

Chapter One

The Pandemonium Playhouse, London
December 19, 1811

Beads of sweat gathered at Penelope Hervey's hairline, trickled down her neck, and slid into the hollow between the bare upper curves of her breasts.

Which of the drunken scoundrels would be the cause of tonight's disaster?

That there would be a disaster was a foregone conclusion. The Pandemonium Playhouse specialized in disasters. What form that disaster might take, and which of their esteemed patrons would be the cause of it, well...that was anyone's guess.

She had a bad feeling about tonight. To be fair, she had a bad feeling every night she took the Pandemonium's stage, but tonight the crowd hummed with an ugly energy that went beyond the usual mayhem. Whistles, catcalls, and rotten tomatoes hurled at the stage weren't going to satisfy this mob.

It had taken a few months, but Penelope had trained herself to dodge the tomatoes. They hardly ever hit her anymore. She'd never been particularly nimble in her past life, but it was astonishing how agile one could become when circumstances required it.

Agility wouldn't do her much good if she was trampled in a brawl, though, would it?

The rabble in the pit was growing wilder with every passing moment. She kept one anxious eye on the drunken scoundrels, and the other on the actress dominating center stage. Florentina strutted, flirted and pouted her way through the final act of *Bluebeard*. She was playing the Wife, of course. Florentina always played the lead. Penelope was playing one of Bluebeard's murdered wives, but she was dressed more like a whore than a corpse. She always wore the same costume, no matter what the play was. A long black wig, a black mask, and a dress with short skirts and a tight bodice that exposed her breasts.

Oh, get on with it, won't you, Florentina?

Florentina didn't get on with it. As always, she dragged her final moment out to its bitter end. Why shouldn't she? No one threw tomatoes at *her*. The crowd might jeer and hiss at the rest of the players, but they all adored Florentina Fernside.

Penelope's cheeks ached as she forced herself to hold her smile. If she escaped the stage without injuries tonight, she'd consider herself lucky. Whether she'd be as lucky tomorrow night

was less certain, but since she'd arrived in London a year ago, she'd learned to take one disaster at a time.

Florentina batted her long dark eyelashes and blew a flirtatious kiss at the crowd. They roared their approval, but their satisfaction was short-lived. As Florentina made her curtsy and turned to leave the stage in a dramatic whirl of scarlet-colored skirts, the pit erupted into utter chaos.

Brawls weren't unusual at the Pandemonium, but as the crowd shoved and pummeled each other, a nameless dread lodged in Penelope's throat. Something awful was about to happen—she could feel it. At a glance, there was nothing that made this brawl any different than the others she'd witnessed at the Pandemonium, but it *was* different. To Penelope's horror, she soon discovered why.

This time, the stage curtains caught on fire.

It happened quickly. One moment two furious blackguards were beating the life out of each other, and in the next one had hurled the other across the stage. The felled man's boot struck one of the oil lamps that served as floodlights, and it skidded across the floor and landed near Penelope's feet. She was nearest the curtain, and so she was the first to see a thin, hungry flame catch the velvet fringe.

No one else noticed. They were so distracted by the brawl they might all have burned to death if Penelope hadn't let loose a terrified shriek. Heads swung in her direction, and a shout rose up from the other actors. Without thinking, Penelope leapt upon the curtain and began stomping on the fringe to beat down the flame, but a shower of sparks shot up around her and caught at the hem of her skirts.

She tried to jump back, but people were crowding around her, yelling and pushing, trapping her in the center of a mass of heaving bodies. She screamed as she was knocked to her knees, but just as she was in danger of being trampled underfoot or burned to ash, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist, hauled her up, and dragged her free of the mob.

Once they were safe, her rescuer set her on her feet and slapped at her skirts. "It's all right. It was just a few sparks, and your skirts didn't catch." He glanced over her shoulder. "They've put out the flame, as well." She wobbled, but he reached out and steadied her with a hand on her arm. "Good Lord, I've never seen anyone move so quickly in my life. You're not hurt, are you?"

