

Chapter One

Drunk. Quite, quite drunk.

Not ever having had the experience before, Lise Helton couldn't be absolutely sure, but she'd sat down on this barstool with the intention of getting drunk and she always achieved her goals.

She looked down at the remnants of her third...or was it her fourth?...drink. A screaming something. A screaming...she tried to focus on the last part of the drink's name except the fuzzy, floating edge of her brain now seemed to have fuzzily floated everywhere, clouding everything. A screaming...

"Well, well, well." The deep, accented voice slid straight through her fuzzy, floating brain. "What do we have here?"

A shot of iced horror straightened her spine and cut through the fog in her brain. Her blurry gaze swept over the dark oak paneling of the fashionable London pub, over the small crowd of laughing, talking customers, over the bartender who eyed her with annoyance. Looking anywhere other than at *him*..

No, it couldn't be. Not *him*. Not here. Her luck could not possibly be this awful.

"I am all astonishment." A wicked lick of tease lined his tone. As usual. "Who would have thought the cool, collected Ms. Helton had a secret life?"

Her brain refused to clear. Closing her eyes, she tried to pull back out of the haze.

"As a—drunk?" The question whispered in the words, barely there. A tool to poke her, push her. Prick at her pride.

"No," she muttered under her breath.

"*Si*." His voice lowered, the accent rich. "As you know, I call them as I see them."

If she kept her eyes closed, perhaps he'd disappear. He was a figment of her drunken imagination. Every morning she awoke and banished him from her dreams. She'd do it again now.

"Trying to ignore me?" he said. "Ignoring your boss is never a good idea, *Princesse*."

“Don't call me that.” He'd only called her *princesse* once before, in a meeting. He'd muttered the word under his breath, still she'd caught it. And caught his meaning. The word had been a slur, a put-down. The lilt of his accent hadn't hid the bite of contempt underneath.

He chuckled and sat down. She sensed his bulk, the solidness, smelled the whiff of his disturbing cologne right beside her. “I suppose you wish me to call you the usual Ms. Helton.”

“I wish...” Her thoughts and emotions tangled around her words. What did she wish for anymore? A sharp grief, effectively doused by alcohol mere moments ago, rose once more to clutch at her throat.

“Si? What would a woman like you wish for, I wonder?”

“Nothing.” Every one of her dreams of happily-ever-after was gone. “Absolutely nothing.”

He stilled.

Why had she said those words? Why had she given him an insight into her pain? The last thing she wanted to do was give anything away to this man, of all men.

Too late.

Lise squeezed her eyes shut until they hurt. She'd done something very stupid. She'd opened her mouth and given him another weapon to use in their ongoing war. Until he left, she needed to open her mouth and put something in it, and not let anything else out. She opened her eyes, took her drink in a shaky hand, and drank every last drop.

“Interesting,” he murmured.

She needed another drink.

“I cannot reconcile the woman I see before me with the cool creature who is my oh-so-professional CFO.”

“Bugger off.” She managed to form the words and push them from her numb mouth.

“I believe this is a public pub.” He waved at the bartender. Ordering a bottled beer, he glanced over. “I hesitate to order you another. I think you've had enough.”

“No.” She pushed her empty glass forward. “Another.”

The bartender grimaced. “Are you sure—”

“Another.”

Her nemesis cleared his throat. “Perhaps it is time to stop. After all, you wouldn’t want to ruin your ladylike reputation.”

The ever-present mockery laced his words. Again, misery slammed around inside her. A lady. A *Princesse*. A woman without a heart. Could it be true? Could this man be right about her? Even more importantly, could Robert be right about her?

What had he called her mere hours ago?

The memory came back like a kick in the gut.

Ice Queen.

Not a woman. Not someone who needed love. No, someone to put on a pedestal like a stone statue. Or in Robert’s case, dismiss as someone as cold as marble.

A nauseous wave of hurt swept through her.

Now, to top it off, as if she hadn’t suffered enough today, the Italian jerk beside her insinuated the same thing. A lady with a reputation, not a heart. A *Princesse* who couldn’t be hurt by nasty nicknames or spiteful scorn. An Ice Queen, completely frozen inside.

All of this must be true because the man she’d loved for months and who knew her better than anyone had told it to her straight.

She’d easily dismiss her boss’s insult.

She couldn’t do the same to Robert’s.

However, it still didn’t mean she had to take anything from this man next to her. The bitter taste in her mouth bubbled down into her throat. “Bite me.”

A choked laugh escaped him. “This is an amazing transformation.”

