



# Jewel of the Ball (Heiress #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** He was meant for the Church. She was never meant to tempt him.

Lady Angelica Ravensmere never expected to fall for the wounded gentleman she helped recover—nor that he would be bound for holy orders. Devoted, principled, and determined to turn from the world, Lord Benedict Deverell is everything she should avoid... and everything her heart yearns for.

With Benedict summoned back to London to recover, old temptations resurface. Angelica is preparing for her Season, determined to find a husband and forget the man who broke her heart. But fate—and desire—throw them together once more.

Torn between the path he vowed to follow and the woman he cannot forget, Benedict must face the truth: walking away may have been his greatest sin... and winning her back may demand the ultimate sacrifice.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

## Chapter

### One

The speed with which the carriage braked threw Benedict Deverell out of his seat, his long legs tangled in the folds of his dark greatcoat, landing him with a thump on the floor.

He clutched at the other chair, the velvet upholstery soft beneath his fingers, and hoisted himself up to the sounds of men shouting and his driver pleading for calm.

For a moment, he was unsure what was happening, or why they'd been stopped.

The air inside the carriage grew stuffy, thick with the smell of leather and dust, while the clatter of hooves on the road outside sent a shiver down his spine.

Perhaps they had been waylaid at the tollgate they needed to pay a fee at, or worse—a highwayman who wanted their worldly goods.

Not that he had much on hand, and that in itself could be a problem, since he was traveling to Wiltshire in his brother the marquess's carriage.

If a highwayman did think to rob him, he would expect there would be some significant blunt on hand.

The marquess's family crest—a rampant lion holding a shield—was emblazoned in gold on the door, a beacon to any thief with a mind for rich pickings.

The door to the carriage ripped open, and he looked at the man who had accosted them.

The fellow's cravat was twisted, his coat threadbare, and a bristled jaw peeked out from beneath the red cloth tied over his mouth and nose.

His boots were cracked at the seams, and his hair stuck out in greasy tufts from beneath a battered cap.

The stench wafting off him—a sour mix of sweat, unwashed wool, and stale tobacco—was far from pleasing.

Benedict swallowed the nausea rising in his throat and waited to be told what to do. No doubt the fiend had plans for them all.

“Out,” he ordered, gesturing with his flintlock for Benedict to jump down and stand beside the carriage. He glanced past the would-be thief and noted his driver was already doing as the man bade them.

“Give me everything you have and be quick about it.”

His driver reached into his pocket and pulled out the purse of coins his brother had paid him with before they'd left London, and Benedict's temper rose.

He lifted off the silver cross that hung about his neck on a simple black cord—a symbol of his faith, the weight of which felt heavier today than ever before—and reached into his pocket, pulling out the few meager coins he also carried.

But he feared it would not be enough to satisfy their bandit.

Between them, there would be barely ten pounds.

The masked man searched each purse of coins, glanced at the cross, and frowned.

“Is that it? That’s all you have on you?”

” His attention shifted to the highly polished and modern traveling coach, with its intricate brass fittings and freshly painted wheels.

His scowl deepened. “That’s the Marquess of Whitmore’s carriage, and you barely have ten pounds here. What kind of fool do you take me for?”

His driver looked at him for explanation, and Benedict turned to the highwayman.

“Listen, sir, I’m a priest. My brother is the Marquess.

I’m merely on my way to my brother’s country estate to carry out a service Sunday next at the parish church of St. Michael’s in the village nearby.

I do not have the funds that my brother may travel with.

I’m sorry if this is not enough to satisfy you.

” A faint quaver laced his voice, the first crack in the mask of calm he wore as a man of faith.

“A priest, eh.” The smirk on the thief’s face sent a cold chill down Benedict’s spine. “A man of God. Tell me, do you not get bored reading scriptures and listening to people’s troubles? And let’s not forget—if you’re a Catholic priest, well, women are unavailable to your poor soul.”

Benedict ground his teeth, not needing anyone to remind him of that fact.

Not that he'd struggled so very much so far in his journey to take orders, but the thought of a life without companionship, without the warmth of a woman's embrace, gnawed at him like a persistent ache.

It was something he seriously needed to think about before promising himself to the church.

He could, he supposed, always join the Church of England...where the rules on marriage were far more forgiving. But what would that say of his convictions?

"I'm sorry. That is all we have." He gestured to the carriage. "Feel free to search the vehicle and our belongings if you like, but I assure you that is all you'll find."

"A shame," the highwayman said, staring at them both as if they were nothing but horse dung beneath his worn boots.

"I suppose this will have to do. But then, I really ought to rid myself of anyone who may order a search of my whereabouts. You understand," the thief said.

"My horse is old and will take some time for me to get many miles from here—far slower than I imagine you could get men out to search for me. That leaves me with only one choice."

Benedict moved to stand in front of the driver, his heart hammering against his ribs like a drum, and the faint scent of damp earth and horse sweat filling his nose.

His stomach churned at the man's train of thought.

"Listen, we shall not say a word. Just leave us be, with what you have taken today, and we shall be on our way. We want no one to be hurt, nor is it necessary. I promise you, and give you my word."

The bandit threw back his head and laughed. “And that, coming from you, is a high promise indeed. Almost smug, is it not?”

“We want no harm, sir,” his driver said. “Please, I have a family...”

The bandit sighed and glanced to the side a minute, and without thought, Benedict threw himself at him.

They tumbled to the ground and rolled several times.

Benedict was able to wrestle the gun from the man and threw it aside, his breath ragged and chest heaving with exertion, before a punch to his jaw rattled him for several heartbeats.

He rolled away, attempting to crawl to where the gun had landed. He yelled for his driver, but could not see where he had disappeared to. They wrestled toward the gun, and Benedict grunted as several punches to his kidneys almost stopped him short.

“Do not even think about it,” the bandit growled, somehow gaining his feet and kicking him in the stomach.

Benedict rolled, clutching his stomach, before a shot rang out, stilling his heart and silencing the outdoors.

The scent of gunpowder hung thick in the air, sharp and metallic.

The sound of his heartbeat sounded loud in his ears, before warmth started to flow down his leg. Searing pain followed, and he sat up and clutched at his thigh as blood oozed through his buckskin breeches onto the ground, rendering the soil red.

The sound of fading hoofbeats told him the bandit had fled, galloping into the nearby

copse of trees and out of sight.

His driver was beside him in a moment, ripping his cravat off from around his throat and tying it high on his thigh.

A thumping pain shot through his leg, and he called out an expletive that he ought not before the world before him started to spin.

“Lord Benedict, all will be well. There is a grand home nearby. Come, help me get you into the carriage, and I’ll ensure you’re looked after. Please, my lord, do not give up just yet.”

His driver’s plea shot adrenaline through his blood, and with his driver’s help, he stood and shuffled over to the vehicle. He sat on the floor of the carriage and slid his way into the vehicle, anything further was impossible—his limbs felt heavy, and his head spun. He could do no more.

“That’s it, my lord. You’ll be put to rights soon enough.”

Benedict lay on the floor of the carriage and heard the door slam closed. He clutched at his leg, the pain searing and blinding him to any other thought.

He’d been shot.

The blackguard had shot him without a second thought.

Bastard.

He cringed at his unkindly thought, the weight of his faith pressing on his chest, reminding him that forgiveness should be his path, before waking several minutes later to the carriage barreling down a bumpy, graveled road.

He hoped his driver knew where he was going and where help could be sourced.

