

Chapter Eight

“If any of my fingers or toes fall off, Penelope, I’m holding *you* responsible for it.”

Penelope pushed the blotted papers in front of her aside and turned to find Dinah standing at her bedchamber door. She was wearing her cloak, gloves and hat, and an irritated frown on her lips.

“Appendages don’t simply fall off, Dinah.” Penelope tossed her quill aside. She’d spoiled half a dozen pages and her fingers were covered with ink, but for better or worse, the Third Act was written.

“They do when they’re frozen.” Dinah strolled into the bedchamber and closed the door behind her. “Lady Madeline and I have spent the last hour in the gardens searching for you. All my fingertips have gone numb. Have you been up here all afternoon?”

“I’m afraid so.” Penelope rose, crossed to the window, and pressed her nose to the glass with a yearning sigh. A light snow was falling, and the garden below looked like a fairyland, the sun scattering diamonds across the drifts of white. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s beautiful, and *cold*.” Dinah joined her at the window and they gazed down at the garden for a few moments without speaking. “Why don’t you go for a stroll this afternoon? It’s likely to be your last chance to visit the garden.”

Penelope dragged a finger down the cold glass, her heart heavy. They’d perform the Third Act tonight. By tomorrow morning she and Dinah would be on their way back to London, and the magical garden just another memory.

Lord Archer’s sweet kiss, just another memory...

Penelope touched her lips, recalling the way they’d tingled when they touched his. His warm breath drifting over her face, just before his mouth took hers. His chest had rumbled with a hungry groan the moment their lips met. She’d felt the echo of it in her entire body.

Penelope forced her gaze from the window and wandered back to the dressing table she’d been using as a writing desk. “I’ve just finished the Third Act.” Whether she’d dare to perform it on stage was another matter.

“Wonderful. Let me see what you have.” Dinah sat down on the end of the bed.

“No!” Penelope cried, then winced at the alarm in her voice. “I, ah, what I mean is, it isn’t very good.”

Dinah raised an eyebrow and silently held out her hand for the pages.

Penelope let out a heavy sigh, but she gathered the scattered papers and thrust the untidy pile at Dinah. She'd see them soon enough, so there was no point in hiding them.

Dinah turned over the pages, her eyebrow inching up until it finally disappeared into her hairline. When she finished, she laid them aside and turned a measuring look on Penelope. "It *is* good, particularly that affecting scene at the end. Still, I can see why you might be anxious. You're fretting over what Lord Archer will think, aren't you?"

"I promised him I wouldn't insult Lady Lavinia again." Penelope avoided Dinah's eyes. It was a cowardly dodge. Her worry had nothing to do with Lady Lavinia, and everything to do with herself.

Dinah snorted. "Oh, I doubt it's Lady Lavinia who concerns you. Once Lord Archer sees this, he'll demand to know what you mean by it. Are you prepared to give him an explanation?"

Penelope sank down onto the edge of the bed, her shoulders drooping. "I don't know." She *wouldn't* know, either—not until she saw his reaction. That was the trouble with this plan—she'd have to expose her own feelings *first*.

Dinah took her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Well, you can always claim it's nothing to do with him, and you were simply reciting your lines. As for Lady Lavinia, if ever anyone deserved an insult, it's *her*. I can't imagine what Lord Archer is thinking, courting such a harridan."

"She may be a harridan, but she's a *lady*." The last word tasted bitter on Penelope's tongue. "That's what Lord Archer wants."

"Lord Archer hasn't the vaguest idea what he wants. He's worse than Lord Rodrigo."

"Perhaps this isn't a good idea, Dinah. I *did* promise him I'd behave." She'd intended to keep her promise, too, but it made her so miserable to marry Lord Archer—that is, *Lord Rodrigo*—to Lady Proper, an entirely new ending had flowed from her pen. "There's still time for me to rewrite it."

"But how will you end it? Lady Proper isn't Lord Rodrigo's one true love. The audience will storm the stage if you put the two of them together at the end of the play."

"Why should they? It makes sense for the two aristocrats to be together at the end. Far more sense than putting an earl with a..." Penelope's voice hitched, and she trailed off into a wretched silence.

Dinah gazed long and hard at Penelope's face. "No," she said at last, her voice thoughtful. "Let's not change it. I think it's perfect as it is. Now, why don't I copy the pages and deliver them to Lord Oliver and Lady Madeline while you have a walk in the garden? Here, take my cloak and gloves. They're not much, but they're warmer than yours."

Penelope's gaze wandered to the window. The snowflakes were still falling from the pale gray sky. If she didn't go now, she wouldn't have another chance to walk in the garden before they left Cliff's Edge. As for the play...

It wasn't going to please everyone. Certainly not Lady Lavinia, and likely not Lord Archer. Yet every line Penelope had written had come straight from her heart. Even if she wanted to change it, she wouldn't know how.

So, she wrapped herself in Dinah's cloak and slid her fingers into the gloves. "I promise to return before my appendages fall off."