She managed to glare at the bartender, if not him. “Get me a drink.”

With a sigh, the man beside her nodded his agreement. “I will take care of her.”

If she did stand on a pedestal, then she’d take the experience and make it work in her favor. She’d build the pedestal so high, it would be impossible for any man to touch her. Touch her in any way. Take care of her in any way. “I don’t need to be taken care of.”

“Aha! The formidable woman I know makes an appearance.”

Lise stared down at her left hand, clutched on the wooden roll of the bar. Her focus zoomed in and out, in and out, making her hand appear large and then small. Large and small. Large and small. And ringless.

She sucked in a breath. A dizzy spray of grief mixed with pure rage shifted her center of gravity. Dimly, she noticed she wasn't centered on her stool—she...she...

“Hold on.” The Italian jerk's warm hand grasped her elbow and righted her. The heat of him cut through the linen of her suit, making her even dizzier.

“Uh.” She closed her eyes again, trying to bring her concentration back into focus.

“You are finished, *Princesse*.”

She really needed another drink.

“No, you do not,” he said.

Had she said something? A male body suddenly pressed hot along her side and her feet came out from under her. Her eyes flew open to meet his.

Tawny tiger eyes. Twinkling with wicked, delighted triumph.

“What are you doing?” She tried to struggle, tried to make the words crisp and clear.

“I am rescuing you.” His arms tightened around her, quelling her feeble rebellion. “An astonishing development.”

Her head flopped back on his arm. “Wait—”

He lifted her, swung her—

“No.” A surge of nausea ran up her throat and she barely swallowed it back. Her head spun, her eyes closed, and she gave up the fight. A dark fog filtered into the dizzy alcoholic fizz in her brain and everything went completely black.

* * *

She was as beautiful in disarray as she was in her usual cool perfection.

Vicenzo Mattare stared down at her. Blonde hair mussed around her head, strands catching at her mouth, curls shadowing her eyes. Her arms were outstretched on his bed, opening her jacket to show her untucked white shirt, giving him a glimpse of creamy skin along the waistline. The grey color of her wool suit contrasted with his black sheets, highlighting every line of her body and the abandonment of her pose.

It was a shock to see her this way. He'd imagined, obsessed. Yet it was invariably the calm, composed woman who walked through his brain. Not this abandoned creature. Except it didn't seem to matter either way. His body reacted as it always reacted to her.

With lust.

He swung around to his full-length closet and bit out a short, sharp curse. Sliding off his tie, he concentrated on what he needed to do next. And what he needed to do next had nothing to do with standing over her, panting with lust. He had to put her in her place once and for all. Like a ripe plum, she'd dropped into his hands this evening and he aimed to take advantage of the situation. Going out for an after-work beer had turned into a lucky coincidence.

He'd been mildly astonished to find her seated in his favorite pub.

Completely amazed when he'd quickly understood she was drunk.

Totally astounded when she'd passed out in his arms.

And when the perfect Lise Helton had spilled most of the alcohol she'd consumed onto the curb before he'd stuffed her into his limo and made her drink some water, he'd laughed. Never in his wildest imagination had he dreamed of the *Princesse* being brought so low. Brought so low as to be almost human.

Laughter had disappeared, though, when she'd cuddled into him and promptly fallen back into her sleepy stupor. The dark, wicked part of his body had leapt to life, as always, against his will.

The impact she had on him, even in a drunken state, was unforgivable.

With that realization stinging his hide, his dark, wild scheme for tonight had slithered into his thoughts.

The scheme would not work if he let his lust master his brain. Wicked and wild he might be; nevertheless the importance lay in remembering this whole inspired setup was designed to show her who was really in control. Out-of-control was out of the question for him. He needed to stuff her back into the compartment of his mind where he'd placed her at the moment he'd met her.

Out-of-bounds. Off-limits.

The day he'd met Lise Helton still echoed in his mind and in his body.

“Mr. Mattare.” The receptionist had jumped from her chair like a jumping jack as soon as she’d spotted him and his entourage walking through the plate-glass doors. “Welcome to HSF Financial.”

He hadn’t been surprised that she recognized him. The news of the takeover of one of the biggest English financial firms by an upstart Italian billionaire had spilled over all the front pages of Europe’s tabloids and newspapers. “If you could direct me to the conference room, I believe management is waiting for me.”

“Certainly, sir.”

His solicitor murmured various suggestions in his ear as the elevator had risen to the top floor. His suggestions were not necessary. Vico knew exactly what he needed to do as a first step. Clean house.

