

## Epilogue

*Cliff's Edge, Essex*  
*Twelfth Night, 1813*

“Whatever happened to the costume you wore at last year’s Christmas farce?”

Penelope laid down her quill and turned around in her chair to glance at her husband.  
“What, you mean the prostitute’s costume?”

“Ah, yes. The prostitute’s costume, with the short, ruffled skirts and the low, tight bodice.” Will was lounging on the bed, his arms under his head and a dreamy smile on his lips. “Fetching little scrap of a thing, especially on you. How come you never wear it anymore? I miss it.”

Penelope raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you suggesting, my lord, that the Countess of Archer venture onto the stage dressed as a prostitute?”

He rolled lazily over to his side and propped his head on his hand. “God, no. I didn’t say a word about the stage, my lady. I was suggesting you wear it here, for me, in the privacy of our bedchamber.”

“You’re as wicked as you’ve ever been, Lord Archer,” Penelope scolded with a smile. She liked to tease her husband about his roguish ways, fondly referring to him as her Gentleman Rake. “Now hush, will you? I’m nearly done with this.”

Will let out a groan. “Can’t that wait?”

“No. I promised Maddy I’d have it finished by tomorrow morning so she could read it before the performance tomorrow night.”

Will had insisted on having another Christmas house party this year, and Penelope was writing a new play especially for the occasion. Their guests had insisted there be a Christmas farce, which perhaps wasn’t surprising, since there were a number of actresses among them.

“Maddy will understand. Come to bed, sweetheart.”

Penelope was reading over the lines she’d written, but the deep, husky note in his voice made her look up at him. She wore only a thin white night rail, and his gaze was fixed on the curves of her breasts. A shiver of awareness darted down Penelope’s spine, but she remained in her chair, tapping her quill against her quirked lips. “This will go much more quickly if you help me. Shall I read the Second Act aloud to you?”

“What, the entire Second Act? That will take ages!” Will flopped onto his back on the bed. “What’s gotten into Maddy, anyway? Why must she have the pages in the morning? The performance isn’t until tomorrow night.”

Penelope gathered up the pages spread across her dressing table and arranged them in a neat pile. “She’s nervous. I think it’s quite sweet, really.”

“She’s been on stage before. Why should she be nervous?”

“Why, because of Lord Notley.”

“Notley?” Will frowned up at the ceiling. “What about him?”

Penelope let out a sigh. “Goodness, gentlemen are dim about these things. It’s a wonder any of you ever marry. She’s in love with him, of course, and he with her. Do you mean to say you haven’t noticed? Lord Notley’s hardly left Maddy’s side since he arrived, and every time he looks at her, her cheeks turn as red as a peony.”

Will jerked upright in the middle of the bed, his eyes wide. “I never noticed a blessed thing. Notley, and Maddy? Are you certain?”

“Oh, yes. Quite certain.” He looked so stunned Penelope took pity on him and crossed the room to join him on the bed. “Aren’t you pleased? I think they’re lovely together.”

“I hardly know if I’m pleased or not.” Will was still shaking his head in wonder, but he reached for Penelope, his strong arms steadying her as she climbed onto the bed.

When she was settled at last, she nuzzled against him with a contented sigh. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Maddy as happy as she is now, and they’ll have beautiful children, you know. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, both the boys and the girls.”

Will ran a caressing hand over his wife’s swollen belly, then leaned over to press a reverent kiss there, just as he did every night. “I *am* pleased,” he murmured after a moment. “Notley’s a fine, steady fellow. He’ll take good care of Maddy.”

They lay quietly for a while. It was a clear night, and the moon’s bright rays spilled through the window and fell across the bed, where Penelope lay with her head on her husband’s broad chest and his arms around her.

Penelope’s eyes were drifting closed when Will stirred. “Are there any other love affairs I should know about? Oliver, or Christopher, perhaps?”

Penelope grinned at the hopeful note in his voice. Oliver and Christopher had made great strides taming the worst of their roguish impulses over the past year. There had been no more duels or carriage crashes, but there was still a bit of the devil in them, and she knew Will would be easier once they were each safely settled.

“Well, let me see. Christopher has his eye on Miss Everard. She’s a sweet thing, and would make him an excellent match, but it’s too early to tell whether there’s an attachment there, or just an innocent flirtation.”

“Christopher, innocent? I’ll make it a point to keep an eye on Miss Everard’s virtue from now on.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry on that account. Christopher’s a gentleman, just like his eldest brother.”

“Thank you.” Will dropped a kiss on her temple. “What about Oliver? Is he in love with anyone?”

“Yes,” Penelope replied without hesitation. “He’s in love with Dinah, and has been for the past year, but he won’t admit it. She’s in love with him, as well, but pretends she isn’t. Two more stubborn, contrary people I’ve never seen, which of course means they’re perfect for each other.”

“Good Lord. Poor Dinah, to be saddled with Oliver as her one true love.” Will chuckled against Penelope’s neck. “Now, *their* children will be regular little hellions.”

“Oh my, yes. Demon imps, the lot of them.”

Will remained quiet as he stroked his palm over Penelope’s belly. When he did speak again, there was a huskiness in his voice that betrayed his emotion. “And our little one, Penelope? Will he be a dark-haired boy, a rogue like his uncles and father, who’ll lead us a merry chase for the rest of our lives? Or will she be a girl, a lady like her mother, with red hair and brown eyes and a sweet, sweet smile?”

Penelope rested her hand over his. “What do you wish?”

“I wish her to be just like you,” he whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

“Whatever he or she is, whoever they are...” Penelope gazed into Will’s eyes, her heart swelling with love at the tenderness in those blue depths. “They’ll be our miracle.”