
Chapter 1

N*ew York City, March 1852*

Helene Hollis would always be "too much" of something. Too much of a redhead. Too clumsy. Her breasts were too big for her short body. Too plain to be compared to her beautiful older sisters, Corinne and Audrina, who had secured rich, handsome husbands.

But she had two gifts. One, she was an excellent conversationalist if one gave her a chance, and two, she was an excellent dancer, unlike her older sisters. Corinne was too aggressive and Audrina would often be too lost in her own head to be able to follow the steps properly.

Though Helene had no idea if she would even dance tonight at Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd's ball given the night was more than half over and her mother, who was acting like her chaperone tonight, would more than likely tell her it was time to go home soon.

Helene let out a frustrated stomp of her navy blue high-heeled slippers while a stupid smile remained on her face. It wouldn't do any good to throw a tantrum in the

middle of a large party, especially since the eighteen-year-old had just made her own debut a few weeks ago.

This was her first ball since her own debut and Helene hated to admit it, but she was disappointed. It wasn't at all what she imagined from the girlish dreams of her youth. She didn't have even one suitor and no one had bothered to fill her dance card.

The youngest Hollis sister knew she wasn't ugly, but since the rest of New York society had met her older sisters, she had to admit she had probably been a disappointment with how different she was from them physically. Corinne and Audrina had inky black hair, porcelain skin like delicate dolls, and stunning blue eyes.

Meanwhile, while Helene also had blue eyes, hers seemed less stunning, her hair was a vibrant orange red, and her skin looked more sickly than porcelain. She pressed the glass of champagne against her lips and drank to remove the sting of rejection.

Helene suddenly wished her sisters were here even though Corinne would probably steal all of the men's affections and Audrina would get asked to dance more despite her terrible dancing skills. At least she wouldn't feel so lonely.

The truth of the matter was both of her sisters were in England. Vivacious Corinne found herself married to a no-nonsense English gentleman, and the intelligent Audrina had followed her American husband overseas because he needed to conduct business.

Helene plastered a smile on her face when she saw her mother approach. Her father rarely attended balls anymore, preferring to nap or spend time in his private library. However, Mrs. Hollis was determined to attend every ball, to make sure Helene got married as soon as possible to a respectable gentleman like her sisters'

husbands. Though, she had admitted, much to Helene's dismay, that she wasn't too hopeful. Her mother made it sound like she was destined to be a spinster at only eighteen.

"We're leaving in twenty minutes. I only have to say goodbye to that dreadful Mrs. Lloyd; otherwise, I will never hear the end of it." Mrs. Hollis was wearing a gray dress with stiff, lace cuffs, looking outdated against her youngest daughter's dark blue dress with the wide skirts and the cinched waist. Her mother's eyes trailed down Helene as they often did since she came out to society. "When we get home, tell Paulette to get rid of that dress. I'm sure the church can find a poor soul for it."

Helene frowned. "Why?" The dress was new; she and her mother had picked it up from the dressmaker just last week.

Mrs. Hollis shook her head. "It's all wrong. Remind me to tell Mrs. Downey not to place you in navy blue anymore. It makes your hair look even redder and you will never get a proposal at this rate. Did you gain weight again, Helene? Your bosom is practically spilling out of your bodice. It looks like you can hardly breath."

Helene turned scarlet as she looked around, afraid someone had heard, but everyone else seemed too drunk or too engrossed in their conversation to care about a mother humiliating her young daughter.

"No," Helene whispered quietly even though she knew it was a lie. She had been eating more sweets lately on account of her mother's henpecking making her nervous. Ever since her sisters had left for Europe, her mother had become more obnoxious. It didn't help that men barely looked in her direction after they discovered she wasn't as witty as Audrina or as pretty as Corinne.

Mrs. Hollis looked like she didn't believe her. She shook

her head before heading to look for the hostess. Helene relaxed only slightly. She knew the rest of the carriage ride home would just be her mother expressing her disappointment about how she couldn't even manage to have one gentleman ask her to dance.

"Helene!"

Helene turned around and saw her best friend, Kathleen Easton, walking towards her wearing a dusty pink and blue dress, with faux blue flowers in her tight brown curls. She was holding the arm of a handsome young man with matching dark brown hair, a mischievous look in his blue eyes as if he were hiding something.

The redhead immediately recognized him as Kathleen's older brother, twenty-four-year-old Zachary Easton who had recently graduated from Harvard business school after spending two years traveling through Asia.

"I'm so happy you're still here. We thought most people had left already, but I so did want to come even if Father didn't, so Zachary, being the gentleman he is, saved me from utter boredom." Kathleen squeezed her brother's upper arm happily. She tended to ramble when she was excited and Helene knew how excited she was to have her older brother home for good after having him gone for six years. Zachary was expected to take over the family's jewelry emporium.

Kathleen's mother had died when she was seven, and the girl therefore often felt lonely in the large house, with only the servants, her father, and brother for company. The two girls had quickly formed a friendship when they shared a violin tutor when they were ten.

