

Chapter Four

The next morning dawned cold and sunny. Penelope, who'd nearly forgotten such vibrant blue skies were hiding under London's sooty gloom donned her frayed coat and gloves and ventured out into Lord Archer's garden.

What a fine thing it must be, to have one's own garden!

There were no flowers at this time of year, but Penelope didn't mind. She pulled a long, deep breath of icy air into her lungs and made her way down the gravel path, pausing here and there to admire a few rosebuds leftover from the summer bloom. They'd never opened, and were now frozen closed forever, but despite the hopelessness of their situation, they were still clinging stubbornly to their canes.

Brave, hearty little things. There was a lesson for her there—something about tenacity in the face of blasted hopes—but Penelope didn't want a lesson this morning. On such a day as this, she should fling her arms wide and let the frosty air chase the cobwebs from her mind.

She'd woken early this morning after a restless night, determined to make the most of her brief time at Cliff's Edge, but as she strolled through the garden her worries and doubts chased after her, like a pack of wild dogs snapping at her heels.

Lord Snedley's Christmas party had been an utter disaster.

She'd come to Essex with high hopes she'd leave five pounds richer than she'd arrived, but those hopes had been dashed before she'd spent a single night under Lord Snedley's roof.

As it turned out, Lord Snedley hadn't been interested in having a Christmas theatrical at his house party at all. No, he'd been looking for another sort of entertainment altogether. Penelope had expected some ogling and pinching—it *was* Lord Snedley—but he'd had far more ambitious plans for her.

Dinah had delicately hinted Penelope was a fool to refuse his offer of protection, beggars not being choosers, and all that. But the vicar's daughter that slumbered inside her had recoiled at the thought of becoming Lord Snedley's mistress.

Or anyone's mistress, come to that.

So, she'd refused him. Offended, he'd tossed them out the door without a backward glance, and without the twenty pounds they'd been promised. As if that weren't bad enough, they'd been forced to spend what little coin they had to hire a post-chaise to take them to the nearest staging inn. They'd been travelling in the direction of Chelmsford when they'd encountered Lord Archer.

Lord Archer. Good heavens.

She'd known him at once, the moment her gaze found his. No one but Lord Archer had such deep, startlingly blue eyes. Her first confused thought was it was a pity a gentleman with such lovely eyes had turned highwayman. Once she'd gathered her wits enough to understand they'd been accosted by the Tainted Angels, she'd been stunned speechless.

Yet here she was, wandering around Lord Archer's garden, the sun bright over her head. That she and Dinah should have stumbled upon the Tainted Angels *here* was almost too fantastical to credit.

Thank goodness they hadn't shot him. That he was still alive and unharmed was the one piece of luck they'd had this entire miserable journey. Still, things were dire enough without Lord Archer's blood on their hands.

Penelope pulled a dead leaf from a branch and crushed it between her fingers as she wandered down the gravel paths. She made one turn after another until she reached an elaborate fountain with three naked cherubs holding what looked like a giant seashell. A row of stone benches surrounded it, and she plopped down onto one of them. She sat there for some time—long enough so the cold crept through her thin coat and froze her bottom numb.

If things had turned out differently, she might have had her own garden. Oh, not one as grand as this, of course—no fancy cherubs or rows upon rows of elegant roses for her—but something small. A modest cottage garden, perhaps. It would have been enough.

More than enough.

She rested her chin on her hand and indulged in a quiet sigh. A clear blue sky, a winter garden, breathtaking in its frozen beauty, sprigs of fresh mistletoe and a Christmas fire...it wasn't so long ago these things had been a part of her life. She did what she could to hold onto her past, but her memories grew hazier as the weeks went by, until she could hardly recall who she'd been back then—

“My dear Lord Archer, what a lovely garden this is!”

Penelope sprang to her feet, startled by the voice and the tinkling feminine laughter that followed it.

“Why, I've never seen such a clever design in my life, my lord!”

Oh, no. The last person Penelope wanted to meet was Lord Archer. He'd have her bundled into a carriage and on her way back to London before the sun rose another inch above the horizon.

“Thank you, Lady Lavinia. That's kind of you to say.”

The voices were drawing closer. Penelope's frantic gaze darted from one tall hedge to the next, searching for an escape. Perhaps she could hide behind the fountain, or—

“What a cunning rose arbor that is, my lord. I've never seen one to equal it!”

