

## Chapter Ten

Something was wrapped around Penelope, holding her down.

Was she caught up in the bed clothes again? More than once since she arrived at Cliff's Edge, she'd woken to find the sheets twisted around her, and the heavy coverlet thrown over her head.

But this wasn't the coverlet. No, this was a warm, breathing thing, with a long, hard body and a reassuring heartbeat thumping a steady rhythm in her ear.

Penelope raised her head and stole a peek at Will. He was asleep, his long lashes resting on his cheeks, his hair a tangled mess of golden-brown waves. She let out a dreamy sigh and gave into the urge to brush those tousled locks aside.

She traced his cheekbones with light fingertips, unable to resist touching him. He had the most beautiful face she'd ever seen, and his body...well, he didn't look like any of the other aristocratic gentlemen who came to the Pandemonium.

Strong arms, a hard, muscled chest, taut belly, and...

Penelope carefully dragged the coverlet down his chest and over his flat belly. She glanced at his face, but his eyes were still closed, his chest moving in slow, deep breaths.

*It's just a tiny peek. I won't touch anything.*

She slid the coverlet a little lower, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, and inched it down over his hips—

“If you're going to uncover it, I hope you intend to do something with it.”

Penelope squealed with surprise as Will's big hands closed around her waist. He dragged her on top of him, so her legs tangled with his and her bare breasts were crushed against his warm chest.

“Will!” She braced her palms against his shoulders and raised herself up so she could see his face. “You nearly scared the life out of me!”

He grinned up at her. “I had to do something to protect my virtue, didn't I? You were about to debauch me.”

Penelope stared down into blue eyes twinkling with mischief and her lips quirked. “It's a bit too late to save your virtue now, my lord.”

“You’re right. Shall we get on with the debauching, then? I’ll start.” He cupped her breasts in his hands and stroked her nipples into stiff peaks with his thumbs, his gaze never leaving her face.

A moan slipped from between Penelope’s lips as he circled and teased. “Will, I want...”

“Do you want my mouth, sweetheart? I think you do. I think you want me to suckle you.” He slid his hands around her back and urged her to lean over him, his lips parting with anticipation. “Come here.”

Penelope gasped when his hot mouth closed over the tip of one of her breasts. He lavished attention on it, sucking and licking before he dropped a kiss over her heart, then wrapped his lips around her other nipple. He scraped his teeth lightly over the sensitive nub, and Penelope moved her hips against his as hot desire pooled in her belly.

Will groaned against her nipple, the muscles in his stomach tightening as he thrust up against her.

She slid her hand down between them to caress his straining shaft. Will looked down, and another groan rumbled in his chest at the sight of his hard length cradled in her palm. “Wrap your fingers around me. Now stroke me...yes.”

Penelope moved her hand on him, mesmerized by the way his thin, silky skin slid over the throbbing heat underneath. He let out a strangled moan and caught her hand in his, stilling it. “Put me inside you, Penelope. *Now*. Please.”

She shifted her legs so she was straddling him and pressed the damp head against her entrance. As soon as he felt her wet heat he moved his hips in a powerful thrust, seating himself deeply inside her, then wrapped his fingers around her thighs to steady her. “Put your hands on my chest,” he murmured, his voice husky. “Yes, just like that. Now move with me, love.”

His hips jerked in another thrust, then another, and after a moment Penelope took up his rhythm. Soft, breathless moans fell from her lips as he drove into her, stroking deep inside her. She took as much of him as she could, her body greedy for him. The sweet ache between her legs intensified with each of his thrusts, until the tension in her core snapped, and waves of pleasure rolled over her.

“Will...ah, God...Will!”

“Yes. Come for me.” He thrust hard once, then again, his fingers gripping her thighs as a low, hoarse groan tore from his lips. He tipped his head back against the pillow, his back arching, his body tight as a bowstring as he rode his own release.

Penelope slumped forward, her limbs boneless. Will gathered her against him and pressed a tender kiss to her temple. She rested her head on his chest and let him stroke her hair until her breathing calmed, but then she stirred, dragged herself from his warm embrace and struggled upright against the pillows.

The patch of blue sky visible through the window was growing lighter with every passing moment. The sun was rising, morning was waning, and it was a long journey back to London.