The amount of blood pumping out onto the carriage floor was alarming and could well mean he'd lose his life before they arrived.

He rolled and groaned as the carriage tore around a corner. Great oaks—stately and ancient—lined whatever road they now traveled. Mayhap they were on the nearby estate's main entrance. Oaks usually lined their grand drives, did they not? This one seemed no different.

“Almost there, my lord. Just a few more minutes,” his driver yelled before the carriage rolled to a hasty stop.

More hollering ensued, men's voices, low and gruff, mingled with the higher tones of women calling for aid.

Benedict only half-listened, unfamiliar voices floated through his mind, and yet he could not form the strength to open his eyes to see who had come to assist him.

He was jostled, pulled from the vehicle, and then shadows passed over his eyes. Was he inside now? He fought the tiredness, needing to tell them thank you for their help. Apologize for being troublesome when he'd never intended for any of this to happen.

They were good people, whoever they were.

“There is a spare room upstairs. Henry, and Thomas, help carry him and quickly,” a sweet, feminine voice ordered, its soft, lilting tone calm yet commanding, a hint of aristocratic breeding in every syllable. An angel, he had little doubt. Maybe he'd died and was already in heaven.

“Send for the doctor and have Cook prepare hot water to be brought up and maids to



carry up towels,” the angelic voice continued.

“He’s been shot, my lady. A highwayman. Perhaps best tell your husband that there are criminals lurking nearby.”

“I shall tell my brother-in-law, the duke, of course,” the woman said. “But first, we must save this man.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

### Chapter

### Two

"Quickly, get him upstairs. He's unconscious again." Angelica cursed, and hurried up the stairs, moving before the servants to open the spare room's door and allowing the footmen to carry the injured gentleman inside.

The room smelled faintly of lavender sachets and beeswax polish, the heavy drapes drawn against the gray afternoon light. The fire in the hearth set but not lit, the chill in the air reaching every corner of the chamber.

The injured man appeared tall and muscular, and by the time the footmen entered the room, their faces were red from exertion, their arms shaking with the determination to carry him and not drop the poor fellow.

They placed him on the bed, and without thinking of what etiquette she was breaking by touching a man who was not her husband, Angelica studied the hole in his breeches where blood oozed through, even with a cravat tied high on his thigh.

Her fingers trembled as she reached toward the torn fabric, the damp warmth of his blood seeping into the cloth. The man stirred faintly under her touch, a barely audible groan escaping his lips—whether from pain or some fevered dream, she could not tell.

"He's bleeding. Has the doctor been sent for?"

Her maid entered with towels and followed close on her heels by another who carried hot water. "Yes, my lady. He'll be here soon, I'm sure." Her maid set down the items she'd requested and came to stand at her side. "What can I do to help?" she asked.

"We need scissors to cut off his breeches." Angelica ignored the startled glances from the footmen and, with a wave of her hand, dismissed them. "Help me with his boots."

Her maid did as she asked, and together they were able to untie his knee-high leather boots, pulling them free from his body.

Blood had pooled in his boots, and her maid threw them over near the fire to keep the floors from being ruined.

The boots landed with a dull thud, their fine craftsmanship marred by mud and bloodstains.

"What a mess this gentleman is in. Whatever do you think happened?"

"Apparently their carriage was accosted by a highwayman, and he shot him. I do hope Rosalind and Ravensmere are home soon. I do worry for their safety if there is a highwayman loose in our county."

"I shall inform the staff who live in the village to be vigilant, my lady."

"Thank you," she said, picking up the scissors a maid had carried in. She went to work cutting off his breeches.

The fabric split with a soft rip, revealing a muscular thigh dusted with dark hair. Angelica's gaze lingered for a breath too long on the sharp lines of his hip, the faint ridge of muscle beneath the skin. Her cheeks flushed, and she glanced away, silently scolding herself.

She took one of the towels and placed it under his thigh, hoping that would help with catching the oozing blood, but her stomach twisted in fear at what would occur the moment the cravat was untied from his leg. Would the man bleed out? Would he die? How horrible for him.

Her attention slipped to his face, and she noted his strong jaw, straight nose, and high cheekbones. His dark hair, slightly damp with sweat, curled over his brow in loose, unruly waves, and a faint shadow of stubble darkened his jaw.

Such a handsome young fellow too. Too young to die, and nor would she let him. If it were the last act of kindness she did at home before traveling to London for the Season, she would ensure this stranger would also return to his family, hale and whole.

He stirred again, the pain sharp and unrelenting. His mind, no doubt, fogged by agony.

"Do you think the doctor will be able to save him, my lady?"

Angelica frowned, unsure. Although she'd never seen anyone who had been shot before, the wound was offensive—looked visibly dirty from the bullet that had entered—and refused to stop bleeding.

Had the bullet hit an artery? She wasn't sure even the doctor could save him from the fate that hovered.

"My angel, you've come to save me..."

His deep voice startled her, and she jumped before looking up to meet the greenest eyes she'd ever seen staring back at her, besides her own, with more clarity than she'd thought possible right at this moment.

The raw vulnerability in his voice sent a shiver down her spine, and her breath caught in her throat. Her hand trembled as she reached for a clean cloth. "We're certainly going to try, sir, but your wound is very serious. I'm not going to lie to you."

He nodded, seemingly understanding what she was saying, before he closed his eyes and went limp once more, no doubt once again unconscious.

Angelica clasped a clean cloth and dipped it into the salty, hot water.

She wiped his leg, making sure to keep away from the wound site and cleaned him up as best she could.

She placed several cloths on his wound, pressing hard the entire time to try to stem the flow of blood, and after several minutes, the flow of blood had seemed to have slowed.

Her own heartbeat thundered in her ears, and she bit her lip to keep her composure. Just in time, too, for the doctor strode through the bedroom door, doctor's bag in hand and a worried frown between his brows.

"Lady Angelica, what has happened?"

"A highwayman on the main road, Dr. Montgomery," she said, moving out of the way to allow the doctor to look at the patient. "He was shot, and I think the wound has stopped bleeding a little, but he's in and out of consciousness."

"Understandable," the doctor said, pulling several instruments out of the bag that made Angelica wince. And when he started probing the wound site, her maid bolted from the room.

The doctor gave the fleeing maid a cursory glance. "Probably a good thing, my lady. I

do not need another person unconscious on the floor."

She nodded and watched him tend the wound. He slipped some laudanum into the patient's mouth, and within a minute or so the pain that had been etched on the gentleman's face eased. The sharp scent of alcohol and opium drifted in the air, making Angelica's stomach churn.

The doctor cut open the wound further, and with a little instrument that appeared far too large for the wound site, he dug into the hole and pulled out what was left of the shell of the bullet.

"There, with that out, we shall hopefully have him on the mend, but he'll not be able to be moved for several days." The doctor probed farther.

"I do not think the bullet has hit a main vein or artery, but keeping the patient still for some time will be paramount." He paused, turning to look at her.

"Will the duke approve having the gentleman under your roof, do you suppose? "

"I do not think he will mind. Not when he finds out what has occurred."

She watched as the doctor stitched the gentleman's leg up and then wrapped it with a clean bandage.

Angelica helped him remove the blood-stained sheets and towels, replacing the bedding with clean linen before standing back and watching the gentleman.

He remained asleep, no doubt both from the pain he was living with and the laudanum he'd been given.

