

Chapter Three

The minute Will threw the carriage door open, all hell broke loose.

Blood-curdling screams erupted. There was a mad scramble of arms and legs and flying skirts as the ladies inside darted about in a panic. He didn't know what to grab first, and every moment he expected a ball to land between his eyes.

He managed to seize a handful of pink skirts and was about to pull whatever lady was inside them from the carriage, but then he saw Oliver fling open the opposite door and twist the lady's arms behind her back. She tumbled backwards, and Oliver dragged her, shrieking and kicking, out the door.

Relief surged through Will—that was one problem dealt with—but then he caught a glimpse of something in the corner of his eye that made his blood go cold.

A dainty hand, and in it...

A tiny pistol, a plume of smoke still curling from the end of the barrel.

He didn't think, and he didn't hesitate. He leapt for the pistol, grabbed it from her hand, then wrapped his fingers around her wrist and with one mighty tug, hauled her out of the carriage. She let out a faint cry as she stumbled, but Will caught her by the waist before she could fall to her knees in the mud. "Now, don't do anything foolish, like—"

Smack! "Let me go, you blackguard!"

"Like slap my face," he finished, his ears ringing from the blow she'd landed on his cheek. For God's sake, wasn't Christmas meant to be a peaceful holiday? Because so far, it had been one bloody skirmish after the next. His sister had been abducted, he'd been shot at, slapped and insulted, and the termagant in his arms was even now aiming her foot at his shin.

"Oh no, you don't." Will pushed her against the side of carriage and crowded into her, trapping her between the door and his body. "Now be still, will you, and let me think?" He had a much bigger problem than this squirming, kicking female.

They'd chased the wrong bloody carriage. The lady pummeling him with her tiny fists *wasn't* his sister, and neither was her companion.

"Christopher!" He had to shout to be heard above the uproar. "Maddy isn't here. Go after her, and be quick! Rowley will have her halfway to London by now!"

Christopher spat out an expletive so wicked it made the lady in Will's arms gasp with outrage. Will held her fast until he heard Christopher's horse's hooves pounding away, then he jerked his attention back to his captive.

The lady who wasn't his sister was still fighting like a feral cat to get free of him. He had a least a foot's advantage on her in height, not to mention six or seven stone, yet she'd still managed to land a blow on him.

What the devil were she and her friend doing out here in a hired carriage in the middle of the night? No one ever passed by Cliff's Edge Castle. It was a good two-hour carriage ride east of Colchester. Its remoteness was the very reason Will had chosen to come here in the first place.

"Stop wriggling, damn it." He still had the pistol in his hand, and he had no idea whether or not she'd had time to reload it before he snatched her from the carriage. "Otherwise one of us may be celebrating Christmas with a pistol shot through the skull. I'd just as soon live to see Twelfth Night, if it's all the same to you."

This time the warning got through to her, and she ceased struggling. Will took a moment to catch his breath, then called out, "Oliver? Everything all right on your side?"

"Splendid," Oliver called back cheerfully, as if this were all great fun. "I've got a lovely young lady here who isn't Maddy, who's stomped twice on my foot and kneed me in the thigh. That is, she got my thigh, but it wasn't where she was aiming."

"You deserve a kick in the bollocks, you scoundrel! I'll see you two hung for this!" Oliver's lady shrieked, her voice shaking with fury.

"The crown tends to frown upon those doing the shooting, madam, not those who were shot upon." Will glanced down at the pistol, which was so small it fit into the palm of his hand. "A muff pistol, Oliver," he called to his brother.

Oliver groaned. "You mean to say we were nearly sent to our graves by a muff pistol? That's humiliating, that is."

Will unscrewed the barrel and checked the chamber. It was empty. He slid the pistol into the back of his waistband, under his coat, and scowled down at the lady he'd trapped against the side of the carriage. "There. That's much better. Now we've taken care of that, perhaps you'd be kind enough to explain why you tried to shoot me."

Her head was down, hiding her face. She was wearing a dark, somewhat shabby cloak, and an ill-fitting bonnet. In the light of the half-moon above Will saw a few tendrils of wavy red hair had escaped. He had a weakness for red hair, and the nape of her neck was so white and delicate and...well, what sort of cold-blooded murderess had such a dainty, fragile nape?