“Yes, well, I can't take credit for the...oh. Miss Hervey. You're up early.”

Oh, blast. Caught, Penelope turned reluctantly to find Lord Archer emerging from a pathway behind her. He was leading a fair-haired lady in an extravagant pink hat adorned with a

white ostrich plume. "Good morning, Lord Archer." Penelope pasted a smile on her lips and waved a cheerful hand at the sky. "I did venture out early this morning. I couldn't resist the sunshine."

His magnetic blue gaze swept Penelope from head to foot. He looked even less pleased to see her now than he had last night, if such a thing was possible. "Lady Lavinia, may I present Miss Hervey?"

Lady Lavinia took in Penelope's worn cloak and cheap gloves in one shrewd glance, and the corners of her mouth turned down with disdain. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Hervey."

Her voice dripped with sweetness, but Penelope wasn't fooled. "How do you do, my lady?" She let her gaze roam over Lady Lavinia, conducting her own subtle inspection. Her ladyship was a dainty little thing, with blue eyes, fair skin, and every blonde hair coiffed to perfection. She was dressed in the height of fashion in a pink and green striped silk pelisse finished with white swansdown trimming at the collar and cuffs.

She looked snug, warm, and ill-tempered in spite of it.

"I thought I'd met all your guests, my lord." Lady Lavinia hung on Lord Archer's arm, her fingers curled into his coat sleeve. "How is it I've managed to overlook you until now, Miss Hervey?"

"Miss Hervey and her friend only arrived last night," Lord Archer said.

Lady Lavinia gasped and raised a gloved hand to her throat. "You mean to say you traveled at *night*? My goodness, I've never heard of such a thing. I wonder you aren't more concerned for your safety, Miss Hervey."

Penelope shrugged. She couldn't tell whether her ladyship's shock was real or feigned, and she didn't much care. "Yet here I am in one piece, just the same."

"Miss Hervey knows very well how to take care of herself," Lord Archer said dryly. "The highwayman are in far more danger from her than she from them."

"Indeed." Lady Lavinia's voice was cold. "How...extraordinary. But I believe I've taken a chill, standing still so long. Shall we continue on our walk, my lord?" She gave Penelope a bright, false smile, then dragged Lord Archer down one of the pathways leading back toward the house.

Once they'd gone, Penelope settled back down on her bench. Heavens, what an unpleasant woman. But then Lord Archer seemed to prefer that sort. Florentina was about as pleasant as a festering toothache.

Still, he hadn't looked as if he was overjoyed with Lady Lavinia's company. He'd looked...not miserable, precisely, but uncomfortable. Not at all like the cheerful, carefree gentleman she recalled from the Pandemonium.

Oh, how she'd stared at him then! How she'd admired his mesmerizing blue eyes, and the ready smile on his perfect lips. She'd spent more than one torturous moment on the stage admiring those alluring high cheekbones, his full, sensuous mouth.

There hadn't been much to admire about his mouth this morning, with his lips pulled into that hard, thin line. Penelope rose from the bench with a sigh. Lord Archer's lips weren't her concern. She had plenty of her own troubles without borrowing any of his, and he was still as handsome as ever, even without the smile.

She started down the path toward the house, the ten pounds she owed Silas once again uppermost in her mind. She darted around a hedge, intending to go in search of Dinah, but before she could take another step, she slammed into something solid. "Oh!" She cried, raising her hands instinctively to steady herself. They landed on something hard, warm, and wrapped in a thick layer of fine, soft wool. It was so fine and soft Penelope instinctively curled her chilled fingers around it, stroking it with her fingertips.

She raised her gaze, blinking in the bright sun. Lord Archer was staring down at her, a faint smile curving his lips. His fine blue coat was the exact shade of his eyes, and the bright winter sun was toying with the strands of gold in his chestnut hair.

"What's your hurry, Miss Hervey? You're not running away from *me*, I hope?"

Penelope felt the vibration of his deep voice against her palms, and snatched her hands back.

Dear God, I'm stroking Lord Archer's chest.

Her cheeks exploded with heat. For pity's sake, what did he mean, jumping out at her from the shrubbery like that? If Dinah were here, she'd probably would have shot him. "I...no. No, of course not, my lord. Why should I run away?"

