

advance reviews for *Helpless*

“*Helpless* is a fascinating look at M/M love among the British upper classes, set against the background of Oscar Wilde’s trial. From the central character, who has loved and lost and now dares to love again, to the lively art students who come to work for him, *Helpless* resonates with charm and deep emotion.”

Neil Plakcy, author of *GayLife.com*

“*Helpless* is a credit to its genre: a literate and intelligent historical romance/thriller with well-rounded, complex characters and a convincing sense of historical authenticity. I couldn’t wait to see how it ended, and I hated to see it end.”

Larry Duplechan, author of *Got ‘Til It’s Gone*

“Marvelous writing in the best tradition of historical romance. An instant classic.”

NL Gassert, author of *The Protector*

“There’s real heart in this romantic mystery. Pearson’s characters are fully-realized denizens of London in an era when men could not trust the government—nor could they trust each other. And yet, in *Helpless*, love still manages to bloom.”

CM Harris, author of *The Children of Mother Glory*

“This suspenseful Victorian-era story of illicit love between a free-spirited artist and a decent toff of noble lineage, set with tense historical accuracy in Victorian-era England, weaves warm romance and robust sex through the backdrop of Oscar Wilde’s trial for crimes against nature. As with two previous novels, Pearson has crafted a sensual blend of enticing fiction and instructive fact.”

Richard Labonte, Book Marks, Q Syndicate

Also by MJ Pearson
The Price of Temptation
Discreet Young Gentleman

Helpless

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MJ Pearson



SEVENTH WINDOW

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For Mom, from whom I inherited the love of words.

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Chapter One

Douglas pulled a new biography of his great-grandfather from the orderly shelves of Goldcrest's Bookshop and flipped idly through its pages. Blast it, the man had died at the age of twenty-eight, yet his exploits in battle and service to the Crown filled an impressive four hundred and fifty-seven pages. The blood stock of the Shroves had obviously diminished: he'd already lived nearly two years longer than his ancestor, yet his own life wouldn't sustain the weight of a single chapter.

A crash of splintering wood and shouts of surprise and frustration outside the bookshop jolted him from his musings. One glance at the street convinced him it would be more pleasant, if rather more disrespectful to family honor, to browse the shelves nearer the window. He set the biography back in its place and strolled casually over to watch the scene outside. The Moorish extravagancies of the Alhambra Theatre across the street, its mishmash of domes and arches and lattices rising over a hundred feet, formed a fanciful backdrop to an intriguing scene: a cart containing what looked to be full casks of ale had broken a wheel on the cobbles in front of the shop, and several strong young men were engaged in the task of fixing it. To do this, they first had to unload the heavy cargo, and Douglas found a great deal of surrepti-

tious pleasure in watching the heaving backs and straining muscles of the laborers.

Mustn't be too obvious, though. He chose a book at random from the poetry shelf and pretended to examine it while enjoying the scene outside the window. But when one of the men, overheated by exertion, paused to pull off his shirt, he couldn't help a small sound of appreciation.

"Impressive physique, wouldn't you say?"

Douglas jumped at the voice that so neatly echoed his thoughts. He flicked a glance at the man standing next to him. Oh, my. About his own age, well-dressed, with clean, refined features and curly sun-yellow hair, and an accent that spoke of good breeding. Watching the adventure of the cart with the same avid interest as Douglas himself. Could it be...? He chanced a reply. "Yes, very admirable. Arms like rocks."

"A veritable Hercules. One must admire the classic form."

Douglas looked sideways at the other man, his heart quickening. "Indeed. Who wouldn't want a body like that?"

The blond man looked back, his eyes traveling slowly over Douglas. "There are those with an esthetic preference for a more willowy build. Not the hero so much as the *kouros*, not Ajax but Apollo, or even—"

"Ganymede?" A smile played about Douglas's lips.

"Yes, indeed." The other man looked pleased. "Perhaps...would you care to continue this conversation over a drink? I have rooms just up the street."

Sweet Jesus. It was a shock to realize that he'd not only been flirting, he was being solicited by this man. Douglas knew what he looked like: brown hair, slightly tinged with red, ordinary hazel eyes, the usual number of features. Presentable, he supposed, except maybe for that bump in his nose, but was there really anything there to tempt a stranger? He took a step back, away from his admirer. "I'm sorry," he said, "That's not possible. I...I..."

The man's blue eyes grew chilly. "I quite misunderstood. How mortifying. My apologies, sir, if I caused any offense."

