house all morning searching for Helen. She had not appeared at breakfast, nor was she taking tea with the other ladies.

Perhaps she had chosen to remain in her rooms after the exertions of the morning?

There was yet so much unsaid between them, and with Holsen's threat lingering in the air like an unsavoury smell, Starling found himself somewhat on edge.

There was something wrong.

Starling caught sight of Holsen across the drawing room, the man seemed far too at ease considering their discussion earlier.

Starling frowned, watching the man carefully.

What had he done?

He needed to find Helen, immediately, and he decided to return to her chamber and see if she was indeed inside.

Just as he made his way to the grand staircase in the foyer, he caught sight of a veritable army of footmen carrying an assortment of trunks and valises outside to an awaiting carriage.

Starling wandered to a window, flicking aside the curtain to see who was quitting the

party so soon.

On the front steps was Lady Caroline in deep discussion with Amelia Bennet, the renowned songbird. His eyes flicked to the carriage, and his heart stopped when he saw a familiar jawline and dark, luscious tresses.

No. Helen was leaving?

She was leaving without a goodbye, even after the perfection of their night together.

Steps sounded behind him, and Starling turned his head, catching sight of Lord Holsen at his back.

Of course.

The tedious man craned his neck, glancing at the scene before them. “I see Mrs Montrose has taken my words to heart and decided to decamp rather than spend another minute in your company.

Starling felt his heart kick in his chest, a rare surge of anger flashing through him.

He turned, grabbing the man by the shirt and shaking him, hard. “What have you done?”

Holsen sniffed, reaching up to shove Starling’s grip from his starched white shirt, smoothing a hand down his chest with affront. “I merely told her the truth.”

A dark bark of laughter fell from Starling’s lips. “I highly doubt that. No, you have said something to save your own hide, you weasel.”

Holsen stepped back, out of reach, then smiled maliciously. “I told her you were

investigating her, that she is suspected of cheating at cards. It is the truth, is it not?"

God damn it. Why hadn't he found her earlier?

If Starling had merely confessed his reason for being at the blasted house party in the first place, instead of playing games, the woman wouldn't think him the most dishonest blighter in all of England right now.

He straightened his shoulders, flashing Holsen a furious look as he gritted his teeth against the desire to plant a fist in that smug expression.

"You will regret this," said Starling, his voice dangerously soft as he walked away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I need to see her,” growled Starling, standing in the middle of Amelia Bennet’s opulently decorated private parlour. “Is she here?”

Since that fateful morning Helen had disappeared, and despite his tireless search, he had found no sign of her in London. Her townhouse was empty, the servants ignorant of their mistress’s whereabouts and she had not set foot in any of the clubs she frequented these past five days.

Starling was desperate, and now he had come to the one person who might have some knowledge on the matter.

Although it irked him somewhat that the widow had run without even thinking to speak to him first, he was glad that she had at last one friend who knew how the world worked to look out for her. Even if he suspected Madame Bennet would guard that knowledge like a righteous dragon.

The woman raised one finely plucked brow in his direction, the burly footman shuffling on his feet in warning where he stood guard at the door.

“I’ve heard about you, Captain Starling. You have quite the reputation.”

She stroked the white silky-haired cat that occupied her lap with long, luxurious strokes as she examined him like a curiosity on display while he stood in the middle of her lavish savonnerie carpet.

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Miss Bennet said mildly, dropping her head back against the upholstery of the chaise she occupied in a relaxed manner. “This might be the one thing you cannot fix , if I understand your business correctly.”

Starling counted slowly to ten, trying to keep the impatience from showing on his face.

“Has she heard the news? Lord Holsen has been exposed, and his debts called in. He is surely headed for Newgate even as we speak.”

Amelia smiled radiantly, and Starling could see why the men of London fell at her feet. It was a pity it did nothing for him, though.

No, he only cared about soulful, olive-grey eyes, and making them widen with dazed delight.

“A most entertaining scandal. I assume you had a hand in it?”

