

## Chapter Five

“You make a lovely angel, Lady Madeline.”

Penelope settled the makeshift crown of rosebuds she'd made over Maddy's curls, then stood back to study the effect. Maddy was wearing a gauzy white gown they'd found in the trunk of costumes they'd brought to Lord Snedley's party. With her golden curls and big blue eyes, Maddy looked every inch the divine celestial being she was meant to be.

“Be thankful you get to play an angel,” Dinah grumbled, tugging at the seat of her breeches. “I'd like to wear a pretty gown now and again. Why do I always have to play the gentleman?”

“You're not a gentleman.” Penelope grinned at her. “You're a scoundrel. It's not the same thing at all.”

“Gentleman, scoundrel. What's the difference? They both wear breeches.”

“At least you're not playing a prostitute.” Penelope smoothed her hands down her tight bodice with a sigh. She shouldn't have to be the doxy in a play she'd written herself, but she could hardly send Lady Madeline onto the stage dressed as a harlot. Lord Archer would have an apoplexy. He was already going to be furious with her, as it was.

No tricks, he'd said. No foolishness. She'd promised it.

Yet here she was, about to embark on an evening of tricks and foolishness.

“Can't have a farce without a prostitute or two.” Dinah tossed her mane of long dark hair over her shoulder. She shoved the tattered top hat they'd dug from the bottom of the trunk onto her head and turned to Penelope with a resigned expression. “All right then, I'm ready. Where's Lord Oliver? We can't begin the play without our hero.”

“I'll go fetch him.” Penelope ducked under the curtain, stepped down from the stage the servants had erected at one end of the drawing room, and went off in search of Lord Oliver. She'd written up a few pages of hasty lines for him for tonight's performance. He'd taken them from her with a grin, delighted to have been assigned the role of hero for the evening.

She wandered from the drawing room into the hallway, but there was no sign of Lord Oliver. Perhaps the gentlemen were still at their port—

“Good evening, Miss Hervey.”

Penelope turned at the deep voice and found Lord Archer striding down the hallway toward her. “Oh, good evening, my lord. I was just—”

“Looking for my brother? Yes, I thought you might be, so I…” he trailed off as he drew closer, his blue eyes darkening to a stormy gray as he took in her tight bodice and short skirts. Her costume was modest by theatrical standards—she’d appeared on stage wearing less—but with his deep blue eyes fixed on her, she felt more exposed than she ever had at the Pandemonium.

But then she wasn’t obliged to look her audience in the eye at the Pandemonium, and Lord Archer’s eyes seemed to be everywhere at once, warming her wherever they touched. His gaze moved down her bare neck to her snug bodice, and then lower, to the hint of ankle and calf revealed by her short skirts.

“I’m playing a whore,” she blurted out by way of explanation, then instantly prayed the floor would open under her feet and swallow her whole.

*I’m playing a whore?*

A flood of heat swept up her chest and throat and surged into her face. Whores were common enough on the London stage, but certainly out of place here at Cliff’s Edge. Christmas greenery, roaring fires, the rich scent of mulled wine, and…whores.

No. It wasn’t at all the thing.

Lord Archer was frowning down at her. “A whore? You assured me there’d be nothing improper about tonight’s performance. I hope I’m not going to regret allowing my sister to participate.”

“Oh, no. Lady Madeline is playing a Christmas angel. As for the rest of the play, it’s perfectly appropriate.” Penelope bit her lip. Mostly appropriate, anyway.

Lord Archer’s dark blue gaze roamed over her again, lingering on her loose hair. “I’ve just been up to Lord Oliver’s bedchamber. He’s on his way to the drawing room. The servants expressed an interest in watching the performance. Do you mind if they attend?”

“Not at all, but I warn you not to expect too much, my lord. It’s just a silly little farce. Pure folly, really. I’d hate for you to be disappointed.”

His eyes flicked to her bodice again, and he cleared his throat. “I’m sure I won’t be. Are you ready, then? Shall I call the guests to the drawing room?”

“Yes, please.” Penelope curtsied to him, then darted away, her cheeks still hot from the look in his eyes when they’d dipped to her bodice. He might aspire to be a proper gentleman, but there was a good deal of the rogue still in Lord Archer, and it had only taken a daring décolletage to lure it to the surface.

When she arrived back stage Lord Oliver was there, chatting with Lady Madeline and trying not to stare at Dinah in her scoundrel’s costume. “I hope you’re not nervous.” Penelope took his arm and led him to his place on the stage, then gave him a reassuring smile. “It’s only a short performance.”

Lord Oliver cocked a playful eyebrow at her. "I think it's you who should be nervous, Miss Hervey. *You* wrote the play."