Foolish question. There were any number of reasons for her to avoid Lord Archer, the first being that he was about to toss her out of his house.

"It's fortunate you rose early this morning, Miss Hervey. There's a hired carriage waiting for you in the drive. One of my footmen will accompany you and Miss Bishop back to London."

His tone was cool, detached, and sudden irritation sparked in Penelope's breast. Really, wasn't *he* to blame for this entire mess? If he hadn't spoken to her the night of the fire, she never would have attracted Florentina's attention, and Silas wouldn't have sent her to Lord Snedley's house party. Why, if it weren't for Lord Archer, she'd even now be on the Pandemonium's stage, dressed as a whore and dodging rotten tomatoes.

Instead, she owed Silas ten pounds. If she returned to London empty-handed, he'd dismiss her, and Dinah, too. They'd end their days on the London streets, starved to death, with rats picking over their rancid flesh.

And it would be all Lord Archer's fault.

He let out an impatient sigh. "I made it clear you and Miss Bishop could only stay for one night. Come, Miss Hervey, you delay the inevitable."

Penelope clenched the folds of her cloak in her fists. There had to be something she could do, something she could say to stop the inevitable, and change their fate.

If ever there was a time for a Christmas miracle, this was it.

A Christmas miracle...

Of course! Why, she'd said herself it was too fantastical to credit they should have stumbled onto Lord Archer *here*, in this remote part of Essex. There could be only one explanation for such a coincidence.

Lord Archer had gotten her into this predicament, and now the Lord of Misrule—or whoever was in charge of such things—had decreed Lord Archer be the one to get her out of it. A Christmas miracle had fallen right into her lap. All she had to do was to seize it with both hands. "No. You can't send us away, my lord."

His eyebrows shot up. "I can, and I will. Fetch your things, Miss Hervey."

He took her arm to lead her back to the house, but Penelope snatched it out of his grip. "No! You owe me twenty pounds, Lord Archer, and I'm not leaving until I get it!"

Will stared down at her, too surprised to say a word. Twenty pounds? For the life of him, he couldn't think of a single reason why Miss Hervey would think he owed her twenty pounds, unless...

"Is that why Silas sent you here? To get twenty pounds out of me?" It didn't seem likely. Will would pay a good deal more than that to be left in peace, and Silas Bragg knew it. If Silas had somehow found out where he was, he would ask for more than twenty pounds to keep quiet about it.

"No!" She threw her hands up in the air, thoroughly aggravated. "Silas didn't send us *here* at all! That is, he did send us to Essex, but not for you. He doesn't have any idea you're here, as far as I know. None one in London does."

Will's eyes narrowed. She must think him an utter half-wit. "It's simply a coincidence I found you sneaking about so near Cliff's Edge, then?"

"I don't deny sending a couple of actresses to bedevil you at your house party is just the sort of scheme Silas *would* come up with, but in this instance, he's innocent."

"Oh, come now, Miss Hervey. What's Silas's scheme? Did he send you and Miss Bishop here to seduce one of my brothers?"

"To seduce you...no!" Color flooded her cheeks. "I told you, this has nothing to do with—"

"If you intend to become an accomplished liar, you'd better learn to control that blush. I assume you do intend it, being an actress. What is acting, after all, but a more artistic form of lying?"

"I'm not ly—"

"A clever plan, I'll give Silas that, but when you get back to London, you may tell him he's wasting his time. I won't tolerate either of my brothers taking up with a London actress."

Will towered over her, but somehow, she still managed to give the impression she was looking down her nose at him. “*You* took up with an actress. A Pandemonium Playhouse actress, no less.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, Miss Hervey. That’s how I know it isn’t a good idea.” He’d been attracted to Florentina’s vivaciousness, but it hadn’t taken long before her seductive charms had worn off, and her pettiness and greed were revealed.

“I see. One wonders, Lord Archer, what prompted this sudden attack of morality. Forgive me, but you appeared content enough to indulge in wicked actresses a mere few weeks ago. Not just any actress, either, but Florentina. It doesn’t get any wickeder than *her*.”

A surprised laugh escaped Will. “You don’t care for Florentina, Miss Hervey?”

“Naturally I don’t. Did you know she demands every actress who shares the stage with her be placed far at the back, so no one will notice us?”

“I noticed *you*.”

Penelope snorted. “Only because I caught fire.”

No, before that.