Starling grimaced. “He deserved nothing less for what he did to Helen.”

Amelia gave him a searching look. “Helen, is it?”

“Yes,” answered Starling, crossing his arms in irritation. It seemed his charm had fled in the wake of losing the one thing he had never thought to find.

“I have also taken steps to ensure her reputation remains unblemished,” said Starling. “Viscount Seton himself has promised to vouch for her, and his sister, the countess of Windham, will soon extend an invitation to join her at society events,” he added. “If we can find her, that is.”

Starling sighed, glancing down as his hands clenched, forcing his fingers to relax.

He had done his best to stave off any hint of scandal attaching itself to Helen's name, now he just needed Helen knew he had done it for her.

"Now, please, let me see her. We have unfinished business, and I intend to hold her to it."

If he could only get her alone, he could convince her that he had never meant her harm, that there was something between them worth fighting for.

"My, what lofty company you keep," smirked Amelia, apparently unimpressed, as Starling frowned with frustration.

"Very well, what manner of business?" she finally asked, pushing the cat off her lap and rising to her feet, walking towards him as he watched her warily.

The woman was more astute than he had given her credit for. Starling imagined that he was not the first, or the last, to underestimate the beauty.

Perhaps he could convince her to take his side, if he pleaded his case with enough fervour, she might be swayed to speak for him.

"We have a wager outstanding between us, and I intend to hold her to it. Besides, I..." Starling ground his teeth, unable to express what had seemed so blindingly obvious from the first moment he saw her.

Helen Montrose was simply the perfect woman for him.

Amelia's eyes widened briefly, then she flashed him another bright smile. "Now, that sounds just like my Helen. I will tell her you were here. Leave your card in the foyer on your way out."

With that, she dismissed him, the footman opening the door with a meaningful tilt of his head.

“Wait-”

Amelia held up one smooth pale hand, halting his speech. She shook her head gravely, her eyes serious for the first time. “No. It is up to Helen now. Good day, Captain Starling.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Helen knocked on the door of the address scripted on the card left by Captain Starling late in the evening. It appeared to be a bachelor's type residence, near Leicester Square, and Helen drew the hood of her cloak to better shield her face from prying eyes.

She had instructed her carriage to wait for her at the end of the street, but still she felt nervous. Helen had never before visited a man at his address alone, yet here she was, with the possibility of an illicit rendezvous buzzing along her nerves.

She shifted awkwardly on her feet, the wait for the door to be answered giving her far too much time to reconsider this rash decision.

But, she was leaving for Bath in the morning, the bags were all packed and ready by the door, the furniture in her townhouse draped under dust cloths.

And yet, there was this last thing that held her back from making the departure, a move many years planned and looked forward to.

Amelia had told her about Captain Starling's visit, and there had been something in the way she described his manner that seemed so out of place. Almost desperate.

The thought of such a man set off balance by her absence made Helen feel surprisingly powerful. She had never been pursued like this before, and the way he had spoken to her after that early morning lovemaking, almost tender... Well, it was enough to make a woman lose her head. Almost.

Certainly, Starling had gone out of his way to repair any damage her reputation might have suffered in the wake of Lord Holsen's scandal. The surprising support of Viscount Seton, in fact, had the effect of bringing Helen almost into fashion.

What did Captain Starling want from her, that he would go to such lengths to ensure she was left better off in the wake of the shocking rumours about her?

She was not quite sure, but perhaps he suffered from the same malady that had plagued her since the departure from Lady Caroline's estate.

Helen craved him, yearned for his touch, hungered for the look in his eyes as he gazed upon her.

It was madness, surely. It could be nothing else.

Finally, the door opened, and the man himself stood before her.

Those startling blue eyes blazed with heat the moment he saw her standing before him.

"Mrs Montrose," he said softly, ushering her in and scanning the street quickly before closing the door behind her.

Taking him in properly, Helen noticed the strain etched on the grooves beside his mouth, his shirt uncharacteristically rumpled, open at the throat, with no gaudy waistcoat in sight. He was draped in a somewhat threadbare deep blue silk banyan, hair mussed and dishevelled.

