

Chapter Six

“Do you believe we each have only one true love, Miss Hervey?”

A cold, bitter wind was blowing off the water this afternoon. Penelope tucked Lady Madeline’s arm tighter against her side and turned them off the main path, toward a more remote part of the garden.

When it came to a discussion of true love, a lady didn’t like to be interrupted.

Lady Madeline had waylaid her last night and shyly invited her to walk in the gardens today. Penelope had accepted at once, but even now, with the crunch of the gravel pathway beneath her feet, she could hardly believe she was still here at Cliff’s Edge instead of crowded into a carriage on her way back to London.

It had been hours since her baffling conversation with Lord Archer in his study, but she still grew breathless whenever she thought of the look in his eyes when he’d agreed to let the play continue. Since she thought of it every moment, respiration had proved quite a challenge today, especially when she recalled the way he’d leaned toward her, his lips parted as if he were going to kiss—

“What I mean is, what if we can’t be with our one true love? Does that mean we’re destined to live without love forever?”

Penelope jerked her attention back to Lady Madeline, her heart softening when she saw the troubled expression on the young lady’s face. She hadn’t the faintest doubt Lady Madeline was thinking of the scoundrel who’d tried to ruin her.

She’d hoped Lady Madeline would confide in her after last night’s performance, and she knew just how to answer her questions. At eighteen, Lady Madeline was only two years younger than she was, and Penelope recalled with painful clarity how she’d felt at that age—how much her heart had ached for love.

And how easily I was duped, because of it.

She took a moment to carefully consider her answer. “I suppose I do believe in one true love,” she said at last. “One person who was made for each of us, who holds our perfect happiness in their hands.” Dinah would say it was romantic nonsense, but Penelope stubbornly held onto her hopes, despite the elusiveness of perfect happiness in her own life.

“I believe it, too,” Lady Madeline confided on a deep sigh. “I think we only fall truly in love once in our lives.”

“That may be so, but I also think a young lady must heed the Christmas Angel’s advice about choosing our love wisely. We often mistake infatuation for true love, and there’s a great danger in that.” Penelope led Lady Madeline over to one of the stone benches, sat down, and patted the seat beside her. “You’ve no idea, my lady, how easy it is for a rogue to hide his true nature under a handsome face and a charming smile.”

Lady Madeline was quiet for a moment as she considered this, then she asked, “How does a lady tell the difference between a rogue and her one true love?”

Penelope took Lady Madeline’s hand in her own. “Oh, my dear. It’s simpler than you think. A gentleman who truly cares for you will never ask you to be dishonest with your brothers, or urge you to do something you know in your heart you oughtn’t do.”

“What...what sorts of things, Miss Hervey?”

“Well, I imagine a rogue might coax you into engaging in a secret correspondence with him, or otherwise persuade you to do something behind your brothers’ backs—something he knows they won’t approve of.” Penelope leaned over to catch Lady Madeline’s eye. “But I think you already know this, don’t you?”

Lady Madeline had been listening with her head bowed, but now she raised her gaze to Penelope’s face, and her eyes were filled with tears. “Mr. Rowley is a rogue, isn’t he?”

Penelope sighed and squeezed Lady Madeline’s hand. “I’m afraid so. Oh, my dear. Don’t cry. He’s not worth your tears.”

But Lady Madeline did cry, just a little, and Penelope sat quietly beside her until her tears stopped, and she offered Penelope a watery smile. “You’re so easy to talk to, Miss Hervey. Much easier than my brothers.”

Penelope laughed. “Yes, brothers are rather hopeless when it comes to a younger sister’s tragic love affair. Don’t be too hard on them. They care very much for you.”

Lady Madeline swiped her glove over her cheek, drying the last of her tears. “I know. I’m fortunate to have them. I’ve, ah...I’ve given them quite a hard time these past few weeks, especially Will.”

Penelope thought of the concern in Lord Archer’s dark blue eyes when he’d spoken of his sister yesterday—the love there, and her heart rushed into her throat. He was a lovely elder brother. It was such a pity he couldn’t see it himself.

“I wish I had brothers like yours.” Penelope was quiet for a moment as she watched the wind chase gray clouds across the sky. “If I had, perhaps they would have saved me from making the mistakes I did, and my life would be very different now.”

Lady Madeline hesitated, then laid a gentle hand on Penelope’s arm. “Have you ever been in love, Miss Hervey?”

