

Chapter Nine

It had come down to a standoff between the rogue and the gentleman. When Will entered his study with Lady Lavinia on his heels, he wasn't sure which would triumph.

She called Penelope a lightskirt. A harlot. A whore. She declared Maddy's reputation was permanently stained from keeping such low company. She said she shouldn't be surprised an infamous rake would prefer a shameless hussy over a proper lady.

A proper lady.

Lady Pristine Proper.

Damn clever, that name. Will's lips quirked with a half-smile as he recalled Lady Proper tumbling over the hay bale onto her arse.

In the end, that half-smile turned out to be the beginning of the end of his courtship. It tipped Lady Lavinia over into a raving fury, and she refused to spend another night in his house if he didn't toss Penelope out at once.

He leaned back against his desk, crossed his arms over his chest, and coolly informed her he didn't fancy proper ladies, after all. Then he told her if she didn't care to spend another night under his roof, she was welcome to fetch her things and go.

She'd marched out the door an hour ago, nose in the air, her face as stiff and cold as stone. Since then he'd been sitting in his study, a glass of port in his hand, staring at the fire. The house was dark, quiet. Even his brothers didn't dare approach him tonight.

His courtship was over, and Maddy's season along with it. The example he'd intended to set his brothers, his claim to being a gentleman—all destroyed in a single evening.

And in their place a cheeky, red-headed actress with the sweetest face he'd ever seen.

He didn't have a single regret. Penelope was worth everything he'd lost, and more.

You are my one true love. I will stay with you always.

She hadn't been looking at Lord Rodrigo when she said it. She'd been looking straight at Will, fear and hope and vulnerability written plainly across her lovely face.

Had she told him she loved him tonight? Or had she simply been repeating her lines?

There was only one way to find out.

Will mounted the stairs to her bedchamber slowly. He'd never been nervous around a woman before, but Penelope wasn't just any woman to him, just as she hadn't been any actress all those nights he'd watched her at the Pandemonium. Even then, before he'd hardly spoken a word to her, he'd known she was more.

A vicar's daughter, an actress, and every inch a lady...

His lady.

He paused when he reached her bedchamber, his heart pounding. There was no sound from the other side of the door. It was late. Perhaps she'd gone to sleep? He raised his hand and tapped lightly on her door. If she didn't come at once, he'd go. He'd respect her privacy—

“Lord Archer?”

The room behind her was lit only by the moonlight streaming through her window. She hadn't drawn the curtains, and he imagined her gazing into the garden below, the gentle silver glow touching her hair, her face, the curves of her red lips.

She was biting that lip now, her dark brown eyes anxious. “I'm sorry about the play tonight,” she blurted in a rush. “Tomorrow, before I leave Cliff's Edge, I'll beg Lady Lavinia's pardon, and—”

“Lady Lavinia is gone. She left several hours ago. Our courtship is over.”

Penelope's face turned white. “Oh, no. I'm so sorry, my lord. I should never have—”

“No, that's not...I-I sent her away.”

Her eyes went wide. “You sent her away? But what of Lady Madeline's season, and your brothers—”

“Hush. It's all right. Last night, in the garden, you were trying to tell me something, and I...I understand it now.”

Her velvety brown eyes flickered. “What do you understand?”

“Birth, titles, fortune—none of it matters. The only thing that matters is your heart.” Will reached for her then, and brushed his fingertips over the center of her chest. “Your heart, Penelope. It's good, and pure, and true.”

He gazed down at her, his own heart swelling in his throat. Part of him feared she'd push him away, but she didn't. She drew closer, and without uttering a word, buried her face against his chest.

Will wrapped his arms around her, a soft groan rising in his throat as he gathered her against him and pressed his face into the wild red curls that had driven him mad since he'd first laid eyes on her. “Bring me into your bedchamber,” he whispered, desperate to kiss her.

She raised her head from his chest and began to back away from him. Will's heart shuddered in protest, but then she took his hand and pulled him toward her, until they were both inside her bedchamber.

Will kicked the door closed behind them and swept her into his arms.