Had she ever seen him look so discomposed?

"You came," he said simply, his hand reaching out as if to cup her cheek, but pulling

back at the last minute.

Helen simply nodded, mute all of a sudden as she stared up at him. What had she intended to say again?

“Come,” he said, helping her to remove her cloak and taking her hand to lead her into a small, dimly lit parlour. A bright fire burning high in the grate with a set of comfortable chairs arranged before it.

Feeling like she was losing control of the situation, Helen tugged her hand from his, lifting her chin and settling herself primly on the edge of one of the chairs, tucking her skirts carefully around her legs.

Starling watched her steadily, slowly lowering himself into the chair opposite her.

They observed each other stiffly for a moment, then Starling cocked his head. “You are not wearing red tonight,” he said, with a small smile.

Helen glanced briefly down at her plain lavender dress, smoothing the skirt over her knees.

“I did not come here tonight as the scandalous widow. There is much more to me than her, you know,” she replied archly.

“Of course I know,” frowned Starling, raking his fingers through his hair. “Is that what you think of me? That I am so shallow as to not see the glorious woman hiding beneath the artificae of that facade?”

Helen bounced to her feet, clasping her fingers together in agitation. “I don’t know what to think of you, who you really are. Why am I here?” she demanded, stepping closer.

“I wanted to see you,” said Starling softly, rising to stand before her. “I needed to see you. After-”

“Yes,” interrupted Helen, warming to her topic. “ After.”

“After you seduced me as part of a job you were paid to do, to discredit me,” she added in a rush.

Starling sucked in a deep breath, holding up his hands. “I was never paid to seduce you, Helen. I need you to believe me. The attraction between us was completely unexpected.”

“But you did intend to discredit me?” Helen whispered, biting her lip against the tremble that threatened.

“Oh God, what a mess,” growled Starling, glaring up at the ceiling briefly. He looked back at her, his expression distraught. “I was paid to investigate you, yes. But there was nothing to find, of course. You are just an exceptionally talented card player. That was the beginning and end of my report, and Lord Holsen, devil take him, did not accept my findings.”

“Was anything between us real, at any point?” asked Helen, sucking in a breath at the pain that the question wrought.

He stepped closer, making her senses spin at the scent of him, the warmth of him mere inches away from her. “Everything, every single moment between us was real, Helen. I swear it.”

Helen searched his gaze, looking for the smallest hint of insincerity, as he stood tall and proud under her inspection.

There was that arrogance she had glimpsed before, the self-assurance of a man who knew his mind and cared not a whit what anyone else thought.

Something inside her buckled with relief at the knowledge.

But another part of her was too proud to accept it so easily.

“It matters not,” she sniffed, tugging off her gloves with agitation. “I am leaving in the morning.”

“Leaving for where?” Starling frowned, moving closer so that she had to tilt her head to keep him in her sight.

“Bath. It was my plan all along. I no longer have any reason to stay in London.”

His brows flew up, his hands reaching out to grip her waist and tug her against him.

“This is a reason for you to stay in London, Helen.” He pulled her closer, drawing her deeper into the spell he was weaving around her senses. “This. Us. We are perfect together, please tell me you feel it too?”

Helen blinked, anger flaring along with that simmering desire his presence unerringly awakened in her.

“You expect me to give up my plans, my life, for a fling?”

Starling huffed, but shook his head, his eyes sincere as he looked down at her. “Very well, I will come with you to Bath, then. I would follow you anywhere you wanted to go.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Helen gasped, even as Starling stepped back towards his chair,

pulling her with him.

“Come here, let me hold you for a moment,” he growled, pulling her down onto his lap as he dropped into the seat. “We can talk about this, work it out. There is so much of myself I need to tell you, if you would only listen for a moment.”

Something wild and unbidden rose up inside Helen, a fierce desire to kick and bite and scream. Scratch and twist like a wild cat caught in a trap.

No. She did not want to listen.