Still, red hair or not, she *had* shot at him, and she'd struck him in the face, as well. "Miss? I asked you a question."

She hesitated, then raised her face to his. "We thought you were highwaymen."

"We still think so!" The other lady shouted, but Will didn't answer her. He didn't even hear her. He was staring at the lady before him, his breath catching in his chest as the moonlight fell on her face.

It was her.

The red-headed actress from the Pandemonium. The one with the wide, dark brown eyes, creamy skin and lips so plump and red every time Will saw them, he was overwhelmed with a mad craving for summer strawberries.

Penelope Hervey.

She'd told him her name a few weeks ago, on the night of the fire, but Will had already known it before then. He'd seen her once when he'd been waiting in his carriage for Florentina after a performance. She'd passed by with a group of other actresses, and one of them had called her by name. He remembered thinking at the time the name Penelope suited her.

He hadn't forgotten it, and he hadn't forgotten her face, either.

Silas Bragg tried to keep her out of sight. Penelope Hervey, with her tempting lips and dazzling red hair was kept as far to the back of the stage as possible. She always played a bit part—a whore, or a bar-maid—and she never had any lines. Her face was frequently half-hidden behind a mask, and her hair covered with a hat or wig.

Silas might have saved himself the trouble. He could have rolled her up in the stage curtains. Will still would have noticed her, and he doubted he was the only one.

There was no hiding Penelope Hervey.

She didn't fit in at the Pandemonium, that much was certain. There was something different about her. He couldn't explain what it was, but she'd caught his attention.

Once she caught it, she held it.

But that was before. Before Christopher had crashed his phaeton, and Oliver had been shot in a duel. Before Maddy had nearly been ruined. Before Will realized his own scandalous behavior was to blame for Maddy's troubles, and for his brothers' unchecked debauchery.

Before he'd vowed to become something more, something better than a Tainted Angel.

He'd left London behind for a reason. Penelope Hervey, for all her loveliness, came from a world he wanted to escape. He couldn't think of any innocent reason she'd be *here*, in this remote part of Essex, less than a stone's throw away from the doorstep of Cliff's Edge.

He could, however, think of a number that weren't so innocent.

Florentina might have sniffed out where he'd gone and sent Miss Hervey here to put a ball between his eyes. Or between his legs, more likely. Florentina was likely furious with him for ending their liaison so suddenly, and God knew she was a vengeful creature.

"Well, Miss Hervey. This is an unexpected pleasure." He didn't bow, but settled his hands on her shoulders, his grip firm to keep her still. For all he knew, she could have a second pistol secreted away in her bodice.

Her throat worked, but it took several tries before those red lips produced a coherent word. "Lord Archer. We...we fired on Lord Archer."

It took Will a moment to understand she wasn't speaking to him.

“We fired on Lord Archer,” she repeated, her voice rising. “*Lord Archer*. We might have put a ball right through his heart!”

There was a brief silence, then her friend called out, “*Did* we put a ball through his heart?”

Miss Hervey swept a panicked gaze over him, her big brown eyes wide. “No.”

“Another part of him, then? His arm, or a leg?”

“No. There’s no blood, and he seems...vigorous enough.”

“Well, I don’t see what all the fuss is, then,” came the disgruntled reply. “No harm done.”

Miss Hervey’s gaze caught his, and she swallowed. “I beg your pardon for mistaking you for a highwayman, and for, ah...well, for trying to shoot you.”

Will stared down at her, assessing every twitch and tremor in her face. As suspicious as he was at her sudden presence here, he couldn’t convince himself she was a bloodthirsty murderess. Her face was as pale as death, and her slender body was trembling with delayed shock.

Whatever reason she had for being at Cliff’s Edge, it wasn’t to shoot him.

But that didn’t mean she was innocent. Either Florentina had sent her here, or Silas had, at Florentina’s urging. Will had given her with a wildly extravagant parting gift, but apparently, he hadn’t been generous enough to save himself from whatever mischief Penelope Hervey had been sent here to cause him. He should have expected a trick of this sort from Florentina.

Not that it mattered what sort of revenge Florentina had in mind for him, because Miss Hervey and her friend wouldn’t be staying. The sooner he was rid of them, the better.