The firm was top-heavy and filled with a variety of people he’d call con artists using nepotism or cronyism to game their way into the money. Well, now HSF was his and the money was his. His duty was to fire them all.

Lise Helton was at the top of the list.

No twenty-nine-year-old woman held the CFO position in this kind of company on the strength of her resume or talent alone. Considering the fact her father had been the “H” in the firm’s name, Vico was sure her position derived entirely from this connection.

The conference room’s double oak doors opened in front of him and the whispers coming from the crowd inside went silent.

“Mr. Mattare.” James Forrester, the last of the founders of HSF who was still alive, stepped forward. “Welcome. This is my...the management of HSF.”

His bland brown eyes and sloping shoulders told a tale Vico had heard throughout the past four months of negotiations with this man. A tale of tired refrains and dusty excuses. Forrester was glad to let go of the reins and Vico was glad that this was the last he’d see of the man.

“*Grazie.*” He stepped forward, right to the front of the room, right to the head of the long oak table where a dozen of his new employees sat slouched in lazy abandonment.

He gave them all a pointed look.

They rose at once in a halting, jerky pattern, their pasty faces going white, their blank eyes suddenly wide and filled with fear.

Buona. Molto bene.

His gaze moved over each one, taking stock and making judgments. Not until he got to the end of the table did he spot her. Lise Helton. This had to be her because no one else appeared to be younger than forty years old.

She hadn't risen. Of all of them, she should be the most obsequious and deferential since she carried not much more experience than a college graduate. Yet, she hadn't risen.

She'd arched a brow when he frowned at her and kept her seat.

Then, all at once, he'd really taken her in.

Her stark beauty had stunned him. The clean line of her jaw, the blonde glow of her hair, the ice blue of her eyes. One look at her and he'd wanted to yank her into his arms. Ruffle her composure. Put fire into those ice eyes. Make her wild for him.

The memory of those instinctive reactions made him burn with disgust even now, even two months later.

"*Dio.*" He stared blankly into his dark closet, remembering. Remembering the stillness of the moment. The realization of his vulnerability to the woman.

His reaction had been unacceptable and contemptible. No woman would be allowed to have such a hold on him. He'd thrust his lust and shock away, replacing it with cold determination. She wouldn't last a day, much less the month he'd been willing to give her. However, his decision had run into a formidable wall of opposition surrounding her with protection.

Today had been the day he'd finally breached that wall.

Ironic. Ms. Helton would have many surprises waiting for her tomorrow.

An evil chuckle rumbled from his throat.

Shrugging out of his suit coat, he hung it carefully in the closet. His silk shirt came next, and then his linen pants. Not even now, after many years of wealth, did he take anything for granted. His possessions reminded him of how much he'd achieved. All of them told him daily how far he'd come from his childhood, roaming the dirty slums of Naples.

Vico padded into the sumptuous bathroom he'd designed himself and turned on the shower. The warm sandstone tile contrasted nicely with the black-and-gold fixtures. Steam instantly billowed, filling the large room, enveloping the sunken tub and long length of mirrors in a fine mist.

This had been a long day of tough negotiations with the other main stockholders of HSF. Still, he'd convinced the majority of them to fall in with his ideas. Lise Helton might hold her father's stock, but she didn't have enough to stop his plans. The company would go in a new direction, focusing on the core competencies of derivatives and futures contracts, moving away from the old standbys of stocks and bonds.

Ms. Helton would not be happy.

Perhaps she would quit.

He stepped under the warm spray of water and let the heat soak into his skin, relaxing the tense muscles of his shoulders and neck. Sighing, he leaned his head back letting his long hair stream down his spine in a wet slide.

She wouldn't quit.

Luck had consistently been his lady in business. In this case, though, with this particular haughty lady, luck had vanished. Lise Helton would not make his life easy by quitting in a huff and walking out of his life. No, he'd come to know her well. There'd be a battle royal with the *Princesse* as soon as she woke up from her drunken state.

Drunk. On an out-and-out bender.

He shook his head in disbelief, drops of water flying from his hair. Could she possibly have hidden a penchant for alcohol behind the prim and precise persona she presented to him every day at work? His gut told him no. But the mystery behind her behavior still intrigued him. Which provided him one more reason to bring her here instead of let his security team drag her to her own flat. He wanted to see what she'd say when she awoke.

Hell, admit it, Vico.

More than anything else, he wanted to look into those ice-blue, bloodshot eyes tomorrow morning and see them widen in horror at the realization he'd seen her at her worst and she'd slept the night by his side.