Helen did not want to care, or feel. She wanted to have peace again, as it was before she had met him. Before she had known that there could be more to life than struggling and fighting and surviving.

Who the hell was this man to think that she had to listen to anything he had to say?

That crazed part of her gripped the reigns of her sanity, the words tumbling from her lips before she could think about what they would mean.

“I don’t want you to hold me, Starling. I want you to fuck me. Let us make it best of three, since we left things between us at an impasse?”

His eyes flashed, his mouth tightening as the coarse words she had spoken registered.

“We don’t need to do that,” he replied, with deadly calm. His hands tightened around her waist as she squirmed on his lap.

“We can be together, care for each other, just for a moment. It wouldn’t be the end of the world to let your defences down for once.”

He softened his voice, attempting to soothe her even as her temper flared hot and fierce at his unruffled response.

She didn't want sweet and tender. She wanted him raw, rough. Demanding.

"I just want to feel you in my arms," he coaxed, pressing his lips to her temple.

When she spoke again, Helen almost didn't recognise her voice.

"That's not how we work, what we do. We have sex. We enjoy ourselves, then we go on with our separate lives."

The rest came out as a rush.

"I am leaving for Bath in the morning. I am only here for... Well. I just knew I needed to see you one last time before we end this."

Starling cocked his head, incredulous. "Is that what you want, Helen? Is that all this is to you?" He gestured between them, appearing almost hurt. "A mere moment of madness, to be tossed aside at the first sign of adversity?"

"What does it matter?" Helen frowned, struggling from his grasp to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips, consternation and anger sending a blaze of heat over her cheeks.

"Dare you tell me there is anything more to this thing between us than the purely carnal?"

"Is that what you truly think, that we are just fucking?" Starling replied, his eyes hot, jaw flexing with tension as he ground out the words.

“Of course,” Helen answered, determinedly pushing aside the small voice inside her that pleaded with her not to do this, to stop and think for a moment rather than crash headlong towards disaster.

Instead, she boldly raised her skirts and clambered onto his lap, spreading her thighs around his hips and grinding herself down against the rigid length of him that she knew would be there waiting for her.

And it was, his arousal hard and jutting between at the apex of her thighs, the roughness of his breeches chafing the delicate skin there with delicious friction.

“What else could it be?” she wondered aloud, her voice turning husky as she leaned down to nip the skin of his neck below his jaw, running her hands up into his hair as she rubbed herself shamelessly against him.

Helen knew Starling wanted her, his harsh, panting breaths and the slight pulse of his hips below her betrayed the weakness of his body.

It was the same weakness she suffered from. The madness that had turned her from her long-chosen path of solitude for one last night of sweet connection.

“I want you. You want me. It’s just fucking,” she whispered against his jaw, flicking her tongue out to taste the salt of his skin as her core clenched around the need to feel him inside of her.

Starling grabbed her roughly by the hair at the nape of her neck, dragging her head back so he could look down into her face, his eyes hooded with anger and lust.

“You want me?” he rasped, the words edged with something dark, his gaze commanding her full attention as he reached between them and freed himself, his hand dipping between her thighs to trail his fingers up through her folds.

Helen moaned, her center unbearably sensitive as he speared his fingers into her heat, roughly grinding the heel of his palm against her swollen bud.

“Yes, I do. You know it,” she gasped, bucking needily into his touch.

He grabbed hold of her from below, cupping one side of her bottom and lifting her as he fitted himself at her entrance.

“Tell me again,” he demanded, rocking up against her, pressing barely inside and pulling back, to her immense frustration.

Helen squirmed, angry that he was playing these games, even more angry at herself for wanting to give him what he wanted, for her to beg for it.

She tried to lower herself onto him, but he held her back, his fingers digging into the plump flesh of her bottom.

“Starling, I need you inside of me-”

He hissed with victory, pushing up into her with a surge of his hips, jolting her down hard onto his cock as her head fell back and an anguished, eager moan flew from her lips.

The pleasure pain of him roughly invading her tight core was exactly what she had craved.