“I thought I was, once. It was a long time ago.” Not *so* long, really, but Penelope felt like a dozen lifetimes had passed since then. What a foolish child she’d been! It was easy enough to see that now, but at the time she’d fancied herself in love, just as Lady Madeline did. “I thought

he was my one true love, but he...well, he wasn't, and by the time I realized it, it was too late for me."

Lady Madeline squeezed her hand. They both fell silent, each of them lost in their own thoughts until finally, Penelope stirred. "Goodness, it's cold, isn't it? You're shivering. Go on in, and warm yourself by the fire."

"I must look a fright." Lady Madeline rose from the bench. "Won't you come back inside with me?"

"You go ahead. I'll follow along in a little while."

Lady Madeline glanced at Penelope's thin coat with concern. "All right, but you won't stay long, will you?"

Penelope smiled. "Not long at all. I promise."

She sat for a while after Lady Madeline had gone, inhaling the frigid air. The icy blasts tore at her skirts with vicious fingers, but Penelope found herself reluctant to return to the house. She didn't mind the cold, and she'd have little enough access to fresh air when she returned to London.

As it was, a great deal more iciness was headed her way.

She saw the tip of the white ostrich feather first, and a shiver of apprehension darted down her spine. Lady Lavinia's boots made a determined crunch against the gravel as she drew closer, but the sound was quickly drowned out by her voice, so cold it put the wind to shame.

"...that scandalous actress and her friend," Lady Lavinia was saying. "You can be sure I left Lord Archer in no doubt as to my wishes on *that* subject."

Penelope's lips curved in a grim smile. Oh, dear. It sounded as if Lady Lavinia hadn't enjoyed the play last night. How unfortunate.

"What, you mean to say you're going to chase off Miss Hervey and Miss Bishop? Dash it, Lavinia, I want to see the rest of the play!" It was Lady Lavinia's cousin, Lord Notley speaking.

"Not that Archer and his brothers are much better," Lady Lavinia went on in scathing tones, as if Lord Notley hadn't spoken. "Lord Christopher is a wastrel, and if Lord Oliver hasn't learned his lesson after being shot in a duel, he never will."

"Now that's just unfair, Lavinia. The Angels are a bit wild, certainly, but they're good fellows, for all their—"

"They're nothing of the sort. If Lord Archer truly wants to mend his wicked ways, he'd do well to mind his own affairs and let his brothers mind theirs."

Penelope didn't much care what Lady Lavinia's opinions were on any subject, but this nasty speech made her gnash her teeth together. Lord Archer wasn't a perfect man, but he cared a great deal for his family. Penelope doubted he'd appreciate Lady Lavinia's cold dismissal of his brothers.

“What about Lady Madeline?” Lord Notley asked. “She’s a lovely, sweet thing. I daresay she’ll make a handsome match this season.”

“She’s pretty enough, but a silly chit, with all sorts of foolish, romantic notions, and then she’s tainted by her brothers’ disgraces.” Lady Lavinia let out a derisive snort. “You can be sure I won’t trouble myself much to find her a match. She’ll take what she can get and be glad of it.”

Why, Lady Lavinia was a monster. One had only to look into Lady Madeline’s blue eyes to see her sweetness, her loveliness. It filled Penelope with rage to hear Lady Lavinia speak of her so callously.

Lord Notley found this speech as appalling as Penelope did. “Dear God, Lavinia! How cold you are. I feel quite sorry for Lady Madeline.”

Penelope did too, but she felt even sorrier for Lord Archer. How miserable he’d be, married to such a woman!

“If you choose to waste your pity on Lady Madeline, that’s your concern, but I shan’t give it a second thought, Notley. I don’t have much interest in Lord Archer’s brothers and sister.”

“Plenty of interest in Archer’s fortune though, eh, cousin?”

Lord Notley’s voice was hard with anger, but Lady Lavinia didn’t seem to notice. “Well, of course. Why else would I marry a Tainted Angel? No proper lady fancies having a scoundrel for a husband. Indeed, if he truly wants to reform, he could make a start by tossing those infamous theatrical harlots out of his house.”

Lady Lavinia and Lord Notley moved on then, but Penelope stayed where she was. She was shaking inside her thin coat, but not from the cold.

No, she was shaking with fury.

It’s nothing to do with you. It’s not your concern.

No, it wasn’t. Lord Archer was a grown man, and a wealthy peer. He could marry whom he liked. Her only concern should be getting her hands on the ten pounds she owed Silas.