Snickering, he turned and slathered his chest and sides using the almond-scented soap he had specially imported from Italy. It had been the first luxury he'd bought when he'd made his first real deal. Dirt and filth had been a part of his childhood. His momma had tried, but the boy she loved had been intent on living on the streets, intent on having his own way.

Intent on falling into the ugly world of crime.

And the inevitable shame which had followed.

Nevertheless, for fifteen years now, he'd paid any price in order to rise above his past, his sins. Forgiveness, relief of his guilt, could not be bought. Still, at least he had the satisfaction of knowing he had the money to pay penance.

He wrenched the shower off and stepped out, wrapping a warmed towel around his waist. Staring into the mirror, he debated only a moment. No, he would not shave his five-o'clock shadow. Not for the woman in his bed. Ms. Helton had made her opinion of him clear from the moment they'd met.

Predator. Peasant. Playboy.

Being who he was, he'd played to her expectations. He'd whispered sinful putdowns. He'd grinned in the face of her contempt. He'd hid his tough demeanor and sharp mind behind the playboy she'd pegged him as. He'd been exactly what she expected these past two months.

A coarse barbarian playing with his new toy.

He knew what she anticipated. She waited for him to grow bored. However, she waited in vain. The woman had miscalculated. She'd underestimated him.

Vico leaned over the sink and brushed his teeth. Turning off the water, he wiped his face with a towel, grimacing at the tightness of his jaw. He'd been angry for months, though he'd successfully kept his resentment banked until he'd evaluated his enemy and decided how to handle her.

Within a week of his arrival, he'd understood Lise Helton held far more cards than he'd expected. She'd entrenched herself too well. The other stockholders, the employees, and every client spoke of her in a mixture of awe and affection. There'd been no way he could fire her without disrupting the entire flow of the company. He'd taken over HSF thinking he'd be in

charge. Not until he'd looked into two frosty blue eyes had he realized where the real challenge lay in conquering this company.

Conquering the *Princesse* had become the real challenge.

The woman who currently lay on his bed, dead to the world, and in distracting disarray.

Vico chuckled again. The irony delivered a sweet addition to his earlier victory over her today.

Ms. Helton was going to be one astonished lady tomorrow.

Walking back into his bedroom, he stared down at her. She hadn't moved. His gaze devoured her: the angelic beauty of her face, the thrust of her breasts, the long, long length of elegant leg. If he were a gentleman, he would sleep on the sofa.

He was not a gentleman.

Leaning down, he pulled her dainty feet out of somber grey pumps. Without conscious thought, he slid his hand over the arch of her foot.

She murmured, then fell silent.

Her suit jacket came next. Her body lay lax, compliant as he slipped off her shirt.

He was a man. He looked.

The bra didn't match her starchy, prim outerwear. Glossy pink, lacy. And sexy. The bra plumped her surprisingly lush breasts up and out. One tiny mole lay on one delectable mound, right by the fringe of the bra.

His mouth watered. His semi-naked body went hard in a split second.

Tamping down his urges, he forced himself to focus on her skirt, sliding it down her rounded hips. Over her smooth thighs. Off her body.

Her panties were pink. Hot pink and lacy, exactly like the bra. Another line of lace edged her clingy silk stockings.

His body roared. Vico stepped back from the temptation, his hands shaking in need.

Yet, when she awoke, the woman would turn as cold as the North Sea. From the first moment, Vico had been bemused by his lust for this chilly creature. He'd berated himself more than once as he'd stood in his shower, hot and hard and breathless. Thinking of her. Why did this sexless woman heat his blood to boiling?

He stared down at her, wondering if he'd been wrong. Wondering if her fiancé had gotten the golden ticket instead of the losing hand Vico had assumed.

He took in a breath. A very deep breath.

Gritting his teeth, he slung back the covers and pushed her under them, covering her and covering temptation. He wasn't a gentleman; still, he hadn't taken her clothes off to ogle. He'd taken them off to compound her dilemma when she awakened tomorrow morning.

In his bed. Semi-naked. With him naked beside her.

No, no. He was not a gentleman.

Clicking off the lights, he slid the towel off and slipped into bed. He put his hands behind his head and breathed.

What a fool. The wicked devil inside him hadn't taken into account his wicked body and the lust he'd unwillingly felt the last two months. For an icy *Princesse*. For the woman who put herself far above him with every look. For a sexless snob of a lady.

His cock twitched and suffered.

But his stubborn pride dug in its heels.

He'd endure this. The morning would finally come.

Then it would be Lise Helton who would suffer..