"No, I... No, you understood very well. I just..." Douglas lifted his chin. "I'm in mourning. It's only been a few months, and I'm not...not ready to..."

"Ah. I understand. I'm sorry for your loss. Was it a long illness?"

"Very brief. I've never felt so helpless in my life."

Something Douglas couldn't read—a memory of his own, perhaps—flickered behind the other man's eyes. "Helpless. So few have any conception of what that word really means."

"I suppose that's true," Douglas said. "But those of us who've ex-

perienced it..." He stared out the window again. They stood in silence for a moment. Outside, the cart was righted at last, the workman resumed his shirt, and there was only the normal bustle of London traffic at which to look.

"My name is Mark Goldcrest," the fair-haired man said. "Of the Buckinghamshire Goldcrests. This is my shop. I'm a respectable tradesman from a very good family, and I swear I don't approach all my customers this way."

"Douglas Shrove. Pleased to meet you."

"Shrove? Good heavens. Not...?"

He shrugged. "Yes, those Shroves."

"Then thank you for not laughing when I suggested I was from a good family. Listen...would you consider dining with me sometime this week? With no expectations of anything but friendship. It would just be lovely to talk to someone and not have to censor my every thought." Douglas hesitated, and the other man added, "Things are worse now than ever." He nodded toward the book Douglas was still holding. "Since the whole Queensberry mess began, I mean."

Douglas looked down at the book he'd chosen for camouflage, which turned out to be an edition of Oscar Wilde's poems. Yet another reason the stranger had felt comfortable approaching him, he supposed. He shook his head. "How could such a brilliant man make such a poor decision? Suing the Marquess of Queensberry for libel for calling him a sodomite when, well..."

The other man's mouth twisted into a rueful smile. "He so clearly is one? And now, not only has the case against the Marquess been dismissed, but thanks to his own efforts, Wilde himself will be tried for gross indecency. If ever a man should have swallowed an insult, it was he."

"Hubris, I suppose. He's such a giant among men, he must have felt himself untouchable."

"No one is untouchable."

A clerk approached, young and timid. "P-pardon me, sir, but there's a gentleman who'd like to speak to you about a special order."

The bookshop owner nodded curtly to his employee, then reached into his jacket pocket and removed a slender silver card case. "My card, Mr. Shrove. Would you be free to dine with me on Thursday, perhaps?"

Douglas bowed. "Yes, Mr. Goldcrest. It would be a pleasure. What time would be convenient for you?"

"Shall we say seven o'clock?"

Plans made, Douglas exited the shop feeling both pleased and appre-

hensive. Henry always had encouraged him to meet other people—it was one of the few things they’d ever argued about. He’d just never felt the need while Henry was around.

When you live with your best friend, other people are superfluous. The social circle of his university days had drifted apart, forming new friendships in their professional lives. But he had never felt the call of a career, and thanks to his family legacy had no need of one. For years he had drifted along, his days spent in solitary contentment: reading, working puzzles, puttering around in the garden. Alone except for Perkins, their lone and very non-obtrusive servant. Their house was a bright, cheerful haven; small compared to the Mayfair mansions around them, but plenty spacious for the two of them. It was his quiet sanctuary during the day, and at night Henry would return home from the City and provide him all the company he needed.

“Why don’t you go out more?” Henry would say. “Join a garden society, or a book club. See more of London—here we are, living in one of the cultural capitals of the world, and you sit in your garden all day.”

Douglas would just smile and shake his head. “I like my garden. Things are perfect just the way they are.”

And then Henry was gone, and things ceased being perfect, and his isolation had only increased. At first the thought of interacting with anyone was painful—hell, at first *breathing* had been painful, getting out of bed nearly unbearable. But the pain, which he accepted would never go away, at least grew manageable. With Perkins’s help he was able to dress and face the day, to resume looking after his flowers, find pleasure again getting lost in the pages of a book. Even so, if today hadn’t been his manservant’s afternoon off, Douglas wouldn’t have ventured out to the bookshop himself.

“I’m glad.” He said the words out loud and raised his face to the spring sunshine. April could be capricious, but today was clear and breezy and there were daffodils everywhere he looked. His errand was complete, and it was too fine to go home. Henry’s voice was warm in his memory: “You should get out more. See the city.” Why not? A hansom cab was approaching, unoccupied, and feeling greatly daring, Douglas raised his hand and hailed it.