It was utter folly for her to even consider interfering...

But Lady Lavinia isn’t Lord Archer’s one true love.

Penelope clenched her hands into fists. Dash it, why couldn’t she manage to simply mind her own affairs? God knew she was in enough of a tangle, what with Silas and Florentina to manage. Didn’t she have enough to worry about without taking everyone else’s troubles onto her shoulders?

What she was contemplating was pure foolishness.

Irresponsible. Rash. The worst kind of recklessness.

Yet she was going to do it, just the same. Her mind was already working, turning over ideas, writing the lines in her head...

If being a gentleman meant Lord Archer had to marry a viper like Lady Lavinia, then Penelope would rather see him remain a rogue.

She was dressed as a prostitute again tonight.

“Good evening, Miss Hervey. I’ve brought my sister.”

Will hadn’t needed to escort Maddy backstage, but he hadn’t been able to come up with any other plausible excuse to see Miss Hervey before tonight’s performance.

Lady Lavinia was waiting for him in the audience, her lips already white with fury, but as Will’s heated gaze roved from the curves rising from Miss Hervey’s clinging bodice to the trim ankles peeking out from under the ruffled hem of her skirts, it was difficult to care about Lady Lavinia’s fit of pique.

Penelope was bustling about the stage, readying it for the performance, but she stopped when she saw Will and Maddy, and a brilliant smile lit her face. “Good evening, Lord Archer. Are you ready for the Second Act, Lady Madeline?”

Will took in Penelope’s bright eyes and the hectic color in her cheeks, and uneasiness shot through him. She seemed overly excited, as if she were nervous about tonight’s performance. He opened his mouth to ask if she was all right, but before he could say a word she seized Maddy’s hand and hurried her over to the other side of the stage.

“Is there something else I can do for you, Lord Archer?” She waved a hand toward the stable boys, who’d taken their places on either side of the curtain. “We’re about to begin.”

“Yes, of course. Excuse me.”

Will bowed and began to withdraw, feeling like a fool, but before he could leave the stage, Miss Hervey called to him. “Lord Archer?”

He turned back to her and tried not to stare at her lips as he waited for her to speak.

“The play. It’s...well, it’s only a silly farce, you know. Nonsensical—a pure folly. It means nothing.” She gazed hard at him, as if she wanted to say more, but then she blew out a breath and nodded to the stable boys, who stood ready to draw back the curtain.

That little speech did nothing to curb Will’s uneasiness, but whatever tonight’s performance held, it was too late to do anything about it now.

He ducked under the curtain and wandered to the front of the stage. The drawing room was crowded with house party guests, and once again a row of servants standing at the back. Every face was alight with anticipation.

Every face except one, that is.

Lady Lavinia’s.

“My lady.” He bowed politely, but aside from a cold nod, she refused to notice him. It took all of Will’s patience not to roll his eyes as he took his seat beside her. She’d taken him aside this afternoon and demanded he banish the “scandalous harlots” from Cliff’s Edge. Will

had flatly refused—on Maddy’s account only, of course—and Lady Lavinia was still in a snit over it.

The curtain was pulled aside. A white sheet had been hung behind the players, with an enormous rendition of London Bridge painted across it. It seemed Lord Rakehell had taken his search for his one true love to London.

Penelope was alone at the center of the stage, and Will forgot all about Lady Lavinia.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Second Act of ‘Boughs of Folly,’ in which our troubled hero continues his search for his one true love.”

Penelope darted off stage, and Lord Rodrigo Rakehell came out.

“Foolishness,” Lady Lavinia hissed. She shot Wil a disgusted look, but he took no notice of her. His attention was fixed on Oliver, who’d flung his arms wide and let out a tragic moan.

“Far and wide I’ve searched for my one true love, just as the Christmas Angel bid me, but alas, my love has eluded me. Twelfth Night draws nigh. If I don’t find my true love in London, I will be denied heaven for all eternity!”

A ripple of laughter went through the audience at Lord Rakehell’s woebegone expression, but then they turned their attention to Dinah, who sauntered down the stage in a bar maid’s costume and stopped beside Lord Rakehell.

“Are you my one true love?” Lord Rakehell asked her, his hands clasped under his chin.

“What use have I for your calf-love?” Dinah snapped her fingers in his face. She strolled off stage, out of the audience’s sight, but she appeared again immediately. She was wearing the same costume, but this time she was carrying a milk bucket, and Will presumed she was no longer a bar maid, but a dairy maid.