Starling gripped Helen around the waist, holding her firmly against him so she couldn't move as he speared himself up into her from below. Working his hips ruthlessly, impaling her again and again until she was boneless, lost in the haze of lust and sensation, their panting breaths mingling together with each jagged thrust and retreat.

Showing her just who was in charge here.

All Helen could do was hold on with desperate hands and trembling thighs, and let him have her. Let him give it to her as he saw fit.

The sounds spilling from her lips were a mix of sobbing cries and pleas for more. She couldn't stop herself, as white-hot pleasure shot through her with every punishing drive into her clenching heat. The depraved sound of their bodies coming together sent a wave of hot shame through her, wetness surging between her thighs and amplifying the anamalistic sound of their raw coupling.

“Do I make you feel good? Do you love it when I take you like this, take control, let you lose yourself for just a moment,” grunted Starling, grinding her down on him now, demanding she give him all of her pleasure as he moved his thumb around to the tender bud above where they joined.

“Yes, Oh God, yes. So good, Starling.”

He dragged her face to his, his mouth a whisper away from her lips.

“Tell me again, what is this? What are we doing?”

“We. are. Just. Fucking,” she groaned, circling her hips hungrily, antagonising him on purpose now, loving the fire her challenge lit in his gaze.

His thumb was rubbing, rubbing, sometimes hard, sometimes soft, drawing out all the shivery heat and pulses of sharp pleasure that fluttered like a bird below her navel, desperate to be set free.

Starling loosened his grip on her hips, and with a throaty gasp of relief, Helen started to swivel her hips, grinding herself against the base of his cock, wrapping her arms

around his neck and kissing him with breathless ecstasy as the maelstrom of sensation reached a powerful crescendo, then exploded below her navel.

She sobbed and arched, rocking over him, losing her rhythm as ripples of tension flew through her limbs, and all the while Starling held her and fucked her through it. Matching her need with his, tasting each cry on her lips with possessive satisfaction.

Moments later, he choked back a guttural groan, his thrusts turning sharp and rough until he pulled her down flush to his hips, bucking desperately into her as the heat of his spend jetted deep into her core, filling her up with his very essence.

As they fought for breath, Starling pulled back, forcing her dazed attention to his face.

What she saw there made Helen go rigid with shock.

“I’m not,” he rasped, his voice low and almost bitter. “I’m not just fucking you. I’m having you, loving you, the only way you’ll let me.”

Starling gripped her chin, not allowing her to look away even as her legs trembled against his hips, the warmth of his release seeping out to coat her thighs.

“I’m begging you, Helen. Give us a chance. Please.”

Helen stared up at him in shock as his choice of words registered in the back of her mind.

He was letting her win . He was asking her to choose her prize.

Starling was begging her to choose him. To let him love her.

You want that , screamed her inner voice, beating frantically at the door she had locked her heart behind many years ago.

But her voice stayed mute, her lips moved, but no sound came out.

Disappointment flared in those beloved azure eyes, his hands softening where they had held her tight, falling away as defeat shuttered over the hope she had glimpsed there in his gaze.

“Very well,” sighed Starling, lifting her and setting her gently away from him.
“Forgive me, but I will leave you to see yourself out.”

With those heart-wrenching words, he stood up and stalked from the room without looking back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It must have been more than an hour later, but still Helen couldn't find the strength to stand up from the couch and leave Captain Starling's townhouse.

The fire had almost burned itself out, and the lamp in the corner was growing dim, the flame guttering, flickering vainly in the air, just like her supposed dreams.

Helen shivered, cold all of a sudden, but she did not move to retrieve her coat. Instead, she slipped her feet out of her slippers and drew her knees up against her body, hugging herself against the fierce surge of loneliness that burned in her breast.

She knew then that the only heat she truly craved was the warmth of her lover's embrace. The fierce regard for her that shone in Starling's eyes whenever they landed on her.

