

Chapter Two

*Brightlingsea, Essex
December 21st*

William Angel, Lord Archer, had gone to great lengths to ensure Cliff's Edge Castle was smothered in Christmas cheer. The fire was roaring in the grate, the spicy scent of gingerbread wafted through the air, and fresh greenery hung in every doorway. He couldn't stir a blasted step without tripping over a bough of holly.

He'd hoped the festive air would reconcile his siblings to their fate. He'd nearly convinced himself it was working, too, but that was before he'd happened to look out his bedchamber window as he was dressing for dinner tonight and spied his sister Madeline, the youngest Angel, fleeing toward a carriage half-hidden behind the stables.

Five weeks at Cliff's Edge, and she was already attempting an escape.

A vile curse fell from Will's lips. "I should have known something like this would happen. That carriage was waiting for her, Oliver, and she damn well knew it would be. They planned this. Now Rowley's got his hooks in her, he won't let her go without a fight."

"We'll catch her." Oliver tapped his heels into his horse's flanks and drew up alongside Will. "She can't be more than a few miles ahead of us."

Oliver was the next eldest after Will, and the most reliable of the two younger Angel brothers. Will shook his head. Christ, things were grim indeed if Oliver could be considered the sensible one. Three weeks ago, he'd been caught in a compromising situation with a jealous viscount's mistress and had nearly been killed in a duel. Fortunately for Oliver, his opponent hadn't been a crack shot. The ball had passed clean through Oliver's shoulder, but the hot-headed viscount had been aiming for Oliver's heart.

Still, Oliver was more trustworthy than their youngest brother. Just before they left London, Christopher had challenged Lord Eggert's son to a carriage race in Richmond Park. He'd destroyed his new phaeton and lost an enormous sum of money in the wager—a sum Will had been obliged to pay.

His brothers were perfect fiends, but at the moment they were the least of Will's concerns. His sweet, innocent sister had fallen prey to a fortune hunter. Will thought they'd left the scoundrel behind in London, but Mr. Rowley had discovered their whereabouts, and now Maddy, who fancied herself in love, had fled into the night with him. If anyone discovered her folly, she'd be ruined.

“Was Rowley in the carriage?” Christopher was staring straight ahead, his face grim. Will shook his head. “I couldn’t tell.”

Damn it, they had to catch her...

“He’s likely waiting for her a few miles off. Too much of a bloody coward to come to Cliff’s Edge for her.” Christopher’s tone was scathing.

Oliver’s lips flattened into a thin line. “Maybe a ball between his eyes will teach Rowley a lesson about trifling with young ladies.”

It was on the edge of Will’s tongue to point out a ball in *his* shoulder hadn’t taught Oliver one, but he bit the words back. “I don’t intend to find out. No more duels, Oliver.”

Mud flew from their horses’ hooves as they galloped over the rutted road, splattering Will’s spotless black breeches and his favorite Weston coat. If there was a puddle about, Diablo’s feet seemed to find it. It had taken his valet ages to dress him for dinner this evening. All that effort to transform him into a proper gentleman, wasted.

When he caught up to Rowley, he was going to take great pleasure in dragging him out of that carriage and tossing him face down in the mud.

And holding him there, with a boot heel against his neck.

As for Maddy—

“Did you hear that?” Oliver went still, listening. “It sounds like a squeaky carriage wheel.”

Will’s head snapped up. The noise was faint, and he couldn’t make out a thing in the thick darkness surrounding them, but he slowed Diablo to a halt alongside Oliver’s horse. They waited, and before long they heard it again—the squeak of carriage wheels, laboring to roll through the thick mud.

“Some luck at last.” A slow smile spread over Will’s face. He’d anticipated a much longer chase. He never thought he’d have a reason to be grateful for the country mud, but damned if it hadn’t stopped Rowley in his tracks.

He urged Diablo into a gallop, and before long he caught sight of a hired post-chaise, the yellow paint gleaming dully in the moonlight. As he drew closer he noticed one of its wheels was sunk deep into the mud. “Serves you right!” He laughed as Diablo’s hooves pounded easily through the same muck that had trapped the chaise.

“One would think you’d have learned your lesson by now, Rowley,” Christopher shouted. “But we’ll be delighted to teach it to you again tonight.”

Oliver was right on Will’s heels, panting with anger and exertion. “Maddy, stay where you are. Rowley, get out of that carriage this instant, or we’ll bloody well drag you—”

Crack!

An ear-splitting blast rang through the air, and something whistled past Will's head, close enough to trim his sideburns. He tugged Diablo to halt and whirled around, his wide eyes meeting Oliver's.

Oliver stared back at him, his mouth hanging open. "Jesus. That sounded like a gunshot!"

"It damn well felt like one, too! Nearly took my head off!" What the devil? Rowley was *shooting* at them? "For God's sake, lay the weapon down before you kill someone, you bloody fool!"

They waited, but there was no reply. After a moment Oliver urged his horse forward, and Will nudged Diablo into a cautious trot beside him, with Christopher riding on his other side.

They didn't get far before a shriek rent the air.

Will froze, staring at the dark bulk of the carriage in front of him. The shriek had been high-pitched, shrill with terror, and distinctly feminine.

Maddy.

"I'm going to kill that blackguard."

Oliver kicked his horse into motion, but Will grabbed his brother's reins before Oliver could rush the carriage. "No. Maddy's in there with him, Oliver. There's no telling what that scoundrel will do when he's cornered."

He eased Diablo into a cautious walk. As he drew closer to the carriage, he could see the barrel of a tiny pistol pointed at him through a half-open window. Will blinked. Christ, it looked like a muff pistol.

Rowley carries a muff pistol?