Zachary gently elbowed his younger sister in the ribs, causing the girl to blush. "I am so sorry. I am being terribly rude. Helene, you remember my brother Zachary Easton. Zachary, Miss Helene Hollis."

Zachary gave a small bow of his head as he kissed her gloved hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Hollis. I heard your sisters married while I was away. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Helene sucked in her cheeks, wondering why she was suddenly so nervous. This was not the first time she had interacted with Zachary, but the last couple of times they had met, she had still been in the nursery, not allowed on any fun social outings which didn't involve dolls.

Zachary was a handsome, rich, red-blooded male. Someone she could quite possibly marry. They were both unattached, after all, and there wasn't a huge difference in age between them. The thought only caused her pasty skin to turn a horrid shade of red.

Kathleen cocked her head to the side. "Hel, are you feeling well? You're all red."

Helene swayed a little in her shoes as she tried to regain her composure. "Yes, I'm fine. I apologize; the room just started feeling hot all of sudden."

"I could come with you to the garden," Kathleen offered sweetly. "Zach can be our chaperone, won't you?"

Helene spoke before Zachary could say a word. She didn't want to be treated like an annoying little sister who was too delicate. Men never married women like that.

Instead, she turned to face him, plastering a fake smile on her face. "Congratulations on finishing your studies. Are you planning on deserting us soon to continue your adventures in Asia or Europe?" She was satisfied by what she said. It sounded charming and sultry, like something Corinne might say. Her oldest sister had had many gentlemen fawn over her before she had been forced to marry her cold English gentleman.

Zachary laughed. His laugh reminded Helene of

wedding bells. "From your lips to God's ears, Miss Hollis. I'm afraid my father wants me to settle in New York for the next year at least, so he can teach me the family business. He's worried he's getting too old though he managed to send me a letter every day during my last semester at Harvard."

Helene smiled at the prospect of seeing Zachary for the next year at least. "It will be marvelous to see you around town." She realized how outspoken she sounded when Zachary started looking at her in amusement. She sounded too eager. Helene was glad it was just Kathleen with her; otherwise, gossip would flow all through New York about how Mrs. Hollis' youngest daughter was throwing herself at the Eastons' heir like some floozy. "What I meant to say is I'm sure Kathleen is eager to show you around."

Kathleen squeezed her brother's arm. "Zach is going to be my new chaperone for all of my social outings. Father is getting too old and I want to get married soon."

Zachary shook his head in a teasing way. "What is it with you American girls and your obsession with marrying? You don't see French girls thinking they're old maids the second they turn eighteen. How about you, Miss Hollis, are you like my sister and running to the altar?"

Helene fought the urge to say that if he were her groom, she wouldn't mind getting married right this second and having his babies. "Well, there isn't much for women to do besides marriage." The statement was true, after all. Perhaps if she weren't rich and didn't come from a good New York family, she would be able to work as a seamstress or perhaps run a small business. But alas, she was destined to become a wife and mother and run her own grand home just like her sisters were doing. Helene had never thought much about the what ifs. As far as she knew, it was a complete waste of time. "But, Mr. Easton, I

have only recently had my debut. I am not looking for a husband just yet."

He gave her a small wink that only she could see and not his sister. "Smart lady, though I'm sure your mother wouldn't want to hear you say that."

"No, she wouldn't." Across from the Lloyd's massive ballroom, Mrs. Hollis was motioning towards her impatiently with her fan, letting her know it was time to go. "I apologize; my mother and I have to retire for the evening. It was nice seeing both of you."

Kathleen kissed her cheek. "Let's go shopping on Thursday. I need new gloves."

Helene nodded as she gave a small curtsy to Zachary while he bowed.

"Miss Hollis, will you be going to the Shepard's ball on Friday?" She nodded and he smiled. "Excellent, will you save me a spot on your dance card?"

To say that Helene Hollis was stunned, would be to put it lightly. Men seldom asked her to dance, even during her own debutante ball where she was the guest of honor. She swallowed hard, trying hard to contain her squeals. "Of course, Mr. Easton."

Once Helene reached her mother, both women were handed their coats by one of the footmen who had been put to the task. Mrs. Hollis didn't speak to her until they were in the privacy of their carriage. Her mother was not against humiliating Helene, but she never did it in public, for fear someone else would also recognize the young woman's flaws.

"Who were you conversing with? The dark-haired young man next to Kathleen?"

"Zachary Easton, he's Kathleen's older brother. He just finished his studies at Harvard and he's back in New York."

Mrs. Hollis pursed her lips. "Ah, yes, the traveler. I

never understood young men's obsessions with traveling to more uncivilized places. What place could be better than New York?"

"Well, I've heard Spain and Greece can be quite lovely. Not to mention, your daughters moved to England."

Mrs. Hollis didn't seem amused. "No dances today, Helene?"

Helene flushed red from shame as she looked at her lap where her hands were slowly turning splotchy and red. They always did when her mother was humiliating her, making her less invisible.

"No, Mother." She perked up remembering Zachary's proposal. "But Zach... I mean Mr. Easton... made me promise him a dance at the Shephard's ball in a few days."

Mrs. Hollis sighed as she settled back in the velvet seat. "I suppose it's a start, but, Helene, you should start thinking seriously about your prospects or lack of any. The last thing you need is for the years to go by and you find yourself unmarried because you let time slip away for you. There are fresh debutantes each year, all wanting the same thing—a ring on their finger and a worthy last name. It will be good for you to remember that."

"Yes, Mother, but if you recall, my sisters married after turning twenty, so there—"

"But you're not Corinne nor Audrina," her mother interrupted coldly, shaking her head. This made Helene feel like an even bigger fool. "They had the advantage of being..." *More beautiful? More charming? Better? Just say it, Mother.* "You're different from your sisters. You need to get married this year if you want to be married at all."

Helene felt numb, and her heart felt like it was shrinking in defeat the more her mother kept talking. "Perhaps, Mr. Easton—"

Mrs. Hollis laughed. "Zachary Easton is not the man for you, Helene."

"But he comes from a good family. An old one, like ours. His great-grandfather was the younger brother of a duke."

"Even so, he is not for a girl like you. Men like him have a wandering foot, they never want to settle in one place. You will be a miserable wife, left behind while he goes galivanting to foreign countries to impregnate peasant woman while you're sitting home like an idiot," Mrs. Hollis stated coldly. "It's better if he married one of the Olsen girls; they both seem to be content lusting after the servants."

Helene choked on a gasp.

"Besides, even if Mr. Easton didn't have his flaws, it is doubtful he would set his eyes on you. Perhaps Audrina would be able to enchant him with all the reading she does, but never you, my dear."

Mrs. Hollis seemed unaware of the tears that had settled in her daughter's eyes which she was trying not to let fall. "Don't worry, Helene. If you are a spinster, you can always stay with me. Someone needs to take care of me and it's not going to be your sisters."

The idea of an eternal life with her mother seemed like a sentence worse than Hell.

On the day of the Shephard's ball, Helene dressed in a pale pink dress with a dozen tiny yellow ruffles along the wide skirt. The redhead thought she looked like a walking pastry, but her mother argued she looked just darling.

She looked around the elegant ballroom for signs of Kathleen or her brother, but she didn't find them at all. The young woman had been standing there for an hour and she didn't know how much longer she could fake a smile.

Helene had dabbled in a bit of small talk with the other debutantes, but it seemed everyone but her had a dance partner who was eager to sweep them into their arms. She frowned as she looked at her empty dance card. She had been tempted to write Zachary Easton's name in pretty penmanship, but eventually, she decided against it.

Maybe he had just been polite when he saw how pathetic Helene looked and he wanted to make his little sister's best friend happy.

I was looking forward to it, she thought silently.

Her blue eyes closed as she imagined dancing with Zachary, their bodies pressed together even though most people would have thought it was inappropriate, their lips nearly touching, her skirts swinging through the elegant ballroom as they danced beautifully.

Helene's daydreaming was interrupted when she heard a crash followed by horrid gasps. She opened her eyes and stared down in horror at the young footman she had bumped into. Broken champagne glasses were on the floor, as was the golden liquid, and on the elegant uniform.

The footman who was around her age was blushing terribly. "I apologize, Miss Hollis. I was merely trying to offer you a glass of champagne."

Helene attempted to speak, but her mouth suddenly felt dry. She was growing hotter by the second, especially as the whispering continued. The redhead swore her mother was glaring at her from where she was standing.

"Miss Hollis, there you are. I believe you owe me a dance."

Helene raised her head to look at Zachary Easton who stood before her in his evening best, his chocolate brown hair swept back to show off his lovely blue eyes. He was offering his hand to her while the rest of New York society pretended to be engulfed in something else.

The Passion

The music had started again as two footmen quickly attempted to clean up the broken glass from the floor. If Helene didn't want to end up as the scandal of the evening, she must pretend this whole disaster had never happened.

She placed her pale-yellow gloved hand in Zachary's larger one, surprised at how hard and masculine it felt. Zachary was a foot taller than she, making her feel impossibly small, but also protected in a way that made her feel safe.

"Yes, I do, Mr. Easton," Helene murmured as she allowed herself to be led into the center of the ballroom.

Chapter 2

"**W**e're dancing marvelously, don't you think?" Zachary Easton tilted down his chin to look at the grinning face of Helene Hollis. She was so small, she barely reached his chest, which made him feel like a giant as he twirled her curvy little body around the Shephard's ballroom.

Helene was a good dancer, despite the pink and yellow monstrosity she was wearing which made her look like a dessert tart. He much preferred the stunning blue gown she'd worn when Kathleen first introduced them. The gown had been much simpler and it had matched her eyes.

"You're very light on your feet. Your dress must weigh twenty pounds." He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Women were very fussy about their clothes and seldom appreciate it when men commented on them.

Much to his surprise, Helene let out a laugh as she gave a roll of her delicate shoulders. "You can blame my mother; she chose this for me to make me stand out. I much prefer something simpler."

"Like your blue dress."