He'd dreamt of her lips, but even his most fevered fantasies paled in comparison to the soft drift of her breath against his mouth, her lips warm and open under his. He kissed her again and again, his mouth gentle but insistent, his hands buried in her hair.

She whimpered when his tongue prodded gently at the seam of her lips, and the sound made Will weak with love and desire. "Let me inside, Penelope," he breathed against her lips. "Let me taste your sweet mouth." He teased at her lower lip with the tip of his tongue until she parted with a sigh, and he slid inside.

Warm, sweet, wet...

Will's knees threatened to give at the slick glide of her tongue against his. Tonight, she tasted like a winter garden, like snow and moonlight, and he wanted to tell her she was like every good thing he'd ever had in his life. He drew away just far enough to hover over hers, and cupped her face in his hands. "You taste like Christmas."

Heat crept into his cheeks at how foolish he sounded, but Penelope didn't seem to mind. She rose to her tiptoes and dropped tiny kisses on his eyelids and nose, then she gave him a smile that made his heart stutter in his chest. "What does Christmas taste like?"

Will's lips curved in an answering smile. "Hmmm. Let me see." He leaned over her, took her earlobe between his teeth and bit down gently. She gasped, and hot desire surged through him. "It tastes like..." he nipped and licked his way down her neck, pausing when he reached the hollow of her throat to suck at the sensitive skin there. "Like you."

She let out a soft laugh, her chest rising and falling with her panting breaths. "Do I taste like roast venison, then? Wassail? Or Christmas pudding?"

Will slid his hands down her rib cage and rested them on the delectable curves of her hips. "Sugar plums, gingerbread, raisins—every sweet thing." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the delicate curve between her shoulder and neck. "I could feast on you all night, and never get enough of you."

Her shy gaze met his. "Then stay with me until you've had your fill."

Will's breath caught, and his fingers tightened on her hips. His body was desperate for her, every muscle straining, but before he snatched her into his arms and carried her to the bed, he searched her face for any sign of uncertainty. "Is this what you want, Penelope?"

Her cheeks turned a rosy pink. "I used to watch you, when I was on stage at the Pandemonium. Did you know?"

Will shook his head. All those nights at the Pandemonium when he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her, she'd been watching him, too?

"Every performance, I'd search for you in your box." She stroked her fingertips down his chest, her face alight with wonder, as if she couldn't believe she was here with him, touching him. "I wanted you even then, and I...I want you now, Will."

He went still, savoring the sound of his Christian name on her lips.

Without warning, he swept her into his arms.

She was *his*, and he couldn't wait another moment to have her.

"Oh!" Penelope curled her fingers into his shirt as he carried her to the bed.

He laid her down gently and stood back to look at her. The pale moonlight caressed her with loving fingers, gilding her face and neck in shades of white and silver. "You look like a moonbeam yourself, in your white night-clothes."

She rose to her knees in the center of the bed. Her gaze held his as her fingers hovered over the tie on her bed jacket. She loosened it, then slowly drew it down off her shoulders and tossed it aside.

Underneath she wore only a thin, white cotton chemise.

Will watched her, his mouth going dry as she reached for the hem and slipped the garment over her head. When she was bared to his gaze she fell back against the pillows, her arms flung wide, and without a shred of self-consciousness, let him look at her.

She was all curves and smooth pale skin. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in a lush red waterfall, teasing at the red, pouting tips of her breasts. Jesus, he wanted his hands and mouth on every inch of her. "You're beautiful," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

She smiled and held out her arms to him. "Then come to me."

There was nothing Will wanted more. He drew his shirt off, tossed it to the floor, then quickly shed his boots. She watched his hands pause over the buttons of his falls. He was already hard and aching for her, but he'd never experienced anything more erotic than having her eyes on him, trailing over his bare skin. "Do you want me, Penelope? If you do, then say it again."

"I do want you, Will." Her chest moved in a trembling sigh. "More than anything."

Will was desperate to feel her bare, warm skin against his, but as he peeled off his breeches and lay down beside her, he forced himself to go slowly. He brushed his lips against hers, groaning as her eager tongue slipped into his mouth. He nibbled and teased at her, tugging her plump bottom lip into his mouth and sucking it gently.

