

Chapter Seven

“Well, that can’t have been pleasant.” Oliver breezed into the study and threw himself into a chair in front of Will’s desk.

“One hopes it wasn’t as awful as it sounded.” Christopher stood in the open doorway, wincing as he watched Lady Lavinia storm down the hallway. Once her angry footsteps had receded, he closed the door and dropped into the chair beside Oliver’s. “Good Lord, Will. I would have thought you were beheading chickens in here, with all that shrieking.”

Will’s ears were still ringing from Lady Lavinia’s tirade. He’d have preferred a chicken sacrifice to the screaming tantrum he’d just sat through. “What are you two doing in here? I sent Mrs. Sedgewick to fetch Penelope Hervey, not either of you.”

Oliver crossed one long leg over the other knee. “Mrs. Sedgewick—being the good soul she is— did exactly as you bid her.”

“And we—being the wicked souls *we* are—sent Miss Hervey to wait in the garden after promising Mrs. Sedgewick we’d take her straight to you.” Christopher’s mouth curved in an infuriating grin. “Miss Hervey’s fond of the garden, you know.”

“Why the devil would you do that?” Will’s voice was harsher than he intended, but after the scuffle with Lady Lavinia, he didn’t have any patience for his brothers’ antics.

“We don’t want you to send Miss Hervey away,” Oliver said. “We can’t finish the play without her. Aren’t you at all curious to find out what happens to poor Lord Rakehell?”

Christopher bobbed his head in agreement. “Miss Hervey’s good fun, Will. We want to keep her.”

Will rolled his eyes. “She isn’t a puppy, Christopher. She’s an adult female, and a troublesome one at that.”

I want to keep her, too...

“I like a troublesome female every now and again. They’re much more diverting than the other kind.” Oliver had been studying the tip of his boot, but now he raised his gaze to meet Will’s. “Besides, it wasn’t all her fault, you know. The business with the pink cloak and ostrich feather, I mean.”

“We all agreed to it,” Christopher said. “Even Maddy. The cloak was hers, and it was her idea to attach the furry white bits to it.”

“Then the three of you are as foolish as Miss Hervey is,” Will snapped.

Christopher snorted. “I don’t know about that. I’d say any man who’d choose Lady Lavinia over Miss Hervey is the one who’s the fool.”

“Miss Hervey is an *actress*, Christopher. Lady Lavinia is daughter to a viscount, and a titled, proper lady.” In truth, Will’s mind was so muddled he hardly knew which of them was the lady anymore.

Christopher leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “A lady, is she? She didn’t sound much like a lady when she was shrieking at you like a possessed demon. We could hear her all the way in the bloody drawing room. Miss Hervey was horrified. I thought she was going to cast up her accounts.”

Will fixed his brother with a cool stare. “We *need* Lady Lavinia. Miss Hervey may be *good fun*, but she can’t smooth your sister’s way with the *ton*. She can’t sponsor Maddy’s season or help her find a respectable husband.”

“Have you even bothered to ask Maddy if she wants a season?” Christopher asked. “I’d wager she doesn’t give a bloody damn about a debut, and certainly not if it means you have to marry Lady Lavinia. She loathes the woman.”

“We all do.” Oliver’s quiet voice cut through the room. He rose to his feet and fixed Will with a hard, blue stare. “Are you sending Miss Hervey away, or not?”

Will wearily shook his head. “No. Not until the play is over.”

After a good deal of effort, he’d managed to persuade Lady Lavinia to overlook tonight’s performance by reminding her Miss Hervey was well beneath her notice. He’d hinted the most ladylike reaction would be to ignore the entire incident. By some miracle, this appeal to Lady Lavinia’s vanity had worked.

Wasted effort, really. Penelope would be gone soon enough, either way. What possible difference could another day make?

Christopher nodded and got to his feet. “Well, all right, then. Should we send Miss Hervey in?”

“No. I’ll go to the garden.” Will pushed his chair back from his desk. He couldn’t bear the stifling air in his study, and in any case, some conversations were better had in the dark.

It didn’t take him long to find her. She was sitting on the same bench they’d shared two days earlier, her shoulders hunched against the cold.

Will was furious with her for tonight’s trick, yet when he saw her huddled there, the ruffle from her costume peeking out from under the hem of her thin cloak, his anger faded. She looked so defenseless, with her feet tucked under the bench and the moonlight turning her creamy skin a pale, ghostly white.

His chest tightened, but he knew better than to believe she’d want his sympathy. Underneath that sweet, guileless smile and delicate figure was a spine of steel. He hadn’t the faintest idea why Penelope would risk insulting Lady Lavinia tonight. Whatever her reasons, it had been a rash, reckless thing to do.

It had also taken a great deal of courage.