She threw the coverlet aside, but before she could leave the bed Will caught her wrist. “Where are you going?”

Penelope glanced at the window, then back to Will’s face, already so dear to her. It broke her heart a little to look at him now, with his hair rumpled and his face still flushed from their lovemaking.

She was in love with William Angel. Last night with him had been a dream, but every dream must fade with the rise of the sun, and this one was no exception. “It’s getting late. It’s more than six hours back to London, and Dinah will be anxious to—”

“No.” Without warning Will shoved the covers aside and leapt from the bed. He paused only to pull his breeches over his hips before he stalked over to the trunk she’d packed last night and began snatching her things out of it, one by one.

Penelope’s mouth fell open. “Stop that, Will! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Unpacking your trunk.” His mouth was pressed into a grim, hard line. “You’re not leaving Cliff’s Edge, Penelope.”

Penelope wrapped the sheet around herself and rose from the bed. “Of course, I’m leaving. We agreed I’d leave once the play was finished. Nothing’s changed since then.”

“Everything’s bloody changed.” He tossed the top hat Dinah had worn in the First Act onto a chair, and the cards and false gold coins Penelope had tucked inside scattered across the floor. “You’re staying here, with me.”

Penelope hesitated. He looked angry, and she didn’t want to end their time together with an argument. “I can’t stay here with you, Will, and you know it as well as I do. You have Lady Madeline to consider, and your brothers—”

He whirled to face her, his expression angry and incredulous at once. “This, from *you*? My God, Penelope, what did you imagine would happen this morning? Did you suppose I’d take you to my bed, then toss you aside and go chasing after Lady Lavinia? What of all your talk about a lady’s heart being the measure of her worth, and not her birth and title?”

Penelope shook her head, her thoughts in a muddle. She *had* said that, and she believed it to be true, but surely there must be proper, titled ladies in England who were also possessed of good, kind hearts? The sort of lady Will would be proud to call his?

“Not Lady Lavinia, but another lady, one who—”

“I don’t want another lady, damn you! I want you! I chose *you*!” He didn’t wait for an answer but went at her trunk again with a vengeance.

Gowns, slippers and sheets of paper flew in every direction. Penelope looked down at her things strewn all about the floor and her blood heated with temper. Oh, why did he have to make this so much harder than it already was?

There was nothing she wanted more than to stay with Will always, but what if she did stay and he grew to resent her when she couldn’t give him what he wanted? She couldn’t smooth Lady Madeline’s way in society, or help her make a brilliant match. What if one of his brothers

followed his example and took up with an actress? Will would send her away and it would break her heart, and then where would she be?

“I told you to stop that! It took me ages to pack that trunk!” She marched across the room, still clutching the bedsheet to her breasts. She grabbed an armful of clothing off the floor and threw it back into the trunk. “You’re behaving like a madman.”

Will was tossing things out of her trunk faster than Penelope could toss them in, but all at once he stopped and went still. He had a paper in his hand, and he was staring down at it. “What’s this?”

Penelope glanced at him, then went back to shaking the wrinkles from the only day dress she owned. “A page from the play, I expect.”

“No. It isn’t.”

She laid the dress in her trunk, surprised at his grim tone. “What, then?”

He scanned the rest of the page, his face going pale. “The Reformed Rake, by the Pandemonium Players. Rakehell, William Angel, Lord Archer. Gambler Scoundrel, Lord Oliver Angel.”

It was a moment before Penelope could make sense of his words, but the hurt in his voice soon brought understanding crashing down on her with brutal force.

Dinah’s character list. She must have slipped it in between the other papers, just in case Penelope changed her mind.

He held the page up. “Should I go on?”

She stretched out her hand to him. “Will, it’s not what you—”

“Was it never meant to be a seduction, then? Did Silas send you here to write this, or did you simply seize the opportunity when it presented itself?” He glanced at the bed, at the rumpled sheets, and when he turned back to her his eyes were shadowed with pain. “You managed the seduction in any case, didn’t you? Clever girl.”

“No.” Penelope wanted to shout the word, but all that emerged was a shaky whisper. “None of what happened between us has anything to do with Silas! I would *never*—”

“It’s really quite perfect, isn’t it?” His voice was dull. “A foolish rake tosses aside his actress mistress to become a gentleman, and then is seduced by another actress he mistakes for a lady. Even better if the rake is a Tainted Angel, and the story is a true one.”