"Hmmm?" Dinah was studying the pages strewn across Penelope's bed. "You know, Penelope, this play is quite good. Good enough you might be able to persuade Silas to stage it at the Pandemonium."

"Oh, nonsense. It's the silliest thing imaginable."

"It's a farce. Every audience in London loves a farce, and this one is about the notorious Lord Archer, London's favorite Tainted Angel."

Penelope frowned. "No, it isn't." Perhaps she'd been thinking of Lord Archer when she wrote it, but none of the characters were meant to be the Tainted Angels.

"Well, it could be, with a few changes. Don't you see? Lord Rodrigo becomes Lord Archer, the rake who wants to turn gentleman." Dinah scribbled a dozen lines, then handed the paper to Penelope.

"The Reformed Rake, by the Pandemonium Players," was scrawled across the top of the page. Underneath, Dinah had listed the characters in the play, with the names of various house party guests next to them. Beside the name "Rakehell" she'd written, "Lord Archer, William Angel," and beside "Gambler Scoundrel" was Lord Oliver's name.

Penelope skimmed it, a sick feeling in her stomach. Dinah was right. With only a few changes it *could* be a play about the Tainted Angels, and not one that flattered them. Lord Rodrigo in particular was portrayed as a bumbling fool who couldn't tell the difference between a lady and a prostitute.

"No. I didn't write the play to hurt anyone." Penelope handed the paper back to Dinah.

Dinah took it from her with a sigh. "I don't wish to hurt Lord Archer or his family either, Penelope, but if you had no other choice, something like this would put you back in Silas's good graces. Florentina's, too. She'd be delighted to see Lord Archer humiliated after the way he tossed her aside."

"I would *never* do anything so low, so ugly—"

"It *is* ugly, but so is starving in the London streets." Dinah's voice was harsh, but when she saw Penelope's stricken expression, her face softened. "I'm sorry. I don't like it either, but you're not the vicar's daughter anymore, Penelope. There may come a time when you can no longer afford your scruples. Do you understand?"

Penelope looked down at her hands, at her bare fingertips poking through Dinah's worn gloves. She understood all too well, but nothing would ever induce her to turn the play over to Silas. Her scruples might cost her, yes, but they were all she had.

Dinah patted her back. "Go on, then. Take your walk. You'll feel better afterwards."

Penelope spent the rest of the afternoon in the gardens, trying to commit each rosebud and gravel pathway to memory. She wandered for so long she didn't have a spare moment before dinner to speak to Dinah. By the time they had a chance to exchange a few private words, they were about to take the stage to perform the final act.

"Now, don't look so terrified." Penelope was dressed in her actress's costume, and Dinah was straightening the long black wig and making soothing noises in her throat. "Lady Madeline and Lord Oliver both adore the Third Act, and the audience will too, I promise you."

Penelope's stomach writhed with butterflies, all battering against her ribs at once. The curtain was only seconds from rising. "Oh, Dinah, I'm afraid I've made a dreadful mistake."

"Nonsense. It'll be fine. All you need to do is run on stage and fall down in front of the carriage when you hear Lord Rakehell yell, 'Dear God, we're going to hit her!' From that point on just follow Lord Oliver's lead. You can do that, can't you?"

"No! That's what I'm trying to tell you!" Penelope's butterflies fluttered wildly. She was certain she was going to cast up her accounts all over the stage.

"Don't worry about a thing." Dinah led her toward the side of the stage, out of the audience's sight, then turned to take her own place.

Penelope snatched at Dinah's arm before she could stir a step. "Dinah, wait! I can't...I don't think I can do this." Oh, what had she been thinking this afternoon, writing that absurd ending? At best, Lord Archer would be livid, and at worst...

At worst, he'd laugh at her.

"It's too late for regrets now, my girl. Lord Oliver and Lady Madeline are waiting." Dinah tugged her arm away and ran toward center stage, where Lord Oliver was sitting in a makeshift carriage the stable boys had fashioned out of a few cushions set atop a hay bale, and holding a pair of reins that had been attached to a hook offstage.

"Curtains!" Dinah whispered.

The stable boys pulled the curtains back. Penelope stood at the side of the stage, every limb shaking, and waited for her cue.

"Once we're wed, I must have six carriages, my lord. Not a single fewer than six will do, each with perfectly matched white horses. Dozens of gowns of the finest silk and satin with Belgian lace, and a grand townhouse in Mayfair. Grander even than Devonshire House!" Lady Pristine Proper was seated beside Lord Rodrigo in the carriage, clinging to his arm with one hand and ticking off her demands with the other.

Penelope closed her eyes in despair. Lady Lavinia was going to snatch her hair out, and Lord Archer was going to be so furious he'd let her.

Lord Rodrigo turned a comically aghast face toward the audience, and laughter drifted through the drawing room. "But my lady, my mother is ailing, and not fit for the London air!"

Lady Proper sniffed at this. “Let your mother stay in the country, then, and have the servants tend her. Speaking of servants, Lord Rakehell, I demand the constant attendance of a French lady’s maid. The finest ladies of the *ton* all have a French lady’s maid, and a French modiste, and a French chef. I am to become the Countess of Rakehell, wife to the wealthiest earl in England, and I must have everything French!”

Lord Rodrigo and Lady Proper were too preoccupied with their argument to notice the Christmas Angel sneaking up behind their carriage. “Lord Rodrigo is a fool to believe Lady Proper is his one true love, is he not?” The angel addressed this to the audience, her hands held up in question.

The audience responded with a resounding yes, particularly the stable boys, who were so offended by Lady Proper they shook their fists at her.

“Shall I help his poor lordship?” The Christmas Angel asked. “Or shall let him reap the consequences of his foolishness with a lifetime of marriage to Lady Proper and an afterlife of eternal damnation?”

“Help the poor sod!” Lord Christopher shouted, and the rest of the audience laughed and clapped their agreement.

The Christmas Angel nodded, then crept up behind the carriage, her finger over her lips to hush the audience. She lifted her arms into the air and waved them about, as if conjuring a spell. The audience remained silent as the angel twirled gracefully across the stage, her filmy white skirts gathered in her hands and her golden curls flying.

Everyone held their breath and waited, curious to see what the effect of this dance would be, when a sudden shriek made them all jump in their chairs. Lord Rodrigo and Lady Proper both screamed, and Lord Rodrigo grappled with the reins, jerking them savagely to the right as if to prevent the carriage from striking something. “Dear God, we’re going to hit her!”

Penelope stood frozen on the sidelines. For an awful moment she couldn’t make herself move, but then she thought of Lord Archer, and emotion welled inside her. He was a good man, a gentleman who cared for his family. He deserved much better than Lady Lavinia.

This was nothing more than a silly little play. It likely wouldn’t change a thing, but it was all Penelope had to offer him. Her heart in her throat, she darted forward and threw herself onto the floor in front of the hay bale, as if she’d fallen in front of the carriage.

Lord Rodrigo let out a pitiful wail and jerked on the reins. “Dear God, I fear we’ve killed her!”

“Never mind *her*! You’ve killed *me*!” Lady Proper screeched as she tumbled backwards off the hay bale. The audience gasped, but it quickly turned to a laugh when Lady Proper landed with an unceremonious thump on her bottom. “Lord Rakehell!” she shrieked, gripping the hay bale and trying to pull herself up. “Come and save me at once!”

Lord Rodrigo didn’t appear to hear her. He tossed the reins aside, jumped down and hurried to Penelope, who was lying in front of the hay bale. He fell to his knees beside her and gathered her into his arms. “Why, it’s the lady from the other day—the actress who wept over my troubled heart! My dear lady, do you live still?”

Lord Oliver jiggled her a bit, and Penelope let her eyes flutter open.

“She lives!” Lord Rodrigo cried, raising his eyes to heaven. He gathered Penelope against his chest and rose to his feet with a dramatic flourish, cradling her in his arms. More than one lady in the audience sighed at the romantic gesture, and Lord Christopher shouted, “Is she your one true love, Lord Rakehell?”

Lord Rodrigo set Penelope down on the hay bale, then threw himself on his knees at her feet. “My dear lady, you showed me kindness and compassion when my heart was sorely afflicted. Yours is the sweetest face I have ever seen. You are my one true love. I beg you to stay with me forever, and save me from eternal damnation.”

This was the moment when Penelope was meant to pledge her love to Lord Rodrigo and thus end the play. She hesitated, seeking out Lord Archer, who was in his usual place at the front with a seething Lady Lavinia at his side. His face was expressionless, but his dark blue eyes were following her every move, her every breath.

Waiting.

Lord Rodrigo cleared his throat nervously and gathered Penelope’s hands in his. “My dear lady, please don’t deny me. The Christmas Angel bid me find my one true love, and you are she. I love you madly and wish to be with you always. Do you love me, my lady? Will you become my wife?”

Lord Oliver gave Penelope’s hands a meaningful squeeze.

Penelope drew in a quick breath and opened her mouth. The audience leaned forward in their chairs, their own breath held as they awaited her reply. She reached for Lord Rodrigo, but when she cradled his cheek in her palm and spoke her lines, she didn’t see Lord Oliver. She didn’t see Lady Madeline, or Dinah, or Lady Lavinia and the rest of the audience.

She saw only Will.

“I *do* love you. You are my one true love, and I will stay with you always.”

The audience released their collective breath in a sigh, then jumped to their feet and burst into a storm of applause.

Penelope hardly heard them.

The players ran down the stage to take their bows. Lord Archer’s guests were rising to their feet, but he didn’t move. Lady Lavinia was saying something to him, her face red with fury, but he wasn’t looking at her. He sat utterly still in the midst of the chaos, his gaze fixed on Penelope, his eyes burning.