She had indeed, and she was dreading the moment she'd have explain herself to Lord Archer, but this wasn't the moment to fret over it.

*One disaster at a time.*

Penelope pressed a dozen shiny false coins into Lord Oliver's hand. "Now, remember, my lord. You're playing a rake. You've been wagering all night, you're in your cups, and you've got a, ah...lady of questionable virtue on your arm." She would *not* say whore again. "All you need do is stumble about on the stage, tossing playing cards and coins about, and demanding more female companionship. Then you'll get into a brawl with Miss Bishop."

Lord Oliver snorted. "This is all disturbingly familiar."

"Just follow Miss Bishop's lead with the fight. She's very good at them. Once she knocks you to the floor, Lady Madeline will take the stage." Penelope turned to smile at Maddy. "Are you ready?"

Lady Madeline looked a bit terrified, but she nodded. "I think so."

Dinah made a shooing motion toward the curtain. "We're ready. Go on."

Once again Penelope ducked under the curtain. Lord Archer was seated right at the foot of the stage, with Lady Lavinia and Lord Christopher on either side of him. The rest of the house party guests were scattered around the room, with a dozen or so servants standing behind them at the back.

Penelope waved a hand for quiet, then announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment this evening we have a new play, never before staged, entitled "Boughs of Folly," written by Miss Penelope Hervey. It's a remarkably silly little play, but if you're amused by it, we'll consider our work a success. Joining the Pandemonium players on stage this evening is Lady Madeline Angel, as the Christmas angel, and Lord Oliver Angel, as Lord Rodrigo Rakehell."

"Bravo!" Lord Christopher ignored Lady Lavinia's quelling look, stuck his fingers in his mouth and let out a loud whistle.

Penelope shot him a grin, then ducked back under the curtain, scurried to her place beside Lord Oliver and called, "Curtains, please!" The two stable boys Lord Archer had recruited for the job swept the curtains back, and Lord Oliver sprang immediately into his role as Lord Rodrigo.

"Women!" He shouted, tossing a handful of coins into the air and staggering about on the stage like a drunken scoundrel. "Bring me more women at once!"

Lady Lavinia gave an outraged gasp, but the rest of the audience burst into laughter, and Penelope had to bite her lip to keep from joining them. She hung on Lord Rodrigo's arm, swaying her hips and flirting her skirts. She reached over, snatched Lord Rodrigo's top hat off his head, and slapped it down on her own.

“More women, more whiskey, more wagering!” Lord Rodrigo shrieked. “I’m a wicked, aristocratic rake, and I must have my way in all things!”

Lord Christopher was convulsed with laughter, and the ladies—with the exception of Lady Lavinia—were blushing and giggling behind their hands. Even Lord Archer was grinning.

Lord Rodrigo, encouraged by their reaction, made a great show of flinging his arm over Penelope’s shoulder and stumbling about for a few minutes before he lurched across the stage toward Dinah, who was seated at a table with a mess of playing cards scattered before her. “I must have more than this scoundrel!”

Lord Rodrigo snatched at the cards, and Dinah shot to her feet, her chair toppling over behind her. “Unhand those cards at once, sir, or you’ll feel my wrath!” She raised her clenched fists in front of her and took a threatening step toward Lord Rodrigo.

He peered drunkenly at her, then tossed the cards he’d snatched into her face and raised his own fists. “You’ll feel mine first!”

Dinah was a gifted acrobat. She dove forward and landed a convincing-looking blow on Lord Rodrigo’s face. Penelope screamed and retreated to the back of the stage while Dinah bounced about, spinning this way and that and jabbing at the air with her fists before she advanced on Lord Rodrigo again, and faked a vicious kick to his shin.

Lord Rodrigo howled and grabbed his leg, and one of the stable boys stationed at the curtains let out a shout. “Oi, that’s a capital fight, innit it? That’s very good, that is!”

Lord Rodrigo hopped around the stage, moaning and carrying on about his leg until Lord Christopher was howling with laughter, and both stable boys were yelling at Dinah to finish the “blasted rakehell.”

Dinah, who knew very well how to work a crowd, waited until the audience’s shouting had reached a fever pitch, then she made a flying leap across the stage, struck Lord Rodrigo in the jaw, and planted a fist in his stomach. Lord Rodrigo stumbled backward, and with one quick swipe of her leg, Dinah swept his feet out from underneath him and sent him crashing to the floor.

The audience roared their approval, the stable boys in particular letting out a raucous cheer. Penelope was half-afraid they’d all storm the stage before Lady Madeline could do her part, but as soon as the white-robed, golden-haired angel appeared, the audience fell silent. Dinah and Penelope scurried to the sides of the stage, out of sight, and watched with admiration as Lady Madeline pointed one accusing finger at the vanquished lord cowering at her feet.