His breathing was shallow, the rise and fall of his chest a fragile rhythm she prayed

would continue.

"I shall come back tomorrow. If he shows any sign of fever in the next three days, or the bleeding is excessive call for me at once, no matter the time."

"Of course," she said, hoping that did not occur. The man had already lost an alarming amount of blood, and he did not need anything else to hinder his healing.

"I shall be back tomorrow to change his bandages in the morning and again tomorrow night. Thank you for your assistance today, Lady Angelica, you're a very capable young woman."

Angelica smiled at the compliment, happy to hear such a nice thing about herself.

She escorted the doctor to the front door and wished him well before returning inside.

"I shall be in the room with the patient. Send the duke and duchess up to see me as soon as they return from the village and notify the carriage driver that so far the injured man is stable."

"Of course, my lady," a footman stated, closing the front door.

Angelica headed back upstairs and went and grabbed her diary before returning to the patient's room. She pulled a chair beside the bed and ordered the fire to be lit to ensure the room remained a comfortable temperature. The flames soon grew bright in the hearth, casting a warm flicker across the patient's pale skin.

She sat for what felt like hours before Rosalind and the duke hurried into the room.

"Dearest, what has happened? Thomas told us what had occurred and I could barely believe there was a highwayman nearby."

"Yes, and one who is willing to shoot people, it would seem."

"I shall have the local magistrate informed at once, and he can see about sending out some men to try to find this fiend." The duke came and stood at the end of the bed just as Rosalind came to stand beside Angelica, reaching down to take her hand.

"He's wearing a black cravat and shirt. A seminarian student, perhaps? And yet he looks familiar. Who did the driver say this man was again?"

Angelica had assumed the same. "A Catholic student, I would guess." She turned to her maid waiting quietly by the door. "Can you have one of the footmen ask the driver the gentleman's name? In all the chaos, I forgot to ask."

"Of course, my lady," her maid said, before slipping out of the room.

"Do you know of anyone who would be traveling through here who would fit his description?" she asked her brother-in-law while taking in their patient and how pale he appeared.

The duke frowned in thought. "There are many people who travel through here, but maybe tomorrow, if he's more lucid, he may be able to tell us who he is if the driver is unaware. However, I do not think that will be the case."

"He's on laudanum, so I think any information we gather on him will be from his driver. The doctor gave him quite a large dose." She studied him, wondering if he was indeed a Catholic priest. Maybe he'd taken his orders already.

Was he a man who had already made his vows?

A man who had sworn away the very feelings she hoped to find during her Season?



She could not imagine such a life, and yet, it would seem this gentleman had.

A pity, for he was exceedingly handsome, even if he were unconscious right at this moment.

Shame washed over her at the thought. She should not have such shallow and impure thoughts about a man who had chosen another way of life.

If he had indeed chosen the church for himself.

Her fingers brushed the edge of the small cross that sat against her chest, the cool metal a silent reminder of the divide between them.

"I shall have a maid come and sit in here with you if you're to be alone with the gentleman. I'll not have any scandal touch you with your Season about to commence."

"You cannot think that I shall be accosted by an injured, unconscious man, Rosalind," Angelica mused, trying to stop a laugh from bubbling out of her.

"I will indeed do so," her sister said. "You're one of the prettiest women in England. You could lure the stoutest of men to your whim, priests not excepted."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

### Chapter

### Three

Angelica woke sometime late into the night to the sounds of a man groaning just a few doors up from her room. She sat up, a little muddled, before she remembered their unannounced injured guest.

She threw the bedding off, reached for her dressing gown and ran from the room. The floor beneath her bare feet was cold, the scent of beeswax and lavender lingering faintly in the air, the only sounds her muffled footsteps on the Aubusson rug and the muffled groans ahead.

Several steps from the injured man's door—whom they now knew to be Lord Benedict Deverell, Lord Whitmore's younger brother—his distress and pain-filled moans increased.

Angelica pushed the door open, thankful to find it lit with several candles, but his tossing and turning did not bode well for his comfort or recovery.

The sheets were tangled about his legs, his skin pale and clammy with sweat. The fire had burned low, casting flickering shadows across his face. His chest rose and fell in shallow gasps, and his lips were dry and cracked.

She pulled up a chair beside the bed and poured a little laudanum into a small glass cup and reached for him. "Lord Benedict, here, take this. It will make you feel better, I promise."

He shook his head as if to say no, before his eyes slowly opened and he focused on her. "My angel," he rasped yet again.

Angelica smiled, although she was far from angelic, and if this man was indeed intended for the priesthood, he certainly would keep his distance once he was better. Even so, her pulse quickened at his words, a blush heating her cheeks, but she forced herself to remain composed.

He attempted to sit up, and she helped him drink down the laudanum before he flopped back on to the bedding. "Water, please," he rasped.

"Of course, here, there is ample beside your bed if you're capable." She reached for the jug and poured him a glass before helping him to drink down as much water as he needed. His hand brushed against hers as she steadied the glass. The contact sent a strange, unwelcome shiver down her spine.

He sighed and lay back onto the pillow, and she stood, walking over to the washbowl and wetting a cloth to place over his forehead. With care, she gently smoothed it across his brow, noting the faint scent of soap and sweat clinging to his skin.

"Where am I?" he asked, the laudanum having not yet taken effect, placing him into another deep sleep.

She sat beside him and left the cool cloth on his forehead. "You're at the Duke and Duchess of Ravensmere's estate in Hampshire, Ebonmere Abbey. I'm Lady Angelica Ravensmere, the duchess's sister."

He frowned and studied her a moment. "But how can you also be a Ravensmere if you're the duchess's sister..."

Angelica moved a little closer and reached up to feel his cheek, glad to notice that it

wasn't overly warm.

His skin was rough beneath her fingertips, a day's stubble darkening his jawline.

"The duke inherited my father's title. My eldest sister married the new Duke Ravensmere, and so we all hold the same name. "

"Ah, I see." He moved and winced, and Angelica reached for the blanket covering his leg.

"You were shot, my lord, by a highwayman, your driver says.

You were brought here, and we called the doctor.

He's removed the bullet and stitched up your wound, but you must try to keep still and help your leg heal.

It was quite a mess when we carried you upstairs.

" Her voice softened as she spoke, an odd protectiveness rising in her chest, as though she alone could keep this man from the clutches of death.

"I'm Lord Benedict Deverell. My brother is the Marquess of Whitmore. Could you please send word to him that I'm here and injured? He's expecting me and will be worried."

She ignored the fact that he'd not noticed she already knew who he was and simply agreed to his request. "Of course, Lord Benedict. I shall have a missive posted first thing tomorrow by express courier."

So he was indeed a lord...a marquess's younger brother, and a handsome one at that.

The confirmation stirred a flicker of interest deep within her—a spark she quickly tried to extinguish.

She could not start romanticizing the injured gentleman simply because up until meeting him she'd never been so close to a man in her life, not one who was not a relation.

"We were curious about your black cravat and shirt and thought that perhaps you were intended for the church."

He instinctively reached for his neck and felt the black cravat tied loosely there.

"I have not yet taken my orders, but I'm currently studying to do so.

As a second son, you understand, either the church or the army.

" His voice was hoarse, yet there was a note of weariness there, as if the weight of duty and expectation pressed upon him as surely as his wound.

She smiled, understanding perfectly what the second and third sons of titled gentlemen had to choose for professions.