He’d noticed her, and once he had, he’d searched for her on the stage every time he’d gone to the Pandemonium. There was no point in telling her this, however. She’d be on her way back to London within an hour, and they’d likely never cross paths again.

She plopped down on a nearby bench. “I don’t blame you for being suspicious of us, Lord Archer. I’d feel the same in your place, but the truth is, Silas sent us here for Lord Snedley, not you.”

“Lord Snedley? That old roué? What’s he got to do with this?”

She let her chin fall into her hand. “Miss Bishop and I were meant to perform a Christmas theatrical at Lord Snedley’s house party, but we, ah...failed to provide the services his lordship expected, and so he tossed us out at the door without a shilling.”

Will’s lips tightened. He could just imagine what sort of services Snedley had demanded. The man was the worst kind of lecher, and Silas Bragg was a scoundrel for indulging him without a care for Miss Hervey’s and Miss Bishop’s safety. “Ah, now we come to it. Silas is expecting you to return to London with Snedley’s twenty pounds in your pocket?”

She gave a glum nod. “Yes, and when we don’t, we’ll both lose our places.”

He sighed and joined her on the bench. “Forgive me, Miss Hervey, but I still don’t see why this means *I* owe you twenty pounds.”

Will glanced at her. Her head was bowed, and her shoulders hunched into her chest. She looked very young and defenseless sitting there, with the pale, fragile nape of her neck exposed, and the wind tossing fiery locks of hair around her face.

If Silas did dismiss her, what would she do? Where would she go?

Her chin lifted. "Silas sent me off to Lord Snedley's party to get me out of Florentina's way. She's demanding he dismiss me."

Will blinked at her. "Why should Florentina want you dismissed?"

"Because of *you*, Lord Archer. She claims I'm the reason you broke off your liaison with her."

"*You*? But that's ridiculous!" Or was it? Will had been careful to hide his attraction to Miss Hervey from Florentina for this very reason, but perhaps he'd given himself away.

She shrugged. "Of course it is, but it hardly matters. You never came back to the Pandemonium after the night we spoke, and then you left London altogether. Florentina has to blame someone for it, so she blames me. Silas told me he'd give me a second chance if I pleased Lord Snedley, but...well, I *didn't* please him."

Will stared at her, incredulous. "I left London because one of my brothers was shot in a duel, the other one nearly broke his neck in a carriage accident, and my sister..." He dragged his hand down his face. "My sister came within a hair's breadth of being compromised by a worthless rake intent on getting his hands on her fortune."

She turned wide dark eyes on him. "Oh, dear. How awful. I'm sorry for it, my lord. Is that why you've dragged your siblings out of London? To save them from the brothels and gaming hells? The wicked, demoralized actresses and conscienceless rakes?"

Will hadn't come out to the garden to unburden himself to Miss Hervey, but he was still distressed over Maddy's flight last night, and to his shock, the truth fell from his lips. "I haven't taught my brothers any restraint. I've let them drink and whore and gamble their way through London, and now my sister's nearly been ruined because of my negligence."

"You blame yourself," she murmured.

"I'm the eldest. It's my responsibility to see my sister safely wed, and to see to it my brothers learn to behave like proper gentlemen."

"Your sister is your responsibility, certainly, but if your brothers don't wish to become proper gentlemen, I don't see what you can do about it."

"Even if they wished to, they don't have any idea how to go about it. None of us do. We weren't raised as aristocrats, Miss Hervey. Our father was fifth in line for the title. We never expected he'd actually inherit. We never had tutors or governesses or nursemaids to teach us to behave respectfully. Our mother died when we were young, and our father let us run wild."

She was quiet for a moment. "How long do you intend to stay in Essex?"

"Until the season begins. Madeline will debut, and I intend for her to be wed to a respectable gentleman by the end of it."

He didn't mention his own intention to wed Lady Lavinia well before the season began. The prospect didn't fill him with joy, but she was just the sort of modest, genteel lady he needed to usher Madeline through her season.

Lady Lavinia was attractive, titled, and respectable. Most importantly, she was *here*. She'd come with her cousin, Lord Notley, one Will's few friends with any claim to respectability. Lady Lavinia had ended her third season without an offer, and she seemed to be encouraging Will's attentions. He was well aware she cared far more for his piles of English pounds than she did for him, but his money for her respectability seemed a fair trade. He didn't have the first idea how to launch his sister into proper society, and Madeline's prospects were gloomy enough already, despite her fortune.