“You, Lord Rodrigo Rakehell, have earned the ire of your Maker with your scandalous, immoral behavior. You are hereby called upon to mend your wicked ways, or else sacrifice your place in the kingdom of heaven.” Lady Madeline’s sweet, high voice echoed around the stage. The audience remained still, not daring to draw a breath.

Lord Rodrigo rose to his knees at her feet, his hands clasped in supplication. “Who are you?”

“The Christmas Angel, sent down from God to save one sinner’s soul on Christmas. To escape eternal damnation, you must put aside your rakish ways, and become a proper gentleman.”

Lord Rodrigo spread his hands wide. “But I don’t know how to become a proper gentleman! How shall I reform, Christmas Angel? What must I do?”

“Marriage to your one true love is your only hope. Only she can bring out the goodness in you. You must marry your fated lady by Twelfth Night, or else suffer the flames of hell for all eternity. But beware—many unworthy ladies will attempt to disguise themselves as your one true love. Only your *true* love can save you, Lord Rodrigo, so choose your lady wisely.”

Lady Madeline swept off the stage, her filmy white skirts floating behind her. The stable boys gaped after her, so entranced they forgot their duty and Penelope was obliged to hiss, “Curtains!” before they hastily pulled them closed.

For one breathless moment afterward, there was nothing but silence from the other side of the curtain, but then the audience burst into ear-splitting applause. The gentlemen stomped their feet and whistled until at last the boys drew the curtain back again, and the players came forward to take their bows.

“*Finis*, Act One,” Penelope called, when the furor had died down at last. “Please join us tomorrow evening for Act Two, when Lord Rodrigo Rakehell will begin his search for his one true love.”

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Will sat motionless in his chair in front of the stage, his gaze fixed on Penelope Hervey, admiration and fury wrestling inside his chest.

Act One. To be followed tomorrow night by Act Two, a day *after* Miss Hervey had promised to leave Cliff’s Edge for good. God only knew how many subsequent acts there were—likely dozens.

Will watched her as she stood on the stage, laughing and fussing over “Rodrigo,” who was looking at the “scoundrel” who’d knocked him down as if he were already half-besotted with her. Will couldn’t blame him. Miss Bishop was a beauty, with her lush coloring and generous curves.

But it wasn’t Miss Bishop who caught and held Will’s eye.

It was Penelope Hervey. That long, thick hair of hers, those red lips, and the sweet, plump curves of her breasts and hips... Good Lord. His tongue had nearly dropped from his mouth when he’d seen her in the hallway before the performance this evening.

Then she’d taken the stage, and everything else—Lady Lavinia, his brothers, his guests—had faded away to nothing.

All he saw, all he knew, was *her*.

The way she twirled her skirts, her laugh, the lightness of her figure as she moved... it felt intimate, as if she knew his gaze was only on her, and she was performing only for him. He

hadn't looked away from her once throughout the entire act. As long as she was on stage—whether she was speaking or not—he couldn't tear his gaze away from her.

“That was every bit as scandalous as I predicted it would be,” Lady Lavinia spat, jerking to her feet. She glared at the stage, her face red with indignation.

Will hadn't found the play all that scandalous, but then he'd likely spent far more time with prostitutes and drunken rakes than Lady Lavinia had. “I apologize if you were offended, my lady. I'll have a word with Miss Hervey about it.”

“A *word*?” Lady Lavinia's gaze fell on Miss Hervey, her eyes glittering with fury. “Why, you must send her away at once, Lord Archer, and that other one along with her. I wonder you allowed your innocent sister on stage with such...such *harlots*.”

Will raised an eyebrow at her, surprised by her venom. He wouldn't have imagined such a small, dainty lady could hold so much malice inside her. “I don't think—”

Lady Lavinia didn't care what he thought, however. She turned her back on him and flounced off in a huff.

Will dragged a hand through his hair, then mounted the stage. Without a word of explanation, he took Penelope's arm in a firm grip. She might have the sweetest face he'd ever seen, but she was hiding a devious side under that innocent smile.

*Act One, indeed.*

He marched her out of the drawing room, down the hallway, and into his study.

She swallowed when he closed the door behind them.

He didn't invite her to sit, but leaned over her, resting his hand on the wood just above her head. “I'm confused, Miss Hervey. I believe we agreed you'd leave Cliff's Edge tomorrow morning, but then I would have sworn just now I heard you invite the audience to come and watch the Second Act tomorrow night. Perhaps I misunderstood you?”