Not that she, as a woman, had a choice. Her only one was to marry well to ensure the family was free of scandal and increased their connections within good society.

Her heart ached for the unfairness of it all—his choices confined to service, hers to matrimony.

They were both prisoners of birth, in their own ways.

Her father would not approve of her marrying a reverend or second son of anyone,

even a marquess. Thankfully, he was no longer around to tell any of them what to do, or whom to love.

"Are you hungry, Lord Benedict? I can have a plate of sandwiches brought up or a cup of tea. I know it's late, but it's no trouble, not if you're hungry. We know you must not have eaten in quite a few hours."

"No food, thank you," he said, his eyes drooping and showing signs that the laudanum was working. "I do not want to be any trouble, and as soon as my leg is healed, I shall get out of the duke's way."

"You're not in any way at all." Angelica settled his bedding about him and sat back on her chair. "Nothing of interest ever happens here, so your arrival is quite the boon. Even though we do, of course, wish it were under different circumstances."

"Of course," he said, his lips twisting into a small smile for the first time since his arrival.

For a moment, Angelica was rendered speechless by the two dimples that settled on his cheeks.

The dimples transformed his face entirely, softening the sharp planes of his jaw and making him appear almost boyish, despite the lines of pain around his eyes.

The man was deadly handsome when he smiled.

What a shame he was so determined to marry the church.

Again she chastised herself for her ungodly thoughts. But at two and twenty it was any wonder her mind had started to wonder what it would be like to be married, to have a husband, and what that relationship would involve.

Of course, she'd stolen down to her father's library a time or two and read as many books as she could on the matter, and it had only left her with more questions than answers.

Certainly, her married sisters were closed-lipped and had not enlightened her on the matter, but after seeing several sketches, she could not work out what a couple did when alone.

The images were all very confusing, even if they were intriguing.

A blush warmed her cheeks, and she shook her head, willing herself to banish such improper musings, especially before a man of God.

Whatever would the Almighty think of her?

"I think I shall sleep for a little while now. I'm finding it awfully hard to keep my eyes open, even if the view is quite pleasant."

Angelica could not stop her lips from twisting into a smile. Was the man trying to give her a compliment, or did he merely think the room was acceptable and comfortable for an invalid?

Angelica decided to believe it was the latter.

She'd never been a vain girl and wouldn't start to be one now. Instead, she sat there for several more minutes until his breathing evened out and she knew him to be asleep. She poured a fresh glass of water before standing and leaving Benedict to rest.

"Sister, I was just coming to check on our guest. How is he?" Rosalind asked as they met in the passageway and walked with her as she returned to her room. Her sister's figure had begun to show the soft swell of her first pregnancy, and Angelica could not

wait to meet her first niece or nephew.

"He seems a little better, although still in pain. I administered some more laudanum, and he's resting now. I do hope, however, that he doesn't start to show any signs of a fever. The doctor was worried most about this, I believe."

Her sister frowned and placed a comforting hand over her growing stomach. "Yes, that would place him in much danger. Was he able to confirm that he is, indeed, Lord Benedict Deverell as the driver stated?"

"Oh yes, of course. I almost forgot. He's the second son of the late Marquess Whitmore, Lord Benedict Deverell. He was heading to his brother's country estate when he was attacked. He asked if we could send word to his lordship, and I stated that we would."

"Of course, we shall send one post haste in the morning." Rosalind frowned. "I think we shall invite the marquess to stay while his brother is recuperating, and then he shall be able to take Lord Benedict home."

The thought of their guest leaving—though she could not truly call Lord Benedict a guest, more an invalid under house arrest, really—did leave her a little melancholy.

Not much happened in the country, certainly not at a ducal estate where everything was orderly and kept just as it should be under her brother-in-law's guidance.

"I must admit, having Lord Benedict arrive here has been exciting, if not scary for his lordship. It makes me eager to travel to town and have my Season. I so want my life to begin. I feel like I've been waiting an age to have my time."

"You'll have a splendid Season in town, my love, and with Evangeline stepping in as chaperone for you since I'm indisposed, it works perfectly.



In fact, I only received a letter from her today.

" Rosalind linked their arms as they walked back toward her room.

"And she has your suite ready at the London house and expects you in four weeks.

That is not long now to wait. Your time in London will be upon you before you know it. "

"And now that I'm busy looking after Lord Benedict, that time will pass even more quickly."

"Yes, but not that I think poor Lord Benedict wished to be a distraction for anyone, and certainly not shot by the highwayman, but he could have ended up in a far worse a location than the Ravensmere ducal estate."

"Yes, that is true. He could have ended in the ground in the churchyard he's so very fond of."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

### Chapter

### Four

The following two days, Lord Benedict slept, spoke very little, and unfortunately, on the third day, fell into a fever that lasted for over a week.

The doctor stayed, was given a bed in the servants' room beside Lord Benedict's own, and each of Angelica's sisters helped keep their injured guest as comfortable as possible.

He tossed and turned, groaned in pain, his leg swollen and hot, his forehead just as warm.

The scent of vinegar, alcohol, and sweat filled the air, sharp and cloying, as Angelica did her best to care for him.

But as much as they tried to help him, to keep him comfortable, all they could do was hope and pray the fever would break and he would soon be on the mend.

Angelica sat beside his bed, constantly wringing out the cloth to place over his forehead as the doctor dipped the bandages into alcohol and wrapped them about his leg, along with others to try to kill off the infection that had taken over his person.

Her fingers ached from hours of tending, and an aching knot had formed in her neck from sitting so long at his side.

The quiet desperation in the room, broken only by his moans, left a hollow pit in her stomach.

Finally, on the ninth day after Lord Benedict had arrived, his fever broke, and he lay still and calm, his breathing even, and the peaceful visage she'd seen during his earlier days at their estate sat upon his handsome features as he slept soundly.

A faint flush of color returned to his cheeks, and the tight line of his mouth softened in sleep.

"I think he will survive, Lady Angelica. The fever has broken, and now I must return home. My wife will be wondering if I've become part of the ducal household."

Angelica laughed at the doctor's words and stood as he collected his things. "Thank you, Dr. Montgomery. We shall send for you if he regresses."

"I do not think he will now, my lady. He's past the dangerous part. His wound is healing, even though a fever wracked his body. I do think he's well on the way to being back to his normal, healthy self."

"Thank you again." Relief poured through her that she would not have to inform Lord Benedict's brother, who was on his way now to their estate, of his sibling's death.

A great relief indeed. Angelica slumped onto her chair after the doctor left, her heart back to beating its normal rhythm.

Her eyes prickled with unshed tears, and she rubbed her neck, trying to relieve the tension of the past week.

She had never seen a man pass away, and nor did she want the first to be an innocent gentleman who did not deserve the attack that was handed to him. She rang for a

servant, knowing the room needed a good clean after days of nursing.

"You called, my lady?" a young maid asked from the door only minutes later.

"Yes, please have the linens changed in this room, and as it's a nice day outside, we shall open the windows in here and have the room aired out. Also, have Cook make up some broth and a cup of tea for me. I think when Lord Benedict wakes, he'll be hungry."

"Of course, my lady." The young maid dipped into a curtsy and left to do as Angelica bid.

For several minutes, the staff bustled about the room, cleaning and doing as she bade, before Lord Benedict's luncheon was brought up on a tray, the smell of chicken broth making even Angelica's stomach rumble.