What in the blazes was she thinking? Did she really imagine that moving to Bath, spending her funds on a fancy townhouse and pretty dresses would suddenly fill the hole in her that had done nothing but widen, gaping now like a wound, in the years since her husband's passing?

Upstairs, there was a man who had just told her he loved her.

Not asked her to change, or marry, or give up her freedoms. No.

All he asked was to be in her presence. Have her affection.

There was more, she knew that. But Helen had never given him the time to say anything of importance during their encounters.

It was as if she had purposely kept Starling at bay, kept him as like a paper cut out of a man, instead of giving him the chance to show her who he really was.

Should she leap into the void, or stay chained to the ledge? It was safe here, but she knew with sudden certainty that there would never be anyone like Starling for her ever again.

What would Amelia do? Helen wondered idly. But in truth, it mattered not.

No. What would Helen do? That was the only question of importance.

As she watched the coals in the brazier crumble in on themselves, flaring and then dimming to a soft red glow, she made her resolution.

Helen padded down the strange passage until she spied a door with a hint of light glowing along the bottom. Pushing it open, she found herself at the entrance to a bedroom, a shadowy figure seated in a chair before an unlit hearth. A single candle burning on a table to one side.

“Starling,” she whispered, moving closer. Hesitant now.

Would he still send her away?

His profile turned slightly in her direction, but he said nothing.

Gathering her courage, Helen drew herself up tall, raising her chin and coming to stand next to the chair.

She reached out, placing her trembling palm down on one broad shoulder, biting her lip as she waited for the rejection she felt sure was coming.

But instead, he raised his hand and covered hers with his, warming her frigid fingers with his heat.

Waiting. He was waiting for her.

Helen cleared her throat. "I have decided on my prize," she murmured, squeezing his firm flesh with her fingers.

"And what will you claim?" he responded, voice raw as he finally looked up at her.

"You," Helen whispered, her heart beating fit to burst from her chest as she finally admitted her true desire. "I choose you, Colin."

He sighed roughly, but said nothing, the tension palpably leaving his body under her palm.

"Will you come with me to Bath?"

For what seemed an eternity, they stared at each other, neither daring to move, lest they break the spell.

"Oh, thank Christ," he murmured at last, lurching to his feet and dragging her into his arms, clutching her tight to his chest as he fitted her head beneath his chin.

Holding her tight, the thud of his heart as loud as her own as it echoed against her cheek.

Helen smiled, then relaxed against him. She drew the spicy scent of him deep into her

lungs as her body melted against his.

She had never before won something so dear, nor would she again.

EPILOGUE

2 years later

Helen shifted restlessly on her feet where she leant against a wall near a conveniently dark alley in the side streets of Covent Garden. It must be nearing the early hours of the morning, but although she was not too fond of the waiting such cases entailed, it was always beyond exhilarating when their quarry was finally caught.

Never had she imagined she would find herself ensnared in a life of mystery and intrigue, but Starling had opened her eyes to the thrills to be found using one's wits to outsmart and outmanoeuvre those with less than honourable intentions.

At first, they had removed to Bath as she had wanted. Those months had been a lovely escape from town, just the two of them free to indulge in whatever took their fancy. Although, as two lovers freshly enamoured with each other, that often included extended stays in the bedroom.

Soon though, Starling had grown restless, he had finally come to her with a proposal he had been weighing up for some months since they met.

Starling had been entertaining the idea of lending his skills to more useful pursuits. In particular, he had formed a friendship with a certain Bow Street Runner, who had asked if Starling would be willing to assist on certain cases. For a fee, of course.

As well as the influence that would accompany it, since it would usually be cases that were somewhat more sensitive in nature.

Never had Helen imagined that she would be drawn into such schemes, but when her beloved asked if she would join him on such escapades, Helen had been intrigued. Now, she loved working a case at Starling's side. She was no stranger to the seedier side of London and its surrounds, and Helen found they made a good team.

Starling was an absolute chameleon when he needed to be, and Helen was always amazed at the lengths he would go to when working a case.