Penelope hardly knew. Her head was spinning and her heart was slamming against her ribs, but she wasn't in any pain. "No, I'm not hurt, but I...I can't see!" Dear God, had the heat injured her eyes? Her breath began to come in short, painful gasps as panic overwhelmed her.

"It's just your mask." He plucked the mask from her face and pulled it over her head, taking her wig with it. "There. Is that better?"

Penelope blinked up at him, her mouth falling open as her blurred vision snapped into focus.

Lord Archer stood before her, his dark blue eyes wide with concern.

She'd spent countless hours staring at this man from her place on the stage, admiring the way the theater lamps caught at the gold strands in his thick brown hair and wondering what he was like, what sort of man he was. Was he kind, or haughty and arrogant? Was he clever, or did he hide an empty head behind those blue, blue eyes? She'd never spoken a word to him, but even so, Lord Archer had become something of a guiding star for her. He was the only beautiful thing about the Pandemonium Playhouse.

He was even more beautiful up close. "Tainted Angel," she murmured dazedly, repeating the nickname the *ton* had given him. It was a play on his given name, William Angel, but also a reproach for his behavior.

William Angel, Lord Archer, was as wicked as he was beautiful.

He quirked an eyebrow at her. "Most people just call me Archer."

Heat flooded Penelope's face, and she rushed to correct her error. "I—yes, of course. Please forgive my rudeness, Lord Archer."

A grin tugged at his lips. "It's all right. I never demand a strictly proper address from ladies whose skirts nearly catch fire."

Penelope gave a startled laugh. "How gallant of you."

His grin widened. "I think so."

She gave her skirts a nervous twitch, but Lord Archer had smothered the sparks, just as he'd said. "Thank you for your assistance, my lord. I'm grateful, indeed."

He bowed. "I'm pleased to have been of service, Miss—"

"My lord!"

Lord Archer and Penelope both turned at once to find Florentina mincing across the stage, a deceptively pleasant smile fixed to her painted red lips.

Ah, yes. How could Penelope have forgotten? Lord Archer did have one flaw, and it was a tragic one. He had dreadfully poor taste in mistresses, and here was proof of it.

"I couldn't imagine where you'd gone to." Florentina curled a possessive hand around Lord Archer's arm. "But here you are, talking with...with..."

Penelope curtsied. "Penelope Hervey, Miss Fernside."

Florentina knew who she was, of course—they'd shared the stage any number of times—but Penelope was far beneath her notice, and Florentina didn't hesitate to remind her of it. "Penelope Hervey." She rolled the name on her tongue as if it had a foul taste. "No, it doesn't sound familiar, but no matter." She dismissed Penelope with a shrug and turned a simpering smile on Lord Archer. "Shall we go, my love? It's been a most trying evening for me. The fire frightened me to death!"

The corners of Lord Archer's lips curled as he studied Florentina, but his expression couldn't be mistaken for a smile. "How curious. You didn't appear to notice the fire at all. You have Miss Hervey to thank for alerting us to the danger."

A heavy silence fell as Florentina tried to decide if Lord Archer was truly demanding she offer her thanks to someone as insignificant as Penelope. When he raised an expectant eyebrow at her, she let out a tinkling laugh. “Why, of course. Thank you, Miss Hervey. It was excessively good of you. Now, may we please go, my lord? I’m nearly expiring from exhaustion.”

“Do endeavor to stay upright until we reach my carriage, Florentina. Miss Hervey.” Lord Archer bowed again, and this time when his lips curled, his smile was genuine. “That was well done tonight.” He paused, then added with a wink, “I prefer your red hair to that dark wig. I can’t imagine what the theater manager is thinking, hiding you under that thing. Come on then, Florentina.”

He strode across the stage toward the exit, Florentina clinging to his arm. Once his back was turned, Florentina turned around and shot Penelope a look of pure venom.