She squirmed closer and tangled her fingers in his hair. Will moaned as she scratched her fingernails lightly against the back of his neck. He put some space between their bodies, his heart pounding, before her innocent caresses made him lose control.

"Will?" She tried to close the distance between him, her brows drawing together anxiously.

"It's all right, sweetheart. I just want to touch you. You feel like silk," he murmured, sliding his hand over her shoulder and down her arm. "I've never touched anything as soft as your skin." He let his palm rest against the curve of her waist, then slid it lower to cradle the gentle swell of her belly. "Does it feel good when I touch you?"

"Yes." Her eyelids had gone heavy over her dark eyes.

Will's gaze never left her face as he traced his fingertips over her belly, then pressed his other hand against the warm, smooth skin at the center of her chest. "Your heart is beating so quickly."

She laughed softly. "It feels like a bird trying to take flight inside my chest."

He wanted to kiss her then, and catch that smile on his lips, but he held back, still watching her face as he slid his fingertips under the curve of her breast.

"Oh." She shivered at his touch, her cheeks reddening.

"You're sensitive here." He could see her arousal in the way she bit her lower lip, her fluttering eyelids, the flush on her chest, and it was driving him mad. Every masculine urge demanded he cover her body with his and slide into her welcoming heat, but once again he held back, panting with the effort to restrain himself.

His gaze dropped from her face to her chest, a low groan tearing from his throat at the sight of her nipples. Will dragged his thumb across one, his breath catching as it peaked for him. "Yes. So sensitive." He cupped her breast in his palm, squeezing gently as he circled her nipple with his thumb.

"Oh. Oh, Will." Penelope tipped her head back against the pillow with a breathless moan.

Will stared, mesmerized, as her pretty nipples turned a deep red from his caresses, the peaks straining for him. His mouth was watering to taste her, and he couldn't hold back for another minute. He leaned over her and took a nipple in his mouth. He teased it with the tip of his tongue, licking her, then pulled harder at the stiff nub, sucking it between his lips.

Penelope gasped, and her fingernails sank into his back. "Will, please..."

That sweet plea undid him, and he could no longer deny her. He held her gently against the bed as he tasted her other nipple, then moved over her, bracing himself on his arms to protect her from his weight. She tensed a little when she felt his hard cock pressing against her thigh, and his gaze shot to her face. She'd thrown an arm across her forehead, and she was biting her lip again.

"Penelope?" He touched her chin and turned her face toward his. "Have you had a lover before?"

Her eyes met his. "Yes. One."

Will ran his thumb across her cheek, tenderness welling inside him. "You don't need to be nervous. I'll be so careful, so gentle with you. You trust me, don't you?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

He kissed her then, his mouth moving gently over hers until passion overwhelmed them both and they were tasting each other deeply, straining to get closer. Will worked her slowly, caressing her with his hands and his mouth until she was whimpering, and he was one kiss away from disgracing himself.

He reached between her legs, rubbing her in slow, steady circles until her desire slicked his fingers, and she was arching her back, pleading for him. Not until then did he open her legs

and slide his hips between them, positioning his stiff cock at her entrance. “You’re mine now, Penelope. Do you understand? You’re *mine*.”

She cradled his face in her palms, her eyes searching his. “Yours, Will. Only yours.”

He shifted his hips against hers and slid inside. She gasped softly as he filled her, and Will paused, teeth clenched with the effort to keep still, and let her adjust to the swell of him inside her. He rested his forehead against hers until she made a low, pleading sound and arched against him. Only then did he move. As he stroked deeper inside her, he took her lips in a lingering kiss.

Will had chased pleasure with other women before her, but he’d never felt the tenderness he did now as he thrust slowly inside Penelope. His breath caught and his back bowed with the pleasure of being surrounded by her snug heat, but afterwards—after she’d shattered around him and he’d come to his own shuddering release, it wasn’t the pleasure he remembered.

It was her eyes. The warmth in those dark brown depths, the trust there.

The love...

He gathered her tightly against his chest. As they drifted off to sleep, he thought of the fathomless beauty of her eyes, the tenderness in them when she gazed up at him. No woman had ever looked at him that way before, as if he...

As if he were a miracle.