

Chapter Eleven

London, January 5, 1812
Twelfth Night

It took Will less than a day to admit to himself he'd made a grave mistake with Penelope, but gentlemen in love being what they are—bewildered, stubborn and irrational—it was three more days before he could bring himself to acknowledge his folly aloud.

It might have taken longer if his siblings hadn't lost patience with him. None of them had been at all pleased to see Penelope depart Cliff's Edge, but it had taken a day or two before their muttered complaints had turned to demands, and then to outright threats.

It started at the dinner table, with an announcement from Christopher.

"I've got it all figured out. We'll beat Will senseless, then toss him into a coach with instructions to the driver to dump him off in front of the Pandemonium Playhouse. Miss Hervey will find him there bloodied and bruised, take pity on him, and bring him home to Cliff's Edge."

"Splendid idea! I'd prefer it to watching him mope about here with that woebegone look on his face." Oliver's nose wrinkled with distaste. "Look at yourself, man! Hair askew, cravat winkled, and what the devil happened to your coat? Is this how a gentleman comes to the dinner table? You look a mess."

Maddy tossed her napkin aside with a sigh. "For pity's sake, Will. 'The Reformed Rake' by the Pandemonium Players? Why, I've never heard such nonsense. Penelope wouldn't do something so low."

"Of course, she wouldn't. Good Lord, you're dense about women, Will." Christopher gave a disgusted shake of his head. "Anyone can see Miss Hervey's as sweet as they come."

Will pushed his fork about his plate, his mouth drawn into a sullen line. "I saw the paper myself. What other explanation is there?"

But Will didn't need to hear Penelope's explanations. He only had to recall the stunned look on her face that morning to know he'd made a terrible mistake. The hurt in her dark eyes, the tears she wouldn't let fall hanging on her lashes...

He'd had nightmares about it, every night since he'd sent her away.

"Dozens, I'd imagine. Here's an idea for you, Will." Oliver leaned forward in his chair. "Why don't you *ask* her? It's astonishing the things one learns when one asks."

Will didn't need to ask. All he needed, all he cared about was getting her back.

His fork hit his plate with a clatter, and he let his forehead drop into his hands. How could he apologize for such a thing? She likely never wanted to see him again, and he didn't blame her. "I don't know what to do."

Oliver finished his wine in one swallow. "I'll tell you what you *don't* do. You don't lay about here like some pathetic jilted lover. Go to London, find Miss Hervey, and don't return to Cliff's Edge until you've convinced her to come back here with you."

"Grovel." Christopher nodded wisely. "The on your knees sort of groveling, I mean. Women love that."

Maddy rolled her eyes. "Oh, for pity's sake. Women don't care about groveling. All any woman wants is to be listened to when she speaks." She gave Will a stern look. "When you find Miss Hervey, *listen* to her. Do you think you can manage that?"

Will gave a meek nod. He'd listen, *then* he'd grovel. He'd do whatever he must to get Penelope to forgive him.

"Good. Then go to London and bring her home."

Once Will made up his mind to go, he couldn't get to Penelope quickly enough. By the time the sun crested the horizon the following morning he was in his coach and on his way to London. It was just past noon when he arrived at his Mayfair townhouse.

He hadn't any idea where Penelope lived, so he was obliged to wait until the Pandemonium's evening performance to see her. He bathed and changed and cursed with impatience as the hours crawled by. By the time the curtain rose that evening he was tempted to jump from his box, storm the stage, snatch Penelope into his arms and take her straight back to Cliff's Edge.

There was only one problem. Penelope wasn't there.

Will's gaze roamed over the players again and again, his heart pounding with trepidation. Florentina was in the center of everything, of course, prancing and pouting her way through the performance as she always did. Behind her, at the back of the stage was the usual collection of actresses costumed as bar-maids and whores, but none of them was Penelope. Her light, graceful figure, the way she moved—even in her dark wig, he would have known her anywhere.

She wasn't on the stage. He was certain of it.

Where the devil was she? Not more than five days had passed since she'd fled Cliff's Edge. There was no way she could have left London in so short a time, was there? Where would she have gone, and with whom?

Will dragged a hand down his face.

It couldn't be too late...

A sudden thought occurred to him and he dropped his hand and leaned forward eagerly in his seat. Penelope wasn't there, but mightn't Miss Bishop—

Yes! She was there at the far right of the stage, her dark hair hidden under a long brown wig. Relief flooded through Will, so intense he went dizzy with it. He'd speak to Miss Bishop at the end of the performance and she would tell him where Penelope was.

All he had to do was suffer through another few hours of Florentina's shrieking, then he'd have Penelope back in his arms.

Will rested his back against his seat and settled in to wait.

Silas fired Penelope three days after she and Dinah returned to London.