She licked her lips nervously. “Um, no. Not exactly. That is, we did agree on one night, but when I sat down to write it...well, plays are generally in multiple acts, as you know, and then I didn't like to overtask poor Lord Oliver and Lady Madeline with their first stage appearances.”

Her tongue had left a tempting sheen of moisture on her lower lip, and Will found himself struggling to catch his breath before he could speak. “I told you before, Miss Hervey. You're a terrible liar.”

He drew closer, close enough to inhale her scent. She'd taken an afternoon ramble in the gardens—he'd seen her from his study window—and she smelled sweet and clean, like sunshine and fresh air. He was overwhelmed with the urge to bury his face against her neck and touch his tongue to that warm, velvety skin.

“Do you know what I think?” He murmured, his lips close to her ear. “I think you intended to write it in multiple acts from the start, so you can remain at Cliff's Edge a little longer. Perhaps you lied to me about Lord Snedley as well, and you're here to cause me mischief, after all.”

He'd be a fool to dismiss his initial suspicions on her word alone. She'd already lied to him once, about the play. It stood to reason she'd lie again.

She shrugged. "You can send us away any time you choose, Lord Archer."

"Yes, if I want to explain to my sister why I've cancelled her play and banished her new friends. I don't think she'd be pleased to see you go, do you?"

"That's your concern, and nothing to do with me. Though I confess I wouldn't envy you the task. Lord Oliver's a natural performer, wouldn't you say, Lord Archer? And Lady Madeline, well, she's as lovely an angel as I ever saw. They'll be disappointed if we don't finish the play."

"Yes, they will be, just as you intended."

Will was honest enough to admit to himself he also wanted Penelope to stay, and with a worrying level of desperation—a gut deep yearning he'd never felt before. That he desired it so badly was the very reason he should send her away at once. Lady Lavinia was already in a devil of a temper, and he needed to keep his prospective bride in a good humor. Maddy's future depended on it.

Yet it had been weeks since he'd seen Maddy smile as she had tonight. Since they'd left London, she'd been so pale and withdrawn Will had hardly recognized her as the happy, carefree little sister he adored. They'd always been close, before Rowley came along and spoiled everything. Now he felt as if he didn't know Maddy anymore.

But Penelope Hervey seemed to understand just what Maddy needed. Will couldn't imagine how she'd known her absurd farce would be just the thing to lift Maddy's spirits, but somehow, she had. He had *her* to thank for Maddy's smile tonight.

He wasn't ready to give that up. Give *her* up.

"Very well, Miss Hervey. It seems your deviousness has paid off. We'll have Act Two of 'Boughs of Folly' tomorrow night. I'd warn you against tricks and foolishness, but I've a suspicion I'd be wasting my breath."

She raised her chin. "Just so we understand each other, my lord. Act Two will cost you seven pounds."

"I see. The price rises with each act, does it? How many acts am I to expect, Miss Hervey?" Will didn't give a damn about the money, but he was curious to see if she'd try for more than the twenty pounds Lord Snedley had promised her. "Four? Five?"

She didn't answer. He moved closer, until his face hovered over hers. He was so close he could see she had a half-dozen or so pale, tiny freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. Dear God, those freckles. He wasn't prepared for those playful little specks, and all at once he felt as though he'd taken a blow to the stomach.

*I want to kiss them, one by one...*

She looked away, color rising in her cheeks, but Will caught her chin between his fingers and tilted her face up to his. "Miss Hervey? How many acts?"

She bit her lip. "Three."

Three. No more than she needed to appease Silas. She had to know she could have squeezed more out of him. That she hadn't even tried caused an odd fluttering sensation near his heart.

"Only three? How reasonable of you, Miss Hervey," he murmured huskily. He stared at her lips, mesmerized by them. They couldn't be as soft as they looked, could they? As plump and sweet? If he took her mouth with his, would she taste like strawberries?

He didn't realize he'd leaned closer until his lips were a mere breath away from hers.

She stared up at him, her lips parted, her deep brown eyes wide. "Lord Archer?"

He jerked back, startled. Good Lord, what was he doing? He'd almost kissed her. He'd almost taken those soft, strawberry lips with his. Even now his mouth watered, as if something sweet had exploded on his tongue.

He backed away from those tempting lips and fumbled for the door, anxious to see her gone before he lost his wits completely. "Good evening, Miss Hervey."

She gazed at him for a moment, her brows drawn together, then she curtsied and slipped through the door. Will watched her hurry down the hallway, then he closed the door and let his forehead rest against the cool wood. He drew in a deep breath. Her fresh scent lingered in the air, and he filled his lungs with it.

It was two more nights only. He could control himself for that long.

*Couldn't he?*