Penelope bent down with a sigh and retrieved her mask and wig. It had been another dreadful night at the Pandemonium, but at least there’d been one bright spot in the gloom.

She’d spoken to Lord Archer, and he’d been kind to her.

At least, he’d meant to be. He couldn’t know it, but his singling her out was likely to cause her trouble with Florentina. Penelope thought of the viciousness in those dark eyes, and a shiver of foreboding darted up her spine.

One disaster at a time.

Lord Archer didn’t come to the Pandemonium the next night. He didn’t come the following night, or the night after that, either. A week passed, then another, but Lord Archer’s box remained empty. Penelope stood on stage night after night in her whore’s costume, sweat dripping between her breasts, vainly searching the audience for a distraction—a single thing she could call beautiful.

She didn’t find one.

When Lord Archer still hadn’t appeared by the end of the fourth week, she knew he wasn’t coming back. The thought weighed far more heavily on her than it should have. It was pure folly for her to waste her time mooning over him. It wasn’t as if Lord Archer had been *hers*, and she’d promised herself she’d cease worrying about things she couldn’t change.

Still, it made for a long month. She was grateful when it ended it last, but she soon discovered the next disaster was already bearing down on her.

The first sign of trouble came after the final performance of the week. Penelope made her way backstage and plopped down into a chair at the dressing table she shared with her friend Dinah, one of the other minor actresses in the company. Dinah, who was also cursed to spend every night dressed as a whore, was dabbing at her sweaty décolletage with a cloth. She nudged Penelope with her elbow. “You’ll *never* guess what—”

She was interrupted by a high-pitched scream of fury, then the sound of shattering glass, as if something had been hurled against a wall.

The sounds of destruction were coming from Florentina's dressing room.

Penelope turned to Dinah, eyes wide. "What in the world was that?"

"My guess is a vase. Perhaps a picture frame." Dinah smirked, hardly able to contain her glee. "Florentina's in a bit of a temper, you see."

Another muffled shout came from behind Florentina's closed door, then Penelope heard Silas Bragg, the Pandemonium's theater manager, speaking to Florentina in soothing tones. Silas didn't put up with any nonsense from his actresses, unless that actress happened to be Florentina Fernside. She was his star, and he'd do whatever he must to keep her happy.

Keeping Florentina happy took up a great deal of his time.

"What's happened this time? Has she misplaced her favorite face powder again?" Florentina was always in a snit about something. Penelope didn't pay much attention to her tantrums.

"Oh, no. It's much more delicious than that." Dinah leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Lord Archer disappeared from London without a single word to her. Well, he's sent her a note at last, and what do you think? He's broken with her!"

Penelope stared at Dinah, her throat closing. "What, you mean he's left London, as well?" It was one thing to disappear from the Pandemonium. Given the choice, she'd disappear herself, and never look back. But to vanish from London altogether?

"He has indeed. He's packed his brothers and sister off to one of his country estates, but no one knows which one they've gone to, or why." Dinah sighed. "It's too bad of them, really. London will be dreadfully dull without the Tainted Angels here to entertain us with their mischief."

Lord Archer's two younger brothers had followed in his rakish footsteps. The three Angels had been scandalizing the *ton* with their shocking behavior ever since Lord Archer inherited the earldom a year earlier. Gaming, brothels, duels, mistresses—even Penelope, who did her best to ignore gossip, knew of their exploits.

"Lord Archer's servant brought round a note for Florentina tonight," Dinah whispered. "Perhaps his lordship has decided to reform, and cast his sins aside. Goodness knows Florentina's as wicked as—"

"Where the devil is Penelope Hervey?"

The women in the dressing room were all chattering and laughing, but everyone fell silent when Silas's harsh voice echoed throughout the room.

Penelope shrank down in her chair and turned her stricken gaze to Dinah.

Dinah stared back at her, eyes wide with alarm. "Oh, no."

Oh no, indeed. No good ever came from being summoned by Silas Bragg.

