



## Black Widow

“Good heavens, what’s that dreadful smell?” cried the posh old fart in the top hat. His bristled ’tache twitched like a dog’s tail as the stink hit his nostrils. My stink. When you’ve lived down the sewers as long as I have, you don’t really notice the pong anymore. Everyone else does, though.

Top Hat adjusted his eyeglass and peered down at me, just as the bread roll disappeared into my pocket.

“Why, you little crook! You thieving guttersnipe!”

*Curses! Here we go again.* I ducked down under his legs and tore out of the baker’s shop, taking my stink and my roll with me.

“After him!” A flurry of outraged cries followed me out onto the street. “Don’t let him get away!”

“Stop! Thief!” Anyone would think I was making off with the crown jewels.

“Come back here you little wretch!”

*I don't think so, mister.*

The chase was on. Top Hat himself was no trouble at all—I managed to ditch him before we reached Mallerton Lane, but the baker's boy who flew out the shop after us was a whole different basket of buns. For a big pudding of a fellow, with a fat wobbly head like an over-risen ball of dough, he was surprisingly quick on his feet. And given that I hadn't eaten anything but gutter-scrap for the best part of a week, mine wasn't the speediest of getaways. Hollow legs can only carry you so far. Halfway across Bartfield Square he caught me, good and proper; snared me like a fish on the end of his flour-fingered line. There was the stolen bread roll, peeping out of my pocket at the gathering crowds. And there *I* was, twisting and jerking round like an eel, struggling to get free.

Floured hands tightened round my collar.

“You're not going anywhere, you thieving little rat,” hissed the baker's boy, his yeasty breath hot and

damp against my face. “Caught you red-handed.” He thrust his knee towards my bulging pocket, forcing the roll up and out from its hiding place. It dropped to the ground, and was set upon by a mangy-looking dog with foaming spit strings hanging from its jaws.

The crowd gasped and cheered like we were part of a Punch & Judy show put on for their entertainment.

“That's the way to do it!”

“Teach the thieving little beggar a lesson!”

“Send for the police,” bellowed a big bearded man.

“Lock him up and throw away the key!”

“They're on their way,” someone shouted back.

*Gulp.* I was a goner and I knew it. Everyone knew it.

Only that's when the lady in the black veil appeared. One minute there was just a sea of jeering people all round me, and the next minute there she was. Like a grieving angel. I couldn't see her face—not with the thick crêpe hanging down from her widow's mourning bonnet—but she had long shiny angel hair, spilling out across her shoulders, and her voice was soft and low, like velvet.

“There you are, Nicholas,” she said, stopping right

in front of me. “Why on earth did you run off like that?”

“What...? Me...? I don’t...” I stood there staring at her, my mouth hanging open. How did she know my name?

The baker’s boy looked surprised too. His doughy chins quivered as he turned from the lady to me and back again.

“You mean you *know* him?” he stammered at last, as if to say, *what’s a nice young widow like you doing with a stinking gutter thief like him?* “But he’s a roll-pincher, ma’am.”

“Of course I know him,” she said. “Master Nabb and I are old friends, aren’t we? I sent him on ahead to fetch me a roll while I was talking to the vicar. Only I must have forgotten to give you the money, Nicholas,” she added, laying a black-gloved hand on my filthy arm. “How silly of me. And how silly of you to run off without explaining. No wonder this gentleman imagined you were stealing from him.”

“But he was spotted, stuffing it into his pocket when he thought no one was looking,” argued the baker’s boy, turning red and puffing out his chest at the use of

the word ‘gentleman’.

“That’s because I asked him to keep it warm for me, didn’t I, Nicholas?” The lady sniffed the air, like she was breathing in fresh oven-baked rolls, instead of stale sewer-stink. “I do so love the smell of warm bread.”

“Huh,” I grunted, too shocked and confused to manage proper words. Where had she sprung from, and why was she lying for me? It wasn’t a very good lie, admittedly—there were more holes in her story than my trousers, and that was saying something. What sort of angel lady wants grubby sewer-hands all over her luncheon bread? Let alone the dubious contents of *my* rat-bitten pockets... But it was nice of her to try, whoever she was. And, amazingly, the baker’s boy seemed to be lapping it all up as if he actually believed her. P’rhaps it was the formal widow’s weeds that swung it for him. As if a poor grieving woman like her *had* to be telling the truth.

“Sorry, miss,” he said, releasing me from his iron grip and straightening up my shirt collar. “My mistake. Don’t worry, I’ll explain everything to the

coppers when they get here. Tell them it was all a misunderstanding.”

“The police?” said the lady, with a sharp intake of breath. “Surely we don’t need to drag *them* into this? The poor boy’s been through quite enough already.” I couldn’t have agreed more. If I was lucky, they’d bang me up in a cell with a bunch of hardened thieves and murderers. If I wasn’t, they’d send me back to the orphanage. To Mr Rodfear and his horrible stick.

The lady fumbled in her purse as the first shrill blasts of a police whistle sounded in the distance. “Please,” she told the baker’s boy, thrusting a handful of coins at him. “Take this for the inconvenience and let’s say no more about it. Come on, Nicholas,” she added, slipping her arm through mine and tugging me away. She was surprisingly strong for an angel. “Let’s get you home before you cause any more trouble.”

“Home?” I said, as she pulled me down a small side street, out of sight of the crowds. “You mean the sewers?” A rare flush of shame spread across my cheeks at the thought of a fine lady like her knowing where I lived. As if she hadn’t already guessed by

the state of me. Her nose must’ve been twitching the whole time. “But we’re going the wrong way, miss. *My* tunnel’s back that way.”

Another sharp whistle sounded behind us. It was closer this time. Much closer.

“Hurry,” she said, breaking into an undignified trot, the black fabric of her skirts billowing out behind her. “I know somewhere safe we can go.” She twisted her head sideways as we ran, like she was examining me. I imagined dark eyes weighing me up from behind their gloomy veiled curtain. “You do like pies, don’t you?”

Well now. There were much more important questions that needed answering—I knew that. Like, *who are you exactly? How come you know my name? Why are you helping me? What happened to your husband?* But now probably wasn’t the time to ask. Not with the coppers hot on our heels. I put them out of my mind as best as I could and concentrated on *her* question instead:

*You do like pies, don’t you?*