Tonight they were hunting a thief, a rather unsavoury person who made it his business to prey upon intoxicated and unsuspecting lords looking for some feminine company in dark alleyways, who would find themselves held at knifepoint, possibly with their breeches below their buttocks as their pockets were emptied of all valuables.

It was a most embarrassing crime to admit to, Helen had to say, and no wonder there had been a request for them to assist with discreetly catching the thief.

That was how she found herself staking out a designated alleyway, in disguise with her hair bound and covered in a garish red wig, her bosom on display as she pretended to ply her wares.

She knew Starling was close, he was always watching over her in these situations, his protective streak fighting against the thrill of catching their quarry.

Helen knew she was perfectly safe, and of course, anyone who actually propositioned her would be hurried along post haste.

No, she was not the bait, thank heavens, just the watcher, keeping her eye on the goings on in the street and watching for suspicious activity.

Various other ladies of the night were stationed along the walkways, as was the way of things, as well as innumerable street urchins who ducked and weaved their way

through the crowds, using any distraction to lift a coin from a purse, or begging a bite to eat from one of the rare kind-hearted harlots.

There was a particular boy that had caught Helen's eye, Abraham was his name, and she had been watching him these past nights. Of indiscernible age, eight years or less, the lad was quick-witted, his dirty blonde hair distinctive under the cap he wore. The boy would bait the lords that passed into a game of chance on the street. Somehow he had procured a pair of dice, and Helen had no doubt that it was weighted in his favour.

No, there was no doubt that this was a sharp one, who used his head before resorting to pickpocketing or the like.

Starling had taken a bit of a shine to the lad, often stopping to play a game with him at the beginning of the night, making sure his pockets and his belly were full before he started their work in earnest.

Neither of them liked to see the young ones lingering on the streets too late, terrible things could happen.

A crazy idea had been stirring in the back of her mind, and she wondered if tonight might be the last chance she would have to ask Starling what he thought.

Speak of the devil, at that moment a dark form broke away from the alley beside her, a distinctive cocky gait moving towards her in the dim light.

““Why, hello there, little dove,” the man grinned, tipping his hat at her as if they were not intimately acquainted, those arresting blue eyes flashing at her cheekily. “And what a fine sight you are, standing here like a goddess under the lamplight, waiting for me.”

Helen fought back a smile, swatting at him playfully with her reticule. “Begone with

you, sir. I am busy,” she sniffed, enjoying the game more than she ought.

“Now now, have mercy on a man,” Starling smirked, stepping close and crowding her back against the wall behind her.

A woman across the street glanced their way and rolled her eyes, but quickly turned her attention elsewhere. She had been well paid to do so, anyway.

Starling spanned Helen’s waist with his hands, smoothing his palms down over her hips to cup her bottom.

“Red suits you,” he whispered, reaching up to finger a ringlet that framed her face. “Like Helen of Troy, I fall at your feet.”

Helen sighed, amused despite herself, enjoying the feel of his warm weight against her after the long lonely night keeping watch.

“Are we giving up the chase for the night?” she asked, running her hand down his arm, enjoying the strength of his body beneath her palm.

Starling smiled, shaking his head as he dipped close to breathe in her scent. “No. The miscreant was caught red-handed and is already on his way to the station, I imagine.”

Helen smiled, arching her neck instinctively as his lips brushed her there. “That is most excellent news. As much as I enjoy joining you on your adventures, this particular case has been quite a bore, since all I had to do was stand around.”

“Stand around and look pretty, yes,” grinned Starling, lifting his head to glance around before manoeuvring her deeper into the shadows of the alleyway.

He pressed his body close, lifting her one thigh up and around his hip, Starling stepped between her legs. “Perhaps I can make the night somewhat more interesting

for you, my sweet Helen.”

The feel of him already stiff and eager for her against her belly sent a shiver of illicit desire down her spine.

“We shouldn’t,” Helen murmured, even as Starling cupped her bottom and lifted her against the wall, his breath already harsh with excitement as the heat of his sinful mouth trailed along the line of her jaw.