“Are *you* my one true love?” Lord Rakehell pleaded, with his hand over his heart.

Dinah scowled at him. “Begone, fool!” She upended her bucket over his head, and the audience laughed as poor Lord Rakehell was showered with torn bits of paper.

Dinah ran off stage, and then it was Penelope’s turn. She minced her way over to Lord Rakehell, hips swaying. “Are you my one true love?” Rodrigo asked, falling to his knees at her feet.

“‘Course I am, luv! For as long as ye’ve coin to spend!” Penelope gave the audience an exaggerated wink, then skipped off the stage to a roar of laughter.

“Shameless,” Lady Lavinia hissed, quivering with fury.

Will ignored her, his gaze following Penelope until she vanished behind the curtain.

Lady Madeline came out in a governess’s costume next, and then Dinah again, dressed as a lady’s maid. At last Penelope took the stage once more, her red hair hidden under a dark wig.

“Are you my one true love?” Lord Rakehell asked her, tears streaming down his face.

Penelope gazed at him in pity. “Alas, I’m only an actress. But you’ve a kind face, sir, and a gentleman’s manners. I wish I was your one true love, so I could ease your troubled heart.” She gave his cheek a tender pat, then ran off stage, her face buried in her hands as if she were crying.

“Will I never find my one true love?” Lord Rakehell fell to weeping and tearing his hair, but his despair was cut short by Dinah, who’d thrown a coat and hat over her previous costume, and now appeared on the stage dressed as...

Will’s eye widened as he took in her fur-trimmed pink cloak, and her pink hat, adorned with an enormous ostrich plume fashioned out of white paper.

Oh, Christ. She was dressed just like—

“How *dare* she?” Lady Lavinia let out an outraged gasp and half-rose from her seat, as if she were going to rush on stage and snatch the hat from Dinah’s head.

Will took her arm and urged her back into her chair. “Sit down. You’ll only make it worse if you take notice of it.”

Lady Lavinia looked around and saw Christopher tittering behind his hand. She sank slowly into her seat, her face flushed with humiliation and fury.

Will brought his attention back to the stage, where Dinah was circling the weeping Lord Rakehell, a calculating expression on her face. “Who are you, sir?”

Lord Rakehell ceased his weeping and looked up at her. “I’m Lord Rakehell. Are you my one true love?”

Dinah tapped her lips with the tips of her white-gloved fingers. “Perhaps I am. It depends. What is your rank, sir?”

Lady Lavinia let out an outraged squeak.

“I’m an earl, madam. The Earl of Rakehell.”

“Hmmm. An earl. And have you a great fortune?”

Lord Rakehell staggered to his feet. “I do, madam. The greatest fortune in all of England.”

“Then it seems I *am* your one true love. I’m Lady Pristine Proper, a lady of birth and breeding. You must marry me at once and make me the Countess of Rakehell. Only I can make you reform your rakish ways and turn you into a proper gentleman.” Lady Pristine Proper snaked her arm through his, and before he could say another word, she dragged him away.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Lady Madeline floated onto the stage, dressed as the Christmas Angel in her rosebud wreath and gauzy white robe. She watched as Lady Pristine Proper yanked Lord Rakehell away, then turned so she was facing the audience and sadly shook her head.

“Alas, our hero has been led astray. Will he ever find his real true love? Lord Rodrigo’s fate will be revealed tomorrow night, in the Third and Final Act of “Boughs of Folly.”

Lady Madeline curtsied, the stable boys pulled the curtain, and the audience burst into enthusiastic applause.

Lady Lavinia didn't wait for the players to come out and make their bows. She rose to her feet, gave Will a look that would have frozen water in an instant, and hissed, "A word in your study, Lord Archer."

She vanished in an outraged whirl of blue skirts, but Will didn't follow her right away. He remained in his place to watch the actors take their bows. His gaze lingered first on Maddy's flushed, happy face. Her cheeks were pink from the enthusiastic applause, her whole face lit with a beautiful smile.

But it wasn't his sister's face that made his heart skip a beat in his chest.

It was Penelope's.

She was watching him, her brown eyes anxious, her teeth worrying her bottom lip. She looked as if she half-expected him to jump onto the stage, toss her over his shoulder, and dump her into a carriage on its way straight back to London.

Will held her gaze, his lips pulled into a grim smile.

She *should* be worried. She should be very worried, indeed.