Silas's oily gaze slid around the room until he spied Penelope, then he jerked his head toward the hallway. "In my office, Miss Hervey. Now."

Penelope shot Dinah one more desperate look, then followed Silas's retreating back.

"Shut the door behind you and sit down." Silas leaned back in the chair behind his desk and rested his hands on his bulging belly.

Penelope sat, sucked in a quick breath, and braced herself for the next disaster.

"All you had to do was stay out of her way, and you couldn't even do that, could you? I took you for one of the smart ones, but you're as pea-brained as the rest of them." The legs of Silas's chair hit the floor with a thump. "You're out. Get your things and go."

Penelope stared at him. "*Out?* But why?"

Silas shrugged. "You're a pretty little bit of stage dressing, and you do well enough playing whores and bar maids and the like, but Miss Fernside wants you gone, so you're gone. Simple as that."

For one awful moment, Penelope couldn't squeeze out a single word. She'd never fit in at the Pandemonium. She'd been expecting this day to come for the past year, but now it had, she was stunned. "Please, Mr. Bragg. I'll apologize for whatever it is I've done to offend Miss Fernside—"

"Won't do a damn bit of good. She says it's *your* fault Lord Archer's buggered off to the country." Silas shook his head in disgust. "You silly chits never learn, do you? Stay out of Miss Fernside's way, or your days are numbered. She says you were flirting with Archer, or some bloody nonsense."

Flirting with him? Oh, certainly she had been! What could be more fetching than nearly catching fire? Why, all the most accomplished flirts in London commenced a seduction by setting their skirts aflame.

Good Lord, she was a fool. She would have been better off letting the theater burn to the ground than to speak to him.

As soon as Lord Archer took notice of her, he'd sealed her fate.

Anger sparked in Penelope's chest, but what use was there in defending herself? The truth didn't matter here. All that mattered was Florentina, and Florentina wanted her gone.

Dear God, what was she going to do? She had no family and no money. Dinah would insist on helping her, but she wasn't any better off than Penelope was. Both of them were scraping to get by as it was.

Silas's sly brown eyes flicked over her face. "Maybe there's one thing you could do for me. A job, of sorts."

Penelope regarded him warily. Silas looked awfully pleased with himself, and when Silas was pleased, it meant something sinister was afoot. "What sort of job?"

"Lord Snedley is having a Christmas party at his country house in Essex. He wants two girls for a, ah...Christmas theatrical, of sorts. He mentioned he's taken a fancy to you and would be gratified if you'd attend his party. You'd go at once and stay until Twelfth Night."

Penelope smothered a snort. Lord Snedley fancied everything in skirts. He was a lecherous old bounder, and she doubted he'd be satisfied with only a Christmas theatrical. If she agreed to go he'd assume she was encouraging his advances, and that was the last thing she—

“He's offered twenty pounds.”

Penelope's gaze shot to Silas's face, her mouth dropping open. “Twenty pounds!”

Silas smirked. “Ten pounds for me, five for each girl, and Snedley'll send his carriage, so you don't have to take the stagecoach. A trip to Essex will keep you out of Florentina's way for a bit, and she might forget her grudge against you. You do well for Snedley, and maybe I'll consider keeping you on here, after all.”

Five pounds each? God in heaven. To have such a sum tucked away would be an unimaginable luxury. She couldn't refuse five pounds, or the chance to keep her place at the Pandemonium. As miserable as she was here, she hadn't anywhere else to go.

Penelope swallowed. It was a house party, nothing more. She wasn't obligated to fall into Lord Snedley's bed, regardless of what he might expect. She'd take Dinah with her. Together they'd be safe enough.

“Well, Miss Hervey? Do we have an agreement?”

Penelope forced herself to look Silas in the eyes. “Yes.”

“Good.” Silas's lips stretched into a leering grin. A chill rushed over Penelope at the sight of his sharp canines.

He looked like a wolf with one tooth already sunk into its prey.