The scent of herbs—parsley, thyme, and bay leaf—drifted from the steaming bowl, mingling with the faint scent of soap and lemon oil from the freshly scrubbed floor.

It seemed to also awaken his lordship, for his eyes fluttered before his gaze landed on hers with more clarity than she'd ever seen in him in the week that he'd been here.

"I truly think you are an angel, my lady. Never have I ever been so looked after than I have been these past days. I do not know how I'll ever thank you enough."

"There is no need to thank any of us, my lord. We're happy to have helped you, and we're so glad you survived your assault. You were quite unwell for some time. Even the doctor, I believe, was worried you may not be strong enough to pull through."

He stared at her for several moments, clearly trying to grapple with the fact he was very ill.

His brow furrowed slightly, as if the weight of her words and the gravity of his situation were only now sinking in.

Perhaps he'd been unaware of just how close he came to parting this world, and her words had shocked him.

"I'm glad that did not happen." He paused. "Has there been any word from my brother?"

"Oh yes, there is a letter beside your bed that arrived only yesterday from Lord Whitmore, and another was sent to the duke. We expect he'll arrive in a week or so. We thought it was in Wiltshire where you were headed and so we sent the missive there before it was redirected to Derbyshire."

"The main estate is in Derbyshire, but I was traveling to another of the family properties. I had commitments there, and much to think upon and wanted some time alone."

His curious answer made Angelica want to pry more, but she thought better of it. "Well, if you continue to get better, let us hope that in a few weeks you shall be back in Wiltshire where you shall have all the time in the world to think."

He reached out and clasped Angelica's hand. His fingers were warm, his skin a little calloused, which went against what she assumed a man of the cloth who gave weekly sermons ought to have.

His grip was firm yet gentle, his thumb brushing over her knuckles as if grounding himself with the contact. The simple touch sent a ripple of heat up her arm, and she quickly tried to ignore it.

Did he work outdoors whenever the time allowed? Perhaps he was a keen gardener?

Or did his faith call him to labor as well as prayer? She had not thought much about the lives of men destined for the church, but now, with him before her, she wondered.

"What is your name?" he asked, not letting go of her hand, even though it was highly improper. Mayhap the gentleman still had a fever.

"Lady Angelica, my lord."

His eyes widened, and that infectious, sweet smile was back again and made her stomach flip. "So you are an angel sent from heaven, even your name says it is so."

She laughed, having never thought of that before, but she shrugged, supposing it was true in a way.

"I only acted as any good Samaritan would for an injured fellow countryman.

But alas, we have not been able to find the highwayman.

No doubt the fiend is many miles from here by now. Fled, like the coward he was."

"I should imagine so," Lord Benedict agreed. "And I cannot say that I'm not sad about that fact, if it were to be true. I would not want any harm to come to anyone else, and certainly not for any young families or ladies returning to their homes in the area. That would trouble me most dearly."

"Yes, let us hope that he has learned from his mistake of shooting another person and will amend his actions in future."

"You can only pray that he will."

The word "pray" hung in the air between them, a subtle reminder of his path, his

calling...and the life he might still choose.

Lord Benedict wiggled to sit up against the bedhead, and Angelica reached for the tray that his broth sat upon along with his steaming cup of tea.

"I had Cook prepare this for you. The broth should be cool enough now for you to eat."

"Thank you. I'm ravenous. This could not have been more welcome."

She set the tray upon his lap before sitting back on her chair.

For several minutes, she watched him eat.

Like any gentleman, his etiquette was perfect, just as she had been taught while growing up.

As he ate, he reached for the letter from his brother, and breaking the seal, started to read.

He set it down, a small frown between his brows, before he picked up his cup of tea and sipped.

"My brother, it would seem" he said at length, "is going to arrive tomorrow, if this letter remains correct. Are you certain that the duke does not mind having all these people come upon him when unannounced and unexpected? I know this is not the quietest time in the year, certainly not if you're preparing for a Season in London. "

"I am indeed going to town in a few weeks, but His Grace is perfectly happy to have you here, and he was adamant that we write for your brother, even if you had not asked to bring him here. I know when I'm unwell, all I wish for is family about me,

and I should think it is no different for you."

"Indeed, although my brother will probably try to get me on my feet far earlier than is warranted. He too is heading to London this year for the Season. I was going, as you know, to his Wiltshire estate, but I should imagine now that I'm recuperating, he'll ask me to return with him in town.

Not the worst thing to happen, mind. There are good doctors at least in London should anything go wrong with my wound. "

"That is true, my lord."

She remembered the terrible bleeding and how close he was to death. The memory sent a chill through her, and she clasped her hands tightly in her lap.

"But until our doctor states that you can attempt to move, please do not try. Your wound bled terribly when you first arrived, and for some time, we did not think we were going to be able to stop it. You were very close to death, not that I wish to scare you, but that is the truth."

"I figured as much, and I cannot thank you enough for your care." He threw her a small smile, and once again her stomach fluttered. His eyes held a warmth that tugged at something deep within her, and she wondered—should a man of the church smile at a woman so?

Gosh, for a man who was to be a priest, he was devilishly handsome, and there was something about the wicked curve of his lips that made Angelica think of things no young lady ought.

She should repent her wicked thoughts, and yet she could not.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

### Chapter

### Five

Benedict woke later that night, the low crackle of the fire and the scent of burning wax drawing him from a restless sleep. The room was quiet but for the soft rustle of fabric, and his gaze shifted toward the hearth.

Lady Angelica had fallen asleep in a chair beside the fire, the book she'd been reading now slipping from her lap. Her head lolled to the side, dark hair tumbling in loose waves across her shoulder, the diamond ear bobs catching the firelight and glittering like stars.

She looked utterly at peace, the delicate curve of her throat, the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the soft glow of her skin in the candlelight. Benedict sighed, unable to tear his gaze from her.

What a lovely, kind soul she was. She had nursed him through the worst of his injury, and he knew, by the grace of God he knew, that he owed her his life.

Her quick actions upon his arrival at the ducal estate had no doubt saved him, and the debt he owed her was one he would carry for the rest of his days.

He watched her far longer than he ought, a man who had been contemplating a life without such earthly entanglements.

The vows he had considered—celibacy, poverty, obedience to the church—would

make a woman like Lady Angelica forever beyond his reach.

A wife, children, the comfort of a family, all of it would be forbidden to him.

A woman like Lady Angelica was forbidden to him...

Benedict swallowed hard, the weight of that truth settling in his chest. His fingers itched to brush the stray curl from her cheek, to feel the softness of her skin beneath his touch.

Desire of the flesh was for weaker men. Men who strayed from their higher calling, and he was not one of those. He must not be.

He pushed the conflicting thoughts aside with effort, drawing in a slow breath. There was much to think upon, and his time at his brother's country estate had been meant for just that after his obligations at the local parish had been settled. Yet now, with his injury, he would never arrive there.

His brother would insist on London instead.

He knew Whitmore well enough to know he would be dragged to the city, not to take part in the Season, but to recover under his brother's watchful eye and ensure his healing was complete.

And with the marquess's resources, that healing would come at no small expense.

Benedict shifted the blankets off his leg and inspected the wound, as much as he could with the wrappings in place. The doctor had changed the dressings earlier, but he needed to see for himself.

The skin, where it peeked through, looked pink and alive, the swelling less than it had

been.

His foot was warm, the toes pink, not cold or discolored.

A good sign. The blood flowed still, the limb intact.