The British Museum was only a short trip away, so he started there, touring it as he hadn’t since boyhood, marveling anew at treasures such as the Rosetta Stone and the Babylonian Gates. Westminster Abbey next, Douglas decided, but when the cab dropped him off in front of its Gothic splendor he hesitated to go in. It wasn’t a day to be surrounded by the dead, however illustrious. He turned away, lifted his

hand to hail another hansom, then dropped it. If he walked past the Houses of Parliament, then straight up Whitehall, he could be at the National Gallery in less than twenty minutes. The fresh air and exercise would do him good.

Douglas shook his head at himself in self-mockery while wandering the galleries. He must be a pitiful thing indeed, that spending a few hours away from home was a major accomplishment. That he had to steel himself to face being in public, around other people, even when the rewards included time spent with works by masters like da Vinci and Michelangelo, Holbein and Van Eyck. Still, the safety of home beckoned, and he'd surely been adventurous enough for one day.

The gallery was quiet as he meandered through the rooms back toward the exit. Most people, he supposed, were outside enjoying the fine spring weather. Bad luck, then, for the artist attempting to sketch *The Virgin of the Rocks*, that one of the few people in the gallery was standing immobile directly in front of it. The artist, sitting on a bench with his black brows beetled in concentration, continued to wield his charcoal with quick authority despite the fact that his view must be almost completely blocked by a middle-aged lady sporting a hat of truly epic proportions.

Douglas's jaw dropped as he studied the creation. Wide brims were both fashionable and practical on a sunny day like today, and a little colorful trim went a long way. But which milliner had decided to bless this woman with so much of Nature's bounty? The hat was a veritable orchard of shiny wax fruit: apples, peaches, plums, bunches of grapes and bobbles of dark red cherries, all advertising a fecundity the lady was surely beyond in years. He shot a glance of sympathy at the artist, who grinned and turned his sketchpad so Douglas could see it.

He grinned back. The man was sketching the lady, not the painting, and had captured her headwear in all its overblown glory. Douglas's smile changed as he studied the sketch, and he glanced swiftly back at the subject for confirmation.

"I never would have seen that," he said with surprise, eyes following the woman as she walked from the room. "She's proud of that hat—she knows it's silly but she loves it and wears it like a queen. All I saw was the hat."

"An artist shows you what he wants you to see," the other man said, reclaiming the sketchpad. He was good looking, if you favored the dark and slightly dangerous type—which Douglas didn't, preferring the

finely-cut features of today's other new acquaintance. "For instance, if I illustrated the society pages..." The charcoal moved swiftly, forming the elegant lines of a fashion sketch. It was the same lady, her face now doll-like and simpering, the hat appearing daring and chic. He had barely finished when he flipped over to a new page. "Guess this one." He used a heavier hand this time, emphasizing the subject's age and just slightly exaggerating—or possibly not—her headgear.

"I see," said Douglas. "This would be for—for a Baptist polemic on frivolity and wastefulness."

"Exactly. And all I'd have to do is add a few starving children in the background and we'd have a political tract."

Douglas tilted his head, considering. "But the first one was the truth." His voice crept up at the end, making it sound almost a question. "I certainly liked it the best."

The artist smiled. "In one way or another, they're all true." He turned back to the first sketch and ripped it from the pad. "Here—for you."

Douglas looked at it again with appreciation. The man might be shabby, but he was talented. "Thank you." Belatedly, he realized he hadn't introduced himself. "I'm sorry, how rude of me. I'm Douglas Shrove." He held out his hand, bracing himself for the usual question, but the other man just smiled and squeezed his hand warmly in his blunt, charcoal-smudged fingers.

"Warren Scott. I know who you are—we met at the bank's Christmas party a few years ago. Henry Carter was my banker."

Douglas felt his face flush. "I'm afraid I'm not very good with faces," he said. "I do remember meeting an artist, though."

The dark eyes studied him. "I liked Henry immensely. I was very sorry to hear of his passing."

"Thank you," Douglas said quietly.

"I should have come by to pay my condolences at the time. It's bothered me that I didn't."

He looked at the floor for a moment. "It's all right. No one did."

The artist winced. "And *that* is about as cogent an indictment of the human race as I've ever heard."

"No," Douglas said, "that's not what I meant. I just meant—it's only natural not to know what to say in...in cases like these."

"It must be difficult even to find people you can talk to about it."

About which? The way Henry had died, or what Henry had been to him? Douglas just nodded, and looked toward the exit.

"If you ever feel the need—to talk about it, I mean—I'd be happy to listen."