That was damned odd, but even a muff pistol could blast a hole in a man's flesh. He held his hands up, hoping Rowley could see him in the dark. "Lay your weapon aside at once, before you hurt some—"

Crack!

This time the bullet flew wide. Panic was making Rowley careless, and Will didn't intend to let him get off another shot. He leapt off Diablo's back and motioned to his brothers. They quickly dismounted and hurried to his side.

"I'm going to shout out to them one more time," Will whispered. "While I'm distracting them, the two of you creep around to the left side of the carriage. If he shoots again, it'll take him a moment to reload. I'll rush the carriage from the right, and we'll fling open the doors at once and pull out whoever's inside."

"Right." Oliver nodded.

"Be careful," Will added. "I've dug a pistol ball out of one of you already, and I don't want to do it again."

Oliver snorted softly. "I'd just as soon avoid that, as well."

Will waited until his brothers were in place on the far side of the carriage, then he walked forward, his hands held up in front of him. “Listen to me—”

Crack!

The shot ripped through the quiet night and echoed through the trees, the hollow pop the last sound before a deathly silence fell.

“Dinah! Have you gone mad?” Penelope gaped at the tiny pistol gripped in Dinah’s hand, her brain fuzzy with shock. One moment she’d been watching out the window as one of the post boys poked at the stuck carriage wheel, and the next thing she knew Dinah had hiked up her skirts and fetched a pistol strapped to her leg, then lowered the window and fired a shot into the darkness.

“I’m as sane as the day I was born.” Dinah jerked the muzzle of the gun away from the window, her fingers working quickly to unscrew the barrel. “Do you think I scared him off?”

Penelope stared at her, her mouth working helplessly for several seconds before she was able to produce a sound. “Who, the post boy? I’d say you scared him, yes. He just dove under the carriage!”

“Not the post boy. The highwayman!”

“What highwayman? There’s no highwayman, Dinah!” Penelope stared as Dinah reached back under her skirts and drew out a small leather pouch. “For pity’s sake, Dinah. What else do you have hidden under there? A cannon?”

Dinah was busily reloading the pistol. “Didn’t you hear the hoofbeats, and the shout? There’s a highwayman after us! Now hush, and let me get another shot off before he kills us both!”

“What? No! Dinah, put that thing away before you hurt someone!” Penelope held out a shaking hand for the pistol.

Dinah ignored her. Instead she dropped a ball down the barrel and rose to her knees on the seat. “Blast it, it’s as dark as Hades out there. I can’t see a blessed thing.”

“There’s nothing to see—” Penelope began, but before she could say another word, a shout made them jump.

“Lay the weapon down!” The voice was deep, masculine, and unmistakably furious. Some more incoherent shouting followed this command, but it was drowned out by the sound of hooves drawing closer to their disabled carriage.

“If he gets any closer, I’m firing.” Dinah cocked the pistol, her tone grim.

“But what if it’s not a highwayman?” Penelope couldn’t deny it sounded very much like a highwayman, but shouldn’t they be certain of it before they fired any more shots into the dark? “There aren’t any highwaymen anymore, are there?”

“Not in London, maybe, but what else is there to do out here in the country aside from rob and murder each other?” Dinah was squinting out the window, her hand steady on the pistol. “Of course, it’s a highwayman. Only a highwayman waylays a carriage in the dark!”

“Maybe it’s Lord Snedley. Perhaps he’s sorry he tossed us out, and he’s come after us.”

Dinah snorted. “Even more reason to shoot, if it’s Snedley. I’ll aim for his bollocks, shall I?”

Before Penelope could answer, the highwayman spoke again, his voice calmer this time.

“Listen to me—”

He didn’t get any further before Dinah pressed her finger down on the trigger. Penelope gasped and slapped her hands over her ears to drown out the sudden, hair-raising crack that rent the air. Dinah jerked back from the window and fumbled for her pouch to reload. Penelope sat, silent and motionless, her gaze fixed on the curl of smoke drifting from the muzzle of the gun.

There was no sound from outside. Not a shout, or single hoofbeat.

“Did you hit him?” Penelope’s voice was shaking.

“I’m not sure. I don’t hear anything.”

“Oh, dear God, do you think he’s dead?”

“I hope so.”

A heavy silence fell over the carriage as they looked at each other, unsure what to do. The moments ticked away, one after the other, but there was still no sound from outside. “He’s either gone, or dead.” Penelope held out her hand for the pistol. “Don’t reload it, Dinah. Give it to me.”

She didn’t want to touch the thing, but of the two of them she was the least likely to fire it again, so when Dinah offered it to her, she took it. The barrel was still warm. She was about to shove it into her pocket and climb down from the carriage to retrieve their post boy when the door flew open.

A man loomed in the doorway, his face half-hidden in shadows. Every inch of his towering frame was heaving with anger, and the part of his mouth Penelope could see was drawn into a fearsome frown. Dinah gasped at the sight of him, then the gasp turned to a scream as he reached an enormous hand into the carriage, fisted it in the hem of Dinah’s skirt, and tugged.

“No!” Penelope threw her arms around Dinah’s legs to keep her from being pulled out, but then the opposite door flew open. A second man yanked Dinah’s arms behind her back, and Penelope watched in horror as her friend was dragged from the carriage.

“Take your hands off her!” Penelope scrambled from her seat to throw herself on top of Dinah’s abductor, but she didn’t have a chance to move before the first man’s roving gaze caught on the gun in her hand.

He released Dinah’s skirt as quickly as he’d grabbed it.

Penelope screamed as his hand snaked out and snatched the gun from her nerveless fingers. Before she could move or even draw breath he reached in again, and this time...

This time, he snatched *her*.