He had been so close to death. A matter of inches, of fate's fickle hand and he may not be here.

A soft mumble broke the quiet, and his gaze snapped to Angelica. She shifted in her chair, her head tilting, exposing the slender column of her throat. The firelight caressed the delicate line of her jaw, the gentle curve where neck met shoulder.

Benedict swallowed. He ought not to look.

His brother's voice echoed in his mind— A priest? You, a man of God? No wine, no women, no worldly pleasures...

Desires of the flesh were for men who had not yet chosen their path. And Benedict had chosen. Hadn't he?

Blast. He hadn't counted on this. On meeting an angel on earth.

The sound of footsteps approached, and Benedict turned his head toward the door just as it opened.

Cold air swept in, and the sight of his brother, the Marquess of Whitmore filled the space.

Commanding as always and looking more suited to the windswept moors than the ballrooms of London.

Whitmore's greatcoat flared behind him, boots thudding across the floor.

Relief, unspoken but palpable, settled in Benedict's chest.

"You're alive. Thank God for that."

Benedict's lips twitched at the exclamation. "Do not take the Lord's name in vain, Hartley." His voice was rough, his throat dry, but the words came steady.

Whitmore bent and clasped him in a quick, firm hug. "I'm glad you're well. You look much better than the duke noted in his letter. I thought I'd find you feverish and half-dead."

Benedict shook his head, the ghost of a smile flickering across his brother's lips. "No, I'm on the mend, I'm sure of it. The doctor was happy with my progress today."

"That's good to hear. For how else is the family name to continue if you do not sire an heir?"

Benedict stiffened, the familiar refrain grating against his already frayed composure. His brother, the marquess, had no interest in marriage or family, leaving the burden to Benedict as though it were his duty to provide what Whitmore refused to.

But if Benedict took holy orders, if he joined the church, that future would be impossible. No wife, no heir, no family of his own.

"Whitmore, we've had this conversation before, and I'm not up for another disagreement about who will be siring an heir. You know what I'm thinking of doing. You said you would be supportive, whatever choice I made."

Whitmore dragged a chair over to the side of the bed, the legs scraping faintly on the

floorboards.

“I did say that,” he allowed, settling in with a shrug, “but that was before I secured Kitty Lane, only London’s most favored courtesan.

She’s delicious, Benedict,” he whispered, grinning wickedly.

“Sweet—so, so sweet. And I don’t mean her character, if you catch my meaning. ” His brother winked.

Benedict closed his eyes briefly, a groan rumbling low in his chest. His brother would never change. “You can still marry and sire a child, even if you have a mistress,” he muttered, the words tasting bitter in his mouth.

“True,” Whitmore said, glancing lazily about the room. His gaze snagged on Angelica, still asleep by the fire. “Well, well, well. Who is this precious morsel sleeping nearby?”

Benedict tensed.

Whitmore’s eyes flared with interest, a gleam in them that made Benedict’s stomach knot. “She’s a beauty, and I don’t even need to see her fully to know that.”

“She’s the late Duke of Ravensmere’s daughter, Lady Angelica.” Benedict’s tone sharpened. “Her elder sister married the new Duke of Ravensmere, and so they all share the same name.” Why he added those details, he couldn’t say, but the possessive note in his voice was unmistakable.

Whitmore leaned back, eyes still fixed on the young woman.

A chill prickled down Benedict’s spine, a flash of something dark and protective rose

within him. “Do not even think about touching one hair on her precious head. She saved my life and has been caring for me. You shall not lure her into your seedy type of life. I forbid it.”

Whitmore arched a brow, turning back to him with an amused smirk. “You? Forbid your elder brother?”

Benedict’s gaze was steady, his voice cold steel. “I shall do exactly that. You’re not to touch her or any of her sisters.”

Whitmore’s eyes lit with curiosity. “She has sisters?”

Dear Lord, spare him from his brother’s whoring. “Yes, and none of them are suitable for you. The eldest two are married—at least, from what I’ve overheard while lying here infirm—and the others are younger, not yet out in society. So stop being a rake.”

Whitmore’s grin spread slow and wicked. “But I like being a rake.”

Didn’t Benedict know it.

For years, he’d been the one to clean up his brother’s messes—dragging him from one house of ill repute—half-naked and drunk—to another when he refused to return home.

It was one of the reasons Benedict longed for the quiet calm of the church—to remove himself from the burden of chasing after Whitmore’s disasters.

At least if he took orders, if he became a priest, he could leave this world of scandal behind.

Unfortunately, Lady Angelica stirred, her eyes fluttering open, blinking in confusion.

She sat up, startled by the sight of the marquess grinning at her like a wolf spotting prey.

“Good evening, Lady Angelica,” Whitmore purred. “My brother introduced us, but you were asleep when it occurred.”

Benedict groaned, a deep, weary sound, and glared at his brother.

“Lady Angelica, may I present to you my eldest brother, the Marquess of Whitmore.”

She stood, dipping into a curtsy so deep it could have been offered to the king himself. “Lord Whitmore, it is a pleasure to meet you. I’m glad you’ve arrived safely, and I hope you find your brother in much better spirits than he was only days ago.”

“Yes, indeed,” Whitmore said, standing and bowing gallantly.

He moved toward her, taking her hand and pressing a lingering kiss to her fingers. Her ungloved fingers... Benedict’s jaw tensed.

“He’s in very good spirits and seems to be healing well. No doubt because of these marvelous healing hands I now hold,” Whitmore said, dipping his head once more, brushing another kiss over her knuckles.

Benedict’s patience snapped.

“Whitmore.” The single word, sharp as a blade, cut through the moment, but Whitmore only smirked and settled back in his chair with a look of innocent mischief.

“What?” he asked, all wide-eyed charm.

Benedict glared at him, a silent, seething promise that he would not let Whitmore ruin

the one good thing that had come from this misfortune—Lady Angelica, who deserved far better than a rake like his brother.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

Chapter

Six

Angelica took back her hand and smiled at Lord Whitmore.

A handsome man to be sure, but one whom she knew already wasn't one to be trusted.

Not when it came to matters of the heart.

In the few minutes she'd come to know him, she already recognized the signs of a flirtatious, smooth-tongued man who could easily charm a lady into believing whatever flowed from his handsome mouth.

Even so, she liked him instantly, in that curious, distant way one might admire a dashing character from a novel.

His easy manner and humor left her wary, though not wholly repelled.

And if Lord Benedict had summoned him here, surely there was no animosity between the brothers.

She would welcome him politely, if not keep him firmly at arm's length.

"I apologize for not hearing you arrive, Lord Whitmore. You found me asleep, and I'm sorry for that. Very unladylike of me."

He grinned, and there was something behind that smile, a wicked glint that told her he wasn't thinking anything innocent about her words. Quite the opposite, in fact. Heat crept up her face, and she averted her gaze, unsure where to look.

What an enigma these two brothers were...

"You're forgiven, Lady Angelica. I arrived late and asked the footman not to pull anyone from their beds. I thank you for looking after my brother so well. I'm happy to have found him still breathing."

Lord Benedict shook his head, a long-suffering look on his face, and Angelica couldn't help but laugh softly at the marquess's words. The man was terribly amusing, if not a little crass and forward with his language.

"As are we, my lord. I will not sugarcoat it and tell you that Lord Benedict has not been very unwell, but we're glad he's on the mend.

"She paused, moving to the other side of the bed, smoothing the blanket as she did out of habit.