Not because of the ten pounds. No, he'd been happy enough to close those golden sovereigns in his fist—so happy he hadn't much cared whether they came from Lord Snedley's purse or not.

Ten pounds was, after all, ten pounds.

No, she'd lost her place at the Pandemonium because of an entirely different disaster—one she hadn't even seen coming. Foolish of her, really. She should know by now another disaster was always lurking in the wings.

Penelope hadn't the faintest idea how Florentina had discovered she'd spent four days at Cliff's Edge with the Tainted Angels. She may have overheard Dinah whispering to another one of the actresses about it, or perhaps she'd heard it from one of Lord Archer's house party guests.

In the end, it didn't really matter.

Florentina had a screaming tantrum in her dressing-room backstage. By the time it was over, so was Penelope's career as a Pandemonium Player. She hardly had time to remove her wig before Silas tossed her out the door.

There'd been nothing she could do to stop it. No way to save herself.

Except for one.

She could have rewritten 'Boughs of Folly,' into 'The Reformed Rake,' and given the play to Silas. Florentina would have forgiven Penelope any sin for the chance to humiliate Lord Archer, and Silas...well, Silas didn't care about Penelope's sins. He cared only for money, and all of London would have come to the Pandemonium to watch their favorite rake's bumbling attempts to find his one true love and redeem himself.

Dinah, in a panic over Penelope's desperate situation had begged her to take her one chance to get back into Silas's and Florentina's good graces. Really, what did she have to lose? Why shouldn't she reap the rewards of a crime for which she'd already been convicted?

But Penelope hadn't been able to do it.

The more fool she...

That one act of honor would be her last.

Dinah had been right all along. She'd warned Penelope a day would come when she could no longer afford her scruples, and that day had arrived. She hadn't given up the play to Silas, but she had given up something else.

Herself.

To Lord Snedley.

After her first lover abandoned her, Penelope had sworn to herself she'd never let another man own her—her body, or her heart.

She was an actress, yes, but she wasn't a whore. Society might not make much distinction between the two, but Penelope always had. She'd had to. If she didn't, the person she'd once been—the vicar's daughter from a small village in Berkshire—would be lost forever.

Then where would she be? *Who* would she be?

Now she knew. She'd gotten her answer two days ago, when she'd agreed to become Lord Snedley's mistress. She was an actress, and actresses—the lucky ones, that is—remained actresses only for as long as it took to become the mistress of a wealthy, powerful aristocrat. The reason most of them took to the stage in the first place was to secure a protector. Why should she be any different?

She should have seen from the start it would come to this and succumbed to the inevitable the night she'd walked through the door of Lord Snedley's country house in Essex. She wasn't the vicar's daughter anymore. She wasn't a lady, or anything close to one. There would be no more Christmas miracles, and no winter gardens in her future. London, the stage, men like Lord Snedley—this was her life now. The sooner she accepted it, the better her chances at survival.

Penelope had been gazing out the window of the cramped flat she shared with Dinah, staring down at the wet London streets. Her few belongings were packed into the small traveling case resting at her feet. The carriage Lord Snedley had sent for her would arrive any moment.

Tonight's performance at the Pandemonium would be over by now. Dinah would be returning soon, and Penelope wanted to be gone before she arrived. There was only one thing left she needed to do.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the pouch Will had given her. She emptied the coins inside into her palm and set them down in the middle of their small dining table, where Dinah would be sure to find them.

For a moment she stared down at the empty pouch still clutched in her hand, and thought of Will as he'd been on the night she brought him to her bed. Tears threatened, but Penelope squeezed her eyes closed, refusing to let them fall. She'd had her Christmas miracle—an unforgettable night with the man she loved—but now it was Twelfth Night, and her miracle was over.

She heard the sound of carriage wheels then, rumbling over the cobbles. She opened her eyes, crossed to her window and looked out to find a luxurious traveling coach waiting below.

Lord Snedley had said they were to remain in London for a time, so why had he sent a traveling coach to fetch her? She frowned down at it, trying to make out the crest on the door, but it was too dark. Still, it must be Lord Snedley's, mustn't it? It wasn't as if crested coaches were a common sight in this neighborhood.

Penelope grabbed her case just as there was a knock on the door. She hurried forward, expecting to find one of Lord Snedley's servants on the other side. When she saw who was there instead her heart shot into her throat, stealing her breath.

Will burst through the door. He was panting, his face flushed with distress. "Is Snedley here? If that lecher has laid even one fingertip on you, I swear I'll—"

"No, you won't." Penelope's voice was quiet, but it silenced Will at once. "It's no business of yours what I do. You have no reason to be here, Lord Archer. You need to leave at once."

She moved to the door and held it open, but Will raised both hands in protest. "Wait. I *do* have a reason. Please, Penelope. I—I just want to talk to you. Let me stay for a moment."

Penelope couldn't imagine what he had to say to her. Hadn't it all been said? But she backed away from the door, because in that strange, frozen moment, she couldn't think what else to do.

Will closed the door, but then he seemed to be struggling with what to say. He stood before her, twisting the brim of his hat between his hands. "I can't eat, Penelope. I can't sleep. I can't even think."

She tried to steel herself against the misery darkening his eyes, but her foolish heart insisted on battering at her ribs, as if it thought it could get free of her chest and leap into his arms.

But one couldn't trust one's heart, could one? That absurd organ may not yet have learned to be wary, but the rest of her had. "What are you doing here, Lord Archer? I'm on my way out."

He stepped forward, his face dark with anguish. "No. You can't go with Snedley. I can't...I won't let you. Please, Penelope. The other day, at Cliff's Edge, I never should have...I know you never would have...I made a terrible mistake."

The thought of Lord Snedley touching her made Penelope's flesh prickle with disgust, but with Snedley at least she'd know who and what she was. It was easier to give up than it was to keep hoping—easier to stop fighting and accept her fate.

No hope, but also no heartbreak.

She raised her chin, her features carefully blank. "That's unfortunate, my lord, but I don't see what that has to do with me."

He flinched at this cold reply, but his lips pulled into a determined line. He took another step forward, until he was so close the folds of his coat brushed her skirts. "It's everything to do with you. I came here to take you back to Cliff's Edge. I can't bear to be there without you."

Penelope's nose started tingling, a sure sign she was seconds away from bursting into a flood of tears. She didn't want him to see them—*couldn't* let him see them—so she whirled around, giving him her back. "For how long, Will? Another night? A week? Until you tire of me?"

"Is that what you think?" He came up behind her and his hands closed around her upper arms. "That I want to make you my whore?"

Penelope blinked up at him. He was gazing down at her, his blue eyes dark with regret. "I—I don't..."

He touched his fingers to her chin to keep her from looking away. "Did you think I'd take you to my bed on a whim and then let you go without a second thought?"

"No. I just thought..."

I'm not a lady, only an actress.

I have nothing to offer you.

I'm not the lady you want.

She pulled away, unable to meet those glittering blue eyes. "I'm sorry you're lonely, my lord, but I daresay Lady Lavinia would agree to—"

He caught her arm and spun her around to face him, his blue eyes flashing as he gazed down at her. "I don't want Lady Lavinia. I never did. I want *you*, Penelope. I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you on stage. Your hair drives me mad. I dream about your lips parting for me, opening for my kisses. Your smile, your laugh, and this sweet, sweet face..." He brushed his thumb over her cheek. "You're all I can think about. All I've ever wanted."

Penelope knees were shaking under her skirts. Oh, how she wanted to believe him! But even as his words made her heart thunder with joy, the rest of her was already peering around the corner, dreading the next disaster.

The tears she'd tried to hide were falling down her cheeks now, but she raised her chin and met his gaze. "No, Will. I'm not everything you've ever wanted. I'm not a lady. How long do you suppose it will be before you start resenting me for it? Halfway through Lady Madeline's failed season, or—"

He jerked her hard against his chest. "You *are* a lady. You're *my* lady, Penelope. My one true love."

My one true love....

He gazed down at her, his blue eyes soft. "The last night of the play, you looked at me when you spoke of your one true love. You looked right into my eyes when you promised to stay with your one true love forever. Were you just reciting your lines, Penelope? Were you acting, or were you making that promise to *me*?"

Penelope's breath caught at the tenderness on his face. "Those words were for you, Will, and I meant every one of them."

“Then I’m holding you to your promise. Come back to Cliff’s Edge with me. I want to marry you, Penelope. I want you to be my wife.”

Will’s voice broke on the last word, and Penelope let out a soft sob and buried her face against his chest. His words, the sincerity of them, the love plainly woven into every syllable, undid her.

He pressed his lips against her hair with a desperate moan. “I know you’re afraid. I know I hurt you, and I swear I’ll spend every minute of the rest of my life to gain your trust back. Please, Penelope. I love you so much, sweetheart. Can you…” He held her gently away from him so he could look into her eyes. “Do you think you could ever love me? Maybe not now, but once I’ve proven myself to—”

She pressed her fingertips to his lips. “I *do* love you, Will. I’ll marry you, and I’ll stay with you always.”

A low groan tore from Will’s throat, and then he was kissing her and murmuring promises against her lips. He told her he’d missed her, and that he’d never let her go again. He told her he loved her—that his heart was forever hers.

Penelope wrapped her arms around his neck, believing every word.

It was midnight, on Twelfth Night. Not a single star was visible in London’s night sky.

Christmas was over, but their miracle had just begun.