“Of course, thank you,” Douglas said, with another polite nod. It was unlikely that he would pursue the acquaintance. The artist’s speech suggested at least some education, but his accent was firmly middle-class. Not the sort with which he would have much in common. And despite what were possibly respectable enough beginnings, the man’s clothing was shabby and his hair not recently cut. That suggested the starving-in-a-garret sort of life—very poetic, but Shroves were taught from birth to avoid such persons or risk being exploited. He held out his hand. “It was very nice to meet you—again.”

The artist shook his hand for the second time. “Somewhere, I have some sketches of Henry that I did during one of our meetings a year or so ago. I’ll have to search them out, but if you’re interested—”

“Sketches?” Douglas felt his knees grow weak with something like hunger. “I—I don’t even have a photograph of him. If you really mean that—”

“Yes. I should have several. There’s one in particular that I remember as being quite nice.”

Forget being exploited. “I’d love to see it. All of them. And I’d be happy to pay whatever you think is fair.”

“I couldn’t accept payment.” The artist searched his pockets. “Damn. I haven’t got a card with me. I’m at number eight Carrington Place, off Tottenham Court Road. Can you remember that?”

Douglas smiled. “I had a governess named Miss Carrington who terrorized me until I was eight and went off to school. And Tottenham Court is just up from Charing Cross Road, where my favorite bookshop is. I think I can remember that. When should I call?”

“Oh, anytime, except weekends, when I go off to the country to paint portraits of tyrannical dowagers. Early morning isn’t good because I tend to work late into the night, but I’m usually up and about by ten o’clock.”

It was impossible to leave things so amorphous. “You’ll need a few days to find the sketches, I suppose. Shall we say Friday afternoon? Two o’clock?”

“That will be fine.” The dark eyes, sensual and heavy-lashed, lingered on his. “I look forward to seeing you again.”

Douglas took his leave. *I look forward to seeing you again.* Was it possible that he had gained two admirers on the same day? The thought made him want to laugh. Well, it was spring, and what did Tennyson say? ‘In the Spring, a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.’

That’s it, he thought, smiling. Just the effects of spring. A trick of the weather. Shaking his head, he hailed a cab for home.

Chapter Two

Twice in one week. Douglas couldn't remember the last time he'd ventured from his home so often, but here it was Thursday night, and he was going to dine with Mark Goldcrest. Still, did his manservant have to look quite so stupefied when Douglas informed him that he was going out?

"You're—you're what, sir?"

"I said, I'll be dining out tonight," Douglas repeated, lifting his brows. "Help me with my cufflinks and then you're free. You can spend the evening with Emily, if you like. She's a pretty girl."

"But where are you going?" The young man turned red. "Sorry, sir. I just..."

It shouldn't be necessary to explain one's actions to a servant, but Perkins looked so bewildered by this turn of events that Douglas took pity on him. "I'm having dinner with a—a friend."

"Oh. Like...from Oxford?"

Douglas frowned. "No, a new acquaintance—no one you know."

"But you did say, just a friend. Not...you're not..." His manservant hesitated, blinking.

"Just a friend. For now. But you know, Perkins, I'm not planning to spend the rest of my life in mourning."

Perkins continued to look lost. "I rather hoped, sir, once you got over Mr.

Carter...well, you might think about finding a nice young lady.”

“I’ve never given much thought to young ladies, I’m afraid.” He smiled. “Now, a nice young gentleman—”

The servant stiffened. “That’s not something I need to hear about, Mr. Shrove.”

“Fine, Perkins. My other cufflink, please?” He kept his voice level, but Douglas couldn’t help feeling hurt. He and Perkins weren’t intimate by any standards, but they got along tolerably well, and the aura of disapproval exuded by the servant stung. And he certainly hadn’t noticed a similar concern in the past. The influence of Emily and her friends? He tried to remember how long Perkins had been seeing the girl, and failed. But most likely it was just a bit of a shock. He’d been wrapped in his grief for a long time, and had rallied so slowly that it must seem unbelievable that he was now seeking out the company of other men.

“Have a good night, Perkins,” he said. “I can let myself in if you’re back late.”

Mark Goldcrest opened his door with a smile and air of distraction. “Mrs. Haworth’s daughter is ill, I’m afraid, so we’ll have to fend for ourselves tonight. Luckily, she was able to put dinner together before she left.”

“Your housekeeper?” Douglas stepped into the hall, stripping off his gloves.

“Yes. Inherited from my uncle two years ago, along with the bookshop and the rest of this.” The sweep of his hand took in the townhouse about them, well-cared for and furnished in a style some thirty years past.