Will reached under his coat, snatched the little muff pistol from his waistband and pressed it into Miss Hervey’s hand. “Here, take this, and for God’s sake, be careful who you shoot it at next time.” He turned her around and gave her a gentle push toward the carriage. “I wish you a pleasant return journey to London. Goodbye, Miss Hervey.”

“Wait!” Oliver rounded the side of the carriage, dragging his captive along beside him. His brow was creased, and he had a fierce scowl on his lips.

Oh, Christ. Will recognized that look. His dream of a quiet holiday house party was fading before his eyes.

“My brother is only jesting, Miss Hervey.”

“The devil I—”

“We wouldn’t dream of sending you all the way back to London tonight. You and your friend must come and be our guests at Cliff’s Edge.”

Will gave his brother a disgusted look. “You’re gallant this evening, Oliver.” There was no mystery as to why, either. The young lady Oliver had pulled from the carriage was as pretty as Miss Hervey was.

Oliver nudged him hard in the ribs. “Will! Have you forgotten you’re a gentleman? Do you truly intend to send these ladies off alone into the dark and cold?”

Will fixed his stoniest gaze on his brother. “They’ve come this far in the dark and cold without any mishaps. I’m certain they’ll make it back to London the same way.”

“Without any mishaps? Shots were fired tonight, Will! Someone might have been killed!”

Will threw his hands in the air. “*They* fired the shots! The only people in danger of getting killed were you, me and Christopher. I’d say Miss Hervey and her friend are more than capable of taking care of themselves.”

Oliver opened his mouth to reply, but he was interrupted by the sound of a horse approaching. They all turned to watch as Christopher came into view. Maddy was perched on the saddle in front of him.

“Maddy! Thank God.”

Will stepped forward and reached for her, but Christopher, whose face was pinched with worry, stopped him with a quick shake of the head. “Caught up to her just before she reached Thorrington. No sign of Rowley. No doubt he was waiting for her there. I’d pay good money to see his face when she doesn’t arrive.”

Will looked Maddy over. She avoided his gaze, but he could see the tear tracks on her cheeks, and helpless frustration overwhelmed him. He adored his sister, but she was a young lady now, and he and his brothers hadn’t the faintest idea how to manage her.

“Maddy, are you—” Will began gently, but Christopher interrupted him.

“*This* is who shot at us? They don’t look like murderers.”

“They mistook us for highwaymen!” Oliver, who loved anything ridiculous, was beside himself with glee.

Christopher laughed. “Well, this is the most exciting thing that’s happened since we came to Cliff’s Edge.”

“First they shot at us, and then this lady here kicked me,” Oliver said, with unmistakable relish. “That young lady slapped Will’s face. Pity you missed it.”

“How fortunate you’re both still in one piece. I’m Lord Christopher Angel.” Christopher didn’t dismount but offered each lady a polite nod. “Who might you two be?”

“My name is Dinah Bishop.” The lady Oliver had dragged from the carriage came forward and curtsied. “This is my friend, Miss Penelope Hervey.”

“Miss Hervey is the lady who tried to murder me.” Will shot Penelope a resentful look, but no one was paying the least bit of attention to him. His brothers were grinning foolishly at Miss Bishop, a curvy brunette with big blue eyes and a wide smile. Her lush beauty perfectly complemented Penelope Hervey’s creamy skin and striking red hair.

Will's lips twisted in a humorless smile. A lady for every gentleman's taste. Silas Bragg was the worst kind of blackguard, but he was no fool.

Oliver bowed to the ladies. "This unpleasant gentleman is our eldest brother, Lord Archer, and that young lady is our sister, Lady Madeline."

For the first time since she rode up with Christopher, Maddy looked up. She glanced at Penelope, then at Dinah, and the tiniest ray of hope crossed her face. "Have you come for a visit at Cliff's Edge?"

"No," Will said, at the same time as Oliver said, "Yes."

Christopher lifted an eyebrow. "It seems there's some confusion. Shall we all return to Cliff's Edge and discuss it?"

"Oh, no. I'm afraid we can't. Will is insisting these ladies return to London at once. In the dark, that is, without a chaperone, and on such a cold night as this, too." Oliver gave an exaggerated shiver. "I believe it's gotten colder in the past hour. Don't you think so, Christopher?"