She was brave—the bravest lady he'd ever known. Had he always sensed this about her? Was her spirit the reason he'd been drawn to her from the start? Despite the mess she'd made tonight, Will couldn't help the small smile that quirked his lips as he gazed at her.

That red hair gave her away. No lady with such fiery hair could ever be a coward.

He joined her on the bench. "It would have been wiser, Miss Hervey, to wait to insult my guests until *after* you'd earned your twenty pounds."

She let out a long sigh. "Yes, I suppose it would have been."

It was too dark for him to see her face, but he could sense her unease, her held breath as she waited to find out if he'd come out here to send her away. "I shudder to think what will happen in Act Three. Somehow I doubt the play will end with Lord Rakehell marrying Lady Pristine Proper."

She went still. "There will be an Act Three, then?"

Will blew out a long breath. "Yes, but you haven't made it easy. You do understand I'm courting Lady Lavinia?"

"I, ah...I did hear something about that, yes."

Will stared down at his hands, loosely clasped between his knees. "I don't understand, Miss Hervey. You must have known Lady Lavinia would be furious over tonight's performance, and since you know I'm courting her, you must have known it would be unwise to offend her. Why would you risk the twenty pounds I promised you?"

"Because I'm remarkably foolish?"

There was a trace of humor in her voice, but Will didn't laugh. "That's just it. You're *not* remarkably foolish. You didn't attack Lady Lavinia on a whim."

She sighed, and a stream of frosty air drifted from her lips. "No. I don't suppose I did."

"Why did you do it, then? Did Lady Lavinia offend you in some way? Did she say something to you?" So far Lady Lavinia had treated Penelope with haughty disdain, but it wasn't difficult to imagine her taking it further.

Penelope was quiet for a moment, then she murmured, "You know, Lord Archer, I never used to think much about what it means to be a lady."

Will's brows drew together. "I didn't realize it required much thought."

"One sees ladies all the time in London," she went on, as if he hadn't spoken. "Proper ladies, I mean. Fine, fashionable ladies, just like Lady Lavinia, who treat those around them with scorn and contempt. Cruelty, even, in the worst cases. Some of those ladies, Lord Archer, are the ugliest people I've ever seen."

And Lady Lavinia's the ugliest of them all.

She didn't say it, but Will's brain provided the words readily enough. He knew who Lady Lavinia was—*what* she was. What he didn't know was how it changed anything. He still needed her.

Maddy needed her.

“Lady Lavinia comes from one of the oldest families in England. She wields considerable influence over the *ton* and can bring Maddy into society. She has a spotless reputation, a title—”

“There's a great deal more to being a lady than having a title, Lord Archer, just as there's more to being a gentleman than having a titled lady for a wife.”

Her words stung Will to the quick. “Not as far as the *ton*'s concerned, there isn't. Now then, Miss Hervey. I don't wish to disappoint my sister by sending you away before the play's done, but unless you promise to avoid insulting Lady Lavinia again, there will be no Act Three tomorrow night.”

His voice echoed in the cold, dark garden. Miss Hervey didn't answer him, and his chest grew tighter and tighter as the silence stretched between them.

Damn it, he hadn't meant to shout at her.

He stole a glance at her out of the corner of his eye, an apology ready on his lips, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead she was gazing up at the sky with a small, dreamy smile on her lips. “Such beautiful stars,” she murmured. “I don't think I've ever seen so many at once. It's lovely to have the chance to see them like this, especially at Christmas. I'll miss them when I return to London.”

Will stared at her soft smile, and a strange sadness washed over him at the thought of her in London, looking hopefully into the sky and finding nothing but thick layers of gray. It was a pity a lady with such appreciation for the stars had so few chances to admire them.

He didn't say so, however. There wasn't any point.

So, instead they remained on their bench long after the cold should have driven them inside, both of them gazing silently at the stars. Will thought he could have stayed there with her all night, but after a while she let out a sigh and rose to her feet. “It's late, my lord. Dinah will be wondering where I am.”

She turned to go, but Will caught her by the arm and eased her back down beside him. “Wait, Miss Hervey. Before you go, I want you to know I appreciate all you've done for my sister. I wouldn't have thought a few days could make such a change, but...well, I've missed her smile. I'm relieved to see it again.”

Miss Hervey's face softened. “She's a dear, sweet young lady, and a good girl, despite the business with Mr. Rowley. She asked me yesterday if I thought...” She trailed off, biting her lip.

“Yes? What did she ask you?”

“I don’t like to betray Lady Madeline’s confidence, but perhaps it’s best if you know. She asked if I thought Mr. Rowley was her one true love. Not in those words, exactly, but that was her meaning.”

Will’s shoulders stiffened. “For God’s sake, the man tried to *ruin* her! He’s the worst kind of scoundrel. I hope that’s what you told her.”

A faint smile crossed her lips. “I can’t imagine why Lady Madeline thinks you’re difficult to talk to, my lord. Of course, I told her he was a scoundrel. Again, not in those words. I was a bit more tactful than that. She already knew it herself, you know. She only needed a lady her own age to confide her troubles to.”

Will’s eyebrows rose. “Are you of an age?” It surprised him, but he wasn’t sure why it should. Miss Hervey couldn’t be above twenty years old, but she seemed...not older, but certainly stronger than most young ladies her age.

“I’m just two years her senior—not so much older I don’t remember what it was like to fancy myself in love. Indeed, Lady Madeline and I have more in common than you might imagine,” she added in a low voice, more to herself than to him.

He shouldn’t ask. The less he knew about Penelope Hervey, the better. Yet Will felt his mouth opening, the words coming out. “What do you have in common?”

“We were both gently raised. I’m not a lady, of course, but my father was a gentleman—vicar at a small parish in Berkshire. He was a learned man, and taught me Mathematics, History and Geography.” A shadow passed over her face. “He would be grief-stricken if he knew I’d ended up at the Pandemonium.”

“How...” Will swallowed against the ache in his throat. “How *did* you end up at the Pandemonium?”

She shrugged, but she didn’t meet his eyes. “It’s a common enough story, really. A foolish young girl fancies herself in love, leaves her father’s protection, and...well, you know how this sort of story typically ends. In my case, it ended at the Pandemonium. It’s hardly a fairy tale, and yet it could be worse, I suppose.”

She’d been ruined, then. Some scoundrel had seduced her, ruined and then abandoned her. Will gazed at the sweet curve of her lips, the vulnerable lines of her white neck, and a crack opened in his chest. “Can’t you return to Berkshire? Surely your father would—”

“He died less than a year after I left. I’ve often wondered if he...well, it doesn’t matter. I didn’t have any brothers, you see. There was no one to chase me when I ran—no one to save me from myself. If there had been—if I’d had a brother to watch over me as you watch over Lady Madeline—it might have turned out differently.”

She turned to meet his gaze then, and the sadness in her dark eyes nearly undid him. Without thinking, he reached for her and cupped her face in his palms. “Penelope, you must let me help—”

“No. Listen to me.” She gripped his wrists in her hands. “I told you my story to make you understand. You’re a fine, caring brother, Lord Archer—a man who’d sacrifice his own

happiness for his family's sake. Don't you see? You don't need to marry a titled lady to become a gentleman. You *are* a gentleman, just as you are."

Will stared at her, speechless. He'd been called a rake and a rogue, a blackguard and a scoundrel, but not once had he ever been called a gentleman. That it should be *her* who'd said it—this lady with her sweet face and her vulnerable, trembling lips—filled him with an aching tenderness.

He looked into her eyes, and he couldn't think of a word to say. So, he said nothing. He slid his hand to the back of her neck, urged her forward, and took her lips with his own.

A faint gasp rose in her throat when his mouth touched hers, but he gentled her with slow, sweet kisses until her body relaxed, and her hands fell against his chest. She melted into him then, and he gathered her close, groaning as her curves pressed against the hard planes of his body.

It had hardly begun, yet it was already the sweetest kiss he'd ever known. She tasted like...oh, God, like moonlight and fresh cold air, and he was going mad, his lips parting hers, his tongue slipping inside and yes, there it was, just as he'd known it would be the first moment he saw her plump, red lips...

Here, in a frozen winter garden, he tasted summer strawberries, tart and sweet.

It made him wild for more of her—the glide of her tongue against his, fistfuls of her red curls in his hands. It was just a kiss, but his muscles were drawing taut, his body hardening for her.

She whimpered when he dragged his mouth down her neck. He nipped and licked at her smooth skin, tasting every inch he could reach. "Penelope, I want..."

He wanted *her*. Everything she was, and all of it at once. Her soft body under his, her fingers in his hair, her heartbeat against his lips, and...

He couldn't have any of it. He couldn't have *her*.

Will tore his mouth from hers with a groan of despair.

"My lord?" She raised her heavy-lidded gaze to his. Her lips were red and swollen from his kisses, and he'd never wanted anything in his life as much as he wanted to bring her back into the safety of his arms.

Instead, he gripped her waist in his hands and eased her away from him. "I—I can't...we can't...I beg your pardon, Miss Hervey. I shouldn't have done that."

The haze of desire in her eyes faded, and his heart flooded with misery. She touched her fingertips to her lips once, as if touching them would help her understand what just happened between them, but then her hand fell away and she rose from the bench.

She started to turn away, but before she vanished into the darkness, she paused and looked back at him. "Do you believe we each have our own one true love?"

Yes.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, without meeting her eyes.

She didn’t say whether or not she believed it. She only gazed at him for a quiet moment, and then, without another word she turned and melted into the darkness surrounding them.