“I told you, Will.” Penelope was fighting to keep her voice from breaking. “Silas didn’t send us here. We were meant to go to Lord Snedley’s—”

“Yes, so you said. You claimed you’d repulsed his advances, yet you jumped into my bed willingly enough.”

Penelope flinched at the ugly words. Tears rushed to her eyes, and she wanted to cover her face, to hide them, but she raised her chin and looked Will in the eye. She hadn’t done anything wrong, and she wouldn’t shrink away from him now as if she had.

“It’s no wonder you’re anxious to return to London. What a triumph!” Will waved the paper in the air. “Tell me, when will it be staged? Perhaps my brothers and I will come see it. It would certainly cause a sensation in London if the Tainted Angels were in the audience, wouldn’t it? Silas would be overjoyed, I’m sure.”

Penelope opened her mouth to defend herself, but not even a whisper emerged. What was the use? She could see by the hard, closed look on his face he wouldn’t believe a word she said. Despair pressed down on her, so cold and heavy she wondered she didn’t collapse from the weight.

Will tossed the sheet of paper aside as if it burned him, then turned away.

He retrieved his shirt from the floor by the side of the bed, pulled it over his head, and picked up his boots. He went to the door, but paused before he opened it. “I think it would be best if you left, after all.” He kept his back to her. “If you and Miss Bishop could take your leave within the next hour, I’d be grateful.”

Then he was gone, closing the door quietly behind him.

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Half an hour later, Dinah and Penelope were seated in one of Lord Archer’s carriages. Will, as good as his word, had ordered a footman to accompany them on their journey back to London.

Lord Oliver and Lord Christopher came out to the drive to bid them goodbye.

“Miss Hervey, and Miss Bishop. It’s been a pleasure.” Lord Christopher lifted each of their hands to his lips. “It’ll be dull as tombs here without the two of you.”

“Indeed, I’m sorry to see you go.” Lord Oliver bowed politely, but his face was troubled. He knew something had happened between Penelope and Will, but he didn’t know what.

Neither Lord Archer nor Lady Madeline made an appearance—that is, not until the carriage was already part way down the drive. Then they heard a shout, and the coachman brought them to an abrupt halt. Penelope’s foolish heart leapt when she heard running footsteps approach, but it wasn’t Will who wrenched the carriage door open.

It was Lady Madeline, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Oh, Penelope! Dinah! I just found out you’re leaving. I’m so dreadfully sorry to see you go.” She wiped at her tears with the sleeve of her dress. “Here, I brought this for you, Penelope, and you must take it.” She thrust a dark green bundle into Penelope’s arms.

Penelope shook out the fine, soft wool, and saw it was one of Lady Madeline’s cloaks. “Oh, no, Lady Madeline. I can’t take this.”

Penelope tried to hand it back, but Lady Madeline wouldn’t take it. “Please. I—I can’t bear to think of you being cold.” She leaned into the carriage and pressed her damp cheek against Penelope’s. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Penelope, and you, Dinah.” She squeezed Dinah’s hand. “I wish with all my heart you could stay forever,” she whispered in Penelope’s ear, her voice catching.

Penelope didn't dare speak for fear she'd start sobbing. So, she only nodded, and squeezed Lady Madeline's hand.

"Here. Will asked me to give you this. I'll never forget you, Penelope! Goodbye!"

Lady Madeline pressed a pouch into Penelope's hand, then stepped back and closed the carriage door. The coachman flicked the reins, and the carriage moved briskly down the drive and around a corner. Cliff's Edge vanished from sight.

Neither Dinah nor Penelope spoke for the first few miles, then Dinah took Penelope's hand and asked gently, "What did Lord Archer give you?"

Penelope looked down at her hands, surprised to see the bag Lady Madeline had given her clutched tightly in her fist. She'd forgotten it.

She loosened the string and upended the contents of the bag over her hand.

A pile of gold sovereigns dropped into her palm.

Dinah gasped softly. "Oh, my."

Penelope stared down at the coins until blurred in front of her eyes. It was only then she realized she was weeping. This time she didn't try and hold back her misery, but pressed her face into the soft green wool cloak and soaked it with her tears.