"Indeed. Of course, they must stay." Christopher frowned at Will.

"Cliff's Edge is dreadfully dull." Oliver gave the ladies his most winning smile. "But perhaps you'll help us liven things up."

Will smothered a groan. Oh, no doubt they knew how to liven things up. Actresses usually did. It was the very reason they weren't staying. "That's not a good idea—"

"Will?" Maddy fixed her wide blue eyes on him. "You don't mean to say you're going to send them off into the dark, alone?"

Will met his sister's pleading gaze, and a perplexing sense of frustration and shame swept over him. He'd promised himself he'd do his best to behave like a proper gentleman from now on, and a proper gentleman didn't send two unprotected young women off into the night alone.

At least, not with his young, impressionable, tender-hearted sister watching.

He sighed. Being a gentleman was a dreary business. It was far easier to be a rake, but the Angels' days of whoring, gaming and drunken duels had come to an end.

He glanced at Penelope Hervey. She *did* look cold. Her red, petal-soft lips were trembling. He knew very well she'd been sent here to harass him, but even the most hard-hearted gentleman couldn't withstand such a sight.

One night. How much trouble could they cause in a single night? He'd keep an eye on them, then send them on their way tomorrow morning with one of his footmen as escort as soon as they lifted their heads from their pillows.

"Very well. Come on then." Will reached down to help the post boy, who was still on the ground where he'd thrown himself after the first pistol shot. He pressed a coin into his hand. "Help us free the wheel from the mud, take the two ladies to Cliff's Edge, and then you can be on your way."

“Yes, my lord.” The boy bobbed his head and scurried off toward the carriage.

Will’s gaze landed on his brothers, a sigh gathering in his chest. Oliver, always the gallant, had handed each of the ladies to a dry patch of ground, away from the mud. Will noticed Miss Hervey still appeared shaken from the evening’s adventure. She certainly had delicate sensibilities for a lady who’d been wielding a loaded pistol less than an hour ago.

He strode forward and set his shoulder to the back of the carriage, pushing it alongside the post boy. The wheel was dislodged from the mud, and in no time at all the ladies were back inside and the post boy astride his horse. Will and Oliver mounted their own horses and led the party back toward Cliff’s Edge.

Will waited until his housekeeper, Mrs. Sedgewick appeared and took charge of Miss Bishop before he approached Miss Hervey. “A word, if you’d be so kind.” He didn’t give her a chance to answer, but took her arm and led her down the hallway to his study. Once he’d closed the door behind him, he waved her to a chair in front of the fireplace. “Please take a seat, Miss Hervey. I’m sure you’re fatigued after your adventures this evening.”

He strode to the sideboard, splashed some port into two glasses, then turned to find Miss Hervey perched on the edge of one of the chairs, her back straight and her dark eyes wary. She looked like a disobedient schoolgirl about to sit through a scolding.

“Are you cold? This will help warm you.” He offered her one of the glasses of port.

She nodded her thanks and took the glass, but set it aside without tasting it. “What can I do for you, Lord Archer?”

He regarded her as he sipped his port. “You can be gone first thing tomorrow morning, Miss Hervey, and on your way back to London.”

She reached for her port then, and raised the glass to her lips.

Will noticed her hand was shaking. His conscience stabbed at him, but he reminded himself he hadn’t any reason to feel guilty. Indeed, he had every right to send her away before she reduced his house party to chaos. So why did he feel like the worst kind of ogre, towering over some innocent maiden?

The thought made his temper rise. He had his siblings to worry about, and a carefully selected houseful of party guests to attend to. A few of them were dreadfully proper, and wouldn’t be pleased to find two scandalous actresses had been invited to stay.

He’d left London to escape the sort of difficulties Penelope Hervey could cause him. She might look innocent, but she must have come to Cliff’s Edge on Silas’s or Florentina’s orders. It was simply too much of a coincidence for her to have appeared here otherwise.

Two disreputable brothers, a lovesick sister and a half dozen demanding house guests were quite enough trouble for one holiday. The last thing he needed was a fetching little redhead with strawberry lips distracting him.

Especially not with all the mistletoe hanging about.

Will downed the rest of his port and set his glass aside. “You and Miss Bishop may remain here tonight, Miss Hervey, but I expect you to take your leave first thing tomorrow morning.”