After all, the infamous Tainted Angels were her brothers.

"Does Lady Madeline look forward to her debut?"

Will let out a humorless laugh. "Hardly. My sister fancies herself madly in love with the scoundrel intent on ruining her. Last night she tried to escape Cliff's Edge to go to him. We were chasing her when we came upon you."

"Ah. I did wonder if it was something like that."

"She's sure to make another attempt, but aside from locking her in her room for the next few months, I don't know how to stop her." Will's shoulders hunched. "I care very much for my sister, Miss Hervey, but she's a mystery to me."

"Well, of course she is, my lord. She's a young girl in the throes of her first infatuation. It's enough to throw any brother into a panic, isn't it?" She nibbled on her lip for a moment, thinking, then said, "It's not my place to say so, Lord Archer, but I expect your sister feels quite alone right now. Perhaps it would help if she had a friend, or at least another lady to talk to."

Will thought of Lady Lavinia, but immediately dismissed the idea. Madeline hadn't warmed to her the way he'd hoped she would. "I'm rather short of ladies at the moment."

"Indeed, you're not. Two ladies fell right into your path last night. It seems to me we're in a perfect position to help each other."

Will quirked a brow at her. "I doubt that."

"Listen, will you? An amateur theatrical might be just the thing to cheer Lady Madeline, and reconcile her to a holiday at Cliff's Edge. Miss Bishop and I would be pleased to stage one, for a small fee, of course."

Will's lips gave an unwilling twitch. He couldn't help but admire her pluck. "How small is this small fee? Twenty pounds?"

"No. Six pounds, for an evening's entertainment. Nothing improper, of course. I could even write in a part for Lady Madeline, if you like."

Will stretched his legs out in front of him as he considered Miss Hervey's offer. He was tempted to accept, but he didn't think Lady Lavinia would like it. The season was nearly upon them, and it wasn't as if he had dozens of proper, respectable ladies lying about, breathlessly awaiting his offer of marriage. He couldn't afford to offend her, and he didn't trust himself to hide his attraction to Miss Hervey from her.

After all, if Florentina had noticed it, anyone could.

"Thank you, Miss Hervey, but I'll have to decline." He rose from the bench and held out his arm to her. "Come. The carriage is waiting to take you back to London."

She didn't argue, but her face went so pale Will hesitated. She looked so forlorn, so defeated when she took his arm, he instinctively covered her hand with his. Hers was small and cold under his palm, her frayed gloves offering little warmth.

An image of her groveling at Silas Bragg's feet rose in his mind. It was so disturbing he opened his mouth to tell her he'd *give* her the bloody twenty pounds—

"Penelope!"

Will stopped on the path, and he and Miss Hervey turned to find Miss Bishop waving at them from the long drive that led toward the estate's entrance. Oliver and Christopher were with her, and beside her, holding her arm...

Maddy.

Will's eyes nearly fell out of his head. Maddy hadn't willingly left her bedchamber for a month, since the day they'd arrived at Cliff's Edge.

"We're on a search for holly berries to freshen the greenery in the drawing room," Miss Bishop called, with another wave. "Come with us!"

Miss Hervey turned to him with an innocent smile. "Well, my lord, your sister seems content enough to remain at Cliff's Edge for the time being. It's curious, isn't it? I wonder what could have happened to change her mind."

Will gaped at his sister, stunned. Maddy's arm was wrapped snugly around Miss Bishop's. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, and a shy smile lit her face.

He had no idea what Miss Bishop had said to coax Maddy from her melancholy, and he didn't care. The bleak cloud had lifted. Nothing else mattered to him. He turned to Miss Hervey. "One more night only. No foolishness, no tricks, and you leave tomorrow morning without further argument."

He'd find some way to excuse it to Lady Lavinia.

"Oh, yes! Of course, my lord. Whatever you like." She gave his arm a quick squeeze.

He glanced down at her, admiring the way the sun turned her hair to a halo of red and gold, and then, before he knew what was happening, before he could prepare for it...

Penelope Hervey offered him a smile that made his knees buckle.

Dear God. How was he going to resist her for another day?

Will tore his gaze away from her, turned his face to the sky, and muttered a quiet prayer for a Christmas miracle.