“Oh, no, we really should,” he replied, pushing her skirts out of the way and grinding himself decadently between her thighs, the rough plaster of the wall at her back a delicious contrast to the fiery passion that flared so hotly between them, as it always did.

“You are a scoundrel,” Helen gasped, reaching between them to free him from his fall, the smooth weight of his arousal pulsing and thickening as she grasped him tight and worked him roughly, loving the way he shuddered and groaned under her touch.

“Fuck, I need to be inside you,” Starling growled, crudely spitting onto his fingers and reaching between her thighs to slicken her already damp folds, his thumb working her clitoris ruthlessly as she handled him in return.

Soon, oh so soon, she was gasping with need, the sound of people passing by their hiding place adding to the thrill.

Helen raised her hands to Starling’s shoulder and clung on, wrapping her thighs around his hips as he fitted himself finally to the aching hole at her core and drove his way inside, sliding home with a hiss as he lifted and held her up against the wall, filling her body, her senses, with his scent, his groans, his weight as it both shielded her and teased her into needing more.

“Harder,” Helen gasped, biting down on the bare skin of his neck above his loosely

tied neckcloth.

Starling growled and complied, his fingers digging mercilessly into the flesh of her thighs, her skirts hiked up between them as he drove himself desperately into her heat, working her hard, slamming the base of his cock perfectly against her greedy flesh with every snap of his hips.

“Oh, yes-” Helen arched her neck, her body spasming as her release overtook her senses, filling her to overflowing with that sweet pleasure that only Starling could give her.

“That’s it, my sweet Helen,” Starling groaned, thrusting raggedly as her core flooded with the evidence of her pleasure, his cock sliding deeper with every drive until he shoved himself to the hilt one last time, joining her in bliss, ducking his head against her shoulder as he shivered and jerked through each pulse of his release.

Gradually, the world around them made itself known, and Starling allowed Helen to slide down from his arms, helping her to right her skirts and fix her bodice.

He smiled, tilting her face to the light as he placed a soft kiss on her lips.

“How do I look?” asked Helen, smoothing her hands down her rumpled skirts.

“Like a woman well tugged,” he smirked, his thumb brushing over her flushed cheeks.

Helen frowned, but a smile broke through her pretence, and she slapped his shoulder, Starling staggering back dramatically with a laugh.

“Come, woman, let us go home,” he said, taking her arm and leading her back into the street as if nothing untoward had just happened.

They walked for a bit, Helen no longer needing to pay attention since Starling was there to protect her as they weaved their way through the street.

“I wanted to ask you something,” she finally said, glancing up at him with a nervous twist of her lips.

“Anything, my love,” he answered, keeping his eyes on those who passed them, pulling her closer to him with a protective tug that reminded her again just how much she adored him.

“I wanted to know how you would feel about taking in young Abraham? Since I... well. I thought perhaps we might be able to offer him a place in our household. Something safer, where he might grow into the young man he could be, if he had a real home to look after him.”

Starling slowed his steps, looking down at her with his piercing gaze. “You want to take him in as a foundling?”

“Well, yes. I suppose I do.” Helen stared warily up at Starling, trying to hide the pain that always hovered in the back of her mind. That she could not have children, give him a child.

Starling squeezed her hand, then flashed her that charismatic smile of his.

“Of course, we must take him home with us, if the scamp is willing. You know I like the rascal far too much.”

“Oh, wonderful,” sighed Helen, leaning her head gratefully against his shoulder, grateful that the tension she had been holding was now released.

“I will fetch him in the morning,” said Starling, planting a hard kiss on the crown of her head and then walking on. “I think the imp will fit right in, especially with you

there to smother him with affection.”

“I will not!” replied Helen, pulling back somewhat.

Starling huffed a laugh. “Oh, yes, you will. And it is just one more thing I love about you. The poor lad won’t know what hit him.”

He glanced down at her, dropping her a playful wink. “He will love you too you know, I promise you that. As we will him.”

Helen flashed him a watery smile. “Oh, I do hope so.”