“It’s quite nice,” Douglas said, looking around. Touches of wealth were apparent in the quality of the paintings hanging in the hall, the large china vases by the door.

“I keep meaning to redecorate, but time just gets away from me. I was thinking perhaps...” He shrugged, with a laugh. “To tell you the truth, I haven’t the foggiest notion. Fancy a whisky before dinner, Mr. Shrove?”

“That’s what decorators are for. And yes, please. A small one.”

They repaired to a drawing room, hung with dark green velvet draperies and lined with bookshelves. Douglas browsed the shelves while his host poured for them. “Good heavens, what a collection. Are the volumes yours or your uncle’s?”

“Oh, a little of both. My uncle is the one who instilled in me a love of literature, and so he left me his estate. The family considered him a bit eccentric for going into trade at all, but the books—” Goldcrest picked up a very old copy of Pope, possibly a first edition, handling the worn leather with reverence. “Well, either you understand, or you don’t.”

“I understand,” Douglas said with a smile of kinship. “I’m something of a bibliophile myself. I read widely, but for collecting my passion is gardening books.” He watched the other man trace the gilt letters on the cover with one long finger, and felt a stirring of interest. His host had aristocratic hands, delicate and tapered. For some reason he thought of the artist he’d met at the gallery, whose blunt digits with their dusting of black hair suffered by comparison. Surely, if God had been paying attention, the artist should have received the beautiful hands.

“Then I shall look through the inventory tomorrow and see if we have anything that might interest you,” the bookseller said. “I’m not in the shop every day, but I usually check in on Tuesdays and Fridays.”

He really was a handsome man, and it was both a relief and an occasion for guilt to notice it. Guilt? Henry was gone. He had no reason not to admire other men, not to consider, well, entering into a relationship with them. Not right away, perhaps, but, you know, those were damned fine hands.

“Thank you, Mr. Goldcrest.” Douglas added a touch of warmth to his voice, and was gratified to see the other man’s lips curve in a slow smile of response. The moment held, and he felt his pulse quicken. For the first time in months, he felt curiosity about what the future might hold.

The bookseller cleared his throat. “Shall we dine?” Goldcrest led the way across the hall to the dining room, then excused himself to fetch the soup.

Douglas approved of his host’s dining room. Good-quality, unpretentious furniture made of walnut. Spotless white linen, old family silver. Although the room was fitted with gas fixtures, he noted with pleasure that like himself, Mark Goldcrest preferred the softer ambiance of candlelight. The flowers on the table contributed the only wrong note. Forced hothouse tulips, just a little ahead of the season, looked so waxen and lifeless that he had to touch one to be sure it was real.

“Here we are. Do you like mulligatawny?” Goldcrest crossed to the table and set down his burden, an elegant tureen trimmed in blue and gold.

“Yes, it smells lovely.” The spicy curried soup was perhaps more

suited to a winter repast, but as his mother used to say, bachelors' establishments are renowned for their eccentricities. He put all thoughts of his mother away and reached to accept a bowl from Goldcrest. Their hands didn't quite touch as the exchange was made, which was a pity, really.

They continued to chat amiably over the soup, which was damned hot, even for mulligatawny. The peppery bite made him reach for his wine goblet more than usual, which was not a good idea given the whisky he'd enjoyed earlier. Already he fancied he could feel the effects, and made a conscious effort to finish his soup without spilling a drop from his spoon. Manners, Douglas. He stared at the silver. Such an interesting chased design.

The conversation became more personal as Mr. Goldcrest carved the beef. "Tell me, what was it like growing up as a Shrove?"

Douglas reached for his wine again. There were many stock answers to this question, and he chose one at random. "Well, I was shocked to find out that Shrove Tuesday was not a holiday in honor of my uncle the Archbishop. But otherwise, I suppose it was much like any other family."

Mr. Goldcrest smiled. "Oh, I doubt it. Is it true Burke is considering giving the Shroves their own volume of the *Peerage* to free up space?"

Douglas set the empty goblet down, his head starting to whirl unpleasantly and his tongue thick in his mouth. "No," he said. "It isn't. Could I have some water, please?"

"And your companion. The one you lost. Was he of a similar background?"

Goldcrest was saying something else, but the words were indistinct. Probably another question about the almighty Shroves. Why did it always have to...to...? The thought was hard to recapture, and from a great distance Douglas realized he was in trouble. He blinked at the plate in front of him and tried very hard to form words.

"I think I'm ill," he said, and then the plate was rushing up into his face.