Her fingers lingered near Benedict's wrist, and she noticed a faint tremble there—a subtle reminder of how fragile life could be.

"I understand from Lord Benedict that when he's recovered enough, you shall be returning to London to take part in the Season. I too will be there this year, and I'm very much looking forward to it."

"Hmm, are you now," he said, leaning back into his chair with an ease that suggested he owned the very air in the room. "Then I will be sure to see you and will command a dance, of course. If you're willing to take a turn about the floor with me."

“Of course. I shall like that very much.”

Angelica glanced at Lord Benedict, whose gaze had sharpened, his mouth tightening ever so slightly as he regarded his brother. A shiver of unease prickled along her spine, and she wondered if she’d spoken out of turn.

“And you, Lord Benedict, I hope that should you be in town, and if you do take any time to enter society, that I shall have a dance with you also. It would be nice to enjoy a waltz after all that you’ve suffered.”

He turned his head slowly, a small, soft smile spreading across his lips. “Should I attend any events and you’re also a guest, it would be my honor to dance with the lady to whom I owe so much. I shall enjoy that most ardently.”

The warmth in his eyes—a quiet, steady light—made her chest tighten in an odd, unfamiliar way.

Lord Whitmore snorted and coughed to cover the sound, but still, Angelica wondered why he found such an exchange amusing.

“Then it’s settled,” she said, smoothing her gown unnecessarily, suddenly conscious of the low neckline of her evening dress.

“We shall all rejoin in town and have our dances as promised.”

“A ménage à trois.” Lord Whitmore laughed, a wicked gleam in his eye. “How fun.”

From head to toe, heat flooded Angelica’s skin, and for several moments, she could not decide what she should do. She wasn’t a woman of the world, sheltered came to mind when she thought of her own character, but even she knew what Lord Whitmore’s words meant.

“Whitmore, remember yourself and apologize to Lady Angelica. Truly, man,” Lord Benedict chided, his voice sharper than she’d heard it before.

Yet Lord Whitmore only chuckled and shrugged. “Apologies, I’m only teasing. You must understand, Lady Angelica, that I do tend to overstep the bounds of society and mock more than I ought. I hope I have not given offense.”

A sharp pang of discomfort twisted in her chest. Of course, he had given offense, and yet she forced a polite smile.

“Well, I shall bid you both good night. Do ring the bell if you require anything from the staff. They will attend you at once.” She moved toward the door, her pulse racing.

She paused at the threshold, offering a small, formal nod.

“There is a room prepared directly across the hall for you, my lord, should you wish to sleep. I shall bid you both good night and see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Lady Angelica,” they said in unison, the contrast in their voices, one warm and steady, the other light and teasing curling through her mind.

She left the room at a pace far quicker than decorum allowed, eager to be free of the unsettling conversation. The heat in her cheeks lingered, and a strange, breathless sensation pulsed through her chest. She wasn’t entirely sure she understood what had just transpired.

Both men—no matter their intentions—were far more worldly than she. The hidden meanings behind their words left her feeling a little foolish, as though she were a child overhearing an adult conversation she was not meant to comprehend.

Especially Lord Whitmore’s words...

As she approached her room, she almost jumped out of her skin when Isabella appeared in the doorway, arms crossed, foot tapping on the worn Aubusson runner.

“Who was that who arrived? He seemed very worldly and tall, not to mention as handsome as the other chap who managed to get himself shot.”

Angelica marveled at how similar two siblings could be, even when of opposite sex. Lord Whitmore and Isabella could give each other a good set down with their tongues, sharp and direct their only language.

“That is Lord Benedict’s elder brother, Lord Whitmore. He’s come to stay and, when Lord Benedict is well enough, escort him back to London to recuperate further.” Angelica moved into her room, tugging at the pins in her hair.

Isabella followed on her heels, perching on the bed.

“I wish I could come to London this year. I hate that I have to wait until you’re married before I have my coming out.

It’ll be dreadfully boring here, with nothing to do but watch Rosalind and the duke make googly eyes at each other all the months you’ll be away. ”

“There will be a baby soon. At least you’ll be here for that. I’ll miss it, unfortunately, trying to find a husband so I can make a family of my own.”

Isabella flopped onto the bed, staring at the ornate ceiling. “I shall miss you when you’re away. Even though I’m looking forward to the baby, I wish I could be with you. I’ll be an old maid by the time my Season comes around.”

“You’re not anywhere near an old maid. And anyway, we’re all extremely lucky that we’re daughters of a duke. No matter how bad our father was, at least we’ll never be

terribly unattractive to the opposite sex, no matter how old we are.”

“That is true, I suppose.” Isabella sat up, grinning. “What do you think of Lord Benedict now that he’s not unconscious? I thought him handsome. What is it that I hear he’s to become a priest?”

“Yes,” Angelica sighed. “A Catholic one, presumably, which means he’ll not marry.” And certainly not her, even though shamefully the thought had flittered through her mind a time or two while caring for him.

“How boring his life shall be. But surely, to make such a choice would not be easy. Not when he’s as handsome as he is.”

“I do not think being handsome or not has any bearing on whether a man wishes to become a Catholic priest, Isabella.” Angelica fought not to laugh, but failed.

“Well, I’m sorry for all the ladies who shall have one less handsome and kind man to choose from to marry. From what Evangeline wrote to us last year, good gentlemen are hard to find.”

“Do I need to remind you that she married after her initial wobble entering the London Season, and no doubt so will I—and so will you and all our sisters. The trick is to marry a man who is kind, one whom you love, and, with any hope, one who loves you in return.”

Isabella wagged her brows mischievously. “Do you think Lord Whitmore will ever love a woman? I could hear him speaking when you were in the room with them, and he seems quite the oddity, if not a little naughty.”

“I think naughty is his middle name...” Not that Angelica didn’t think him nice and handsome too, but when she looked at the marquess, she felt nothing more than polite

curiosity.

Whereas with Lord Benedict... Well, with the younger brother, something else entirely stirred within her, a fluttering, a heat she didn't understand and wasn't sure she wanted to.

Especially since he had no intention of finding a wife.

Her feelings, whatever they were, would be a waste of effort and could only injure her heart if she let them grow.

"Perhaps I ought to invite Lord Whitmore for a ride about the estate tomorrow. Do you think he'd like that?" Isabella asked.

"Take a maid and a stablehand. I don't know if I trust his lordship around anyone in a skirt."

"You tease. He wouldn't dare do anything scandalous."

Angelica raised a brow. "I'm certain Lord Benedict would not, but Lord Whitmore? I wouldn't wager on that—not one penny."

### Chapter

### Seven

The following day, and with the help of his brother, Benedict managed to bathe and dress in clothing that was fresh and clean before joining the family for dinner downstairs. Although he'd slept the majority of the afternoon after his exertions, he felt strong enough to join them.

The press of crisp linen against his skin was oddly comforting, though the bandage beneath his breeches itched with every step. His leg throbbed in a dull, persistent beat, but the ache was manageable, far preferable to the searing pain of the bullet wound.

"Are you certain, Lord Benedict? We do not wish you to injure yourself further and put your healing back," the sweet Lady Angelica said, her voice low and soothing as she walked slowly beside him and Whitmore, who supported most of his weight.

"I feel up to joining everyone. If I did not, I would not attend, I assure you." He threw her a reassuring smile, and he hoped she would stop fussing over him.

It was dangerous how easily he could grow used to such kindness, such tender care. Perilous, too, how the warmth in her eyes stirred a longing he had thought long denied him. He could not allow it. The path he had chosen, or thought he had chosen, demanded sacrifice.

If only he had managed to arrive at his brother's county estate, he could have sat in



quiet contemplation, read Scripture, prayed for guidance, and dwelled upon the life he was preparing to enter and the one he would be forced to leave behind.

But he had not.

Instead, he had been thrown into the warmth of this family, this home filled with women and light and laughter, and now he was as muddled as he had been when the fever raged through his body.

After what seemed like hours, he stepped onto the ground floor landing of the magnificent ducal estate. His leg ached fiercely, a throb that matched the pulse in his temple, yet it also felt good to be upright, to move under his own power.

His healing was progressing, the wound pink and healthy, the doctor cautiously optimistic. Still, there was no denying the gnawing fatigue in his limbs, the weakness that reminded him he was far from whole.

The family had done so much for him. He owed them this dinner, even if it left him aching and exhausted by night's end.

“Very well,” Lady Angelica acquiesced, her lips curving into a gentle smile. “But if you feel at any moment that you need to return to your room and rest, please let us know. We shall not be offended.”

Benedict's heart twisted. She was too good. Far too good for this world, and certainly too good for a man who would belong to the church.

Unless you choose a different path...

“How sweet you are,” Whitmore said, his eyes glinting with a wicked teasing that made Benedict's teeth clench. “Like a dessert one cannot get enough of.”

“Hartley,” Benedict muttered, shooting his brother a warning glance. What was Whitmore thinking, teasing his angel. No, not his. Never his. The word burned in his mind.

He stumbled slightly, pausing mid-step, and stared ahead. The thought of Angelica as his was dangerous. A temptation that pulled at him with alarming force.

She was not his angel. Yes, she had been an angel in her care, her kindness, but she belonged to no one. She would soon go to London, enter society, and marry a man who could give her a family, a home, a life of love. That was what she deserved.

“I’m teasing,” Whitmore whispered, with a wink that made Benedict’s fists clench.

“Are you well, Lord Benedict?” Lady Angelica’s hand rested lightly on his sleeve, her touch featherlight yet scalding through the fabric. Her eyes, wide and filled with concern, locked with his.

The scent of lavender clung to her skin, subtle and clean, and for a moment, it mixed with the warmth of her gaze and nearly undid him.

“Does your leg pain you? Do you need to return upstairs?”

“No, all is well.” The lie tasted bitter. He forced a smile and resumed his slow steps toward the dining room. “Just pausing, so as not to injure myself before my delightful dinner with you all.”

The dining room was set as one would expect in a ducal household—the scent of beeswax polish lingering in the air, candles flickering in heavy silver sconces, their flames reflected in the polished mahogany table.

Flowers arranged in elegant sprays lined the center of the table, and fine ceramic

dishware with delicate floral patterns gleamed beneath the light.

Benedict settled into his chair with a wince as the motion pulled at the scarred muscle of his thigh. The pain was sharp, but manageable—a constant companion now.

The family conversed easily, voices overlapping, laughter bubbling here and there, the sounds of a home at peace. He glanced up and found Lady Angelica's gaze resting on him, a softness in her eyes that made his breath catch.

"I'm so glad you're on the mend, Lord Benedict. I do hope you enjoy this evening's dinner. Your brother, Lord Whitmore, told me your favorite was braised turkey, so that is the second course, followed by rolled jam pudding for dessert."

Benedict nodded, warmth curling in his chest—an emotion both welcome and unwelcome. She was too good, too pure, too...dangerous to a man in his position.

Indeed, his brother had been right to call her sweet enough to be a treat at dinner.

She was too good for London's vipers. He had seen the way the ton could strip a woman of her joy, their gossip and cruelty like wolves tearing at flesh. He did not want that for her.

But with the duke and duchess at her back, she would be protected, he told himself, though a part of him wanted to stand as her shield. Wanted it far too much.

"Thank you. That sounds wonderful. You're all spoiling me, and I shall never wish to leave, I think."

Her smile was radiant, and Benedict's breath caught in his chest. He stared, unabashedly so, before Whitmore cleared his throat, and Benedict forced his gaze away, heat prickling along his neck.

Damn.

“I think in a week or so my brother shall be well enough to travel to London. When is it that you intend to leave, Lady Angelica? I understand you’re to have a Season this year?”

Whitmore’s reasonable question caught Benedict off-guard, though he was grateful his brother was behaving himself, at least for the moment, and especially before the duke and duchess.

“We leave in just over two weeks. I hope that we can visit you when we’re in town. I’ll be staying with my second-eldest sister, Lady St. George.”

“Ah, yes, I think I read about St. George’s marriage. The earl is a good man.”

“He is indeed,” the duke added, lifting his glass. “A shame they could not come and stay after Christmas and return to town in the spring, but they are newlyweds...”

Whitmore chuckled, and Benedict smiled faintly, though the tightness in his chest did not ease.

“No need to elaborate, I think we all understand perfectly,” his brother said.

Benedict met Lady Angelica’s gaze, and the faintest blush touched her cheeks. Something flickered between them, a shared understanding, or perhaps just the weight of the unspoken emotions that seemed thick and present whenever they were around each other.

Heat licked along Benedict’s spine. A sensation that had never before stirred in him with such force. He was not a man given to fancies, yet...

What was happening to him? Since the injury, since her care, everything had shifted. He had been so certain, so sure of his path, yet now, the road ahead seemed clouded.

His decision to enter the church, once so clear, now felt like a noose tightening around his throat. Could he truly give up all he had worked for? Could he give up her ?

Or was he foolishly imagining what did not exist, reading into a kindness that was nothing more than gentle compassion?

Dinner progressed well and conversation flowed easily.

The julienne soup, the braised turkey with seasonal vegetables, and a dessert so sweet it seemed a sin to eat.

By the time the ladies left and the men took to enjoying their glasses of port, Benedict felt the weight of the evening drag at him, exhaustion seeping into his bones.

“I do apologize, but I think I’m in need of my bed. Thank you so very much, Your Grace, for the wonderful dinner. Please thank the duchess for me.”

“Of course, it was our pleasure.”

Whitmore rose, but Benedict waved him off. “I shall ask a footman or two to assist me. You stay here and enjoy your port.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course.” A footman approached, and with his help, Benedict made his slow way upstairs. By the time he sat on the edge of his bed, exhaustion felt like a physical weight dragging him down. The act of undressing loomed before him, a hurdle that

seemed impossible to clear.

He tugged at his cravat, loosening the knot with fingers that shook. His coat and waistcoat followed, tossed over the chair in a heap. But the shirt, its linen damp against his skin, his breeches, tight against the bandaged wound, remained.

He stared at them, debating whether to sleep in them, but the thought of the tightness over his wound, the slow, creeping ache already building made the decision for him.

A knock sounded at the door, a gentle rap.

“Enter,” he rasped, the word almost a plea.

The soft, familiar voice of Lady Angelica drifted into the room, warm as a balm.  
“Lord Benedict?”

He turned toward her, his shoulders sagging.

“Help me, please?” The words left him unguarded, raw, the admission more intimate than he’d meant it to be. He was desperate for sleep, desperate for something else he dared not name.

She did not hesitate, the angel that she was.

### Chapter

### Eight

Angelica walked into Lord Benedict's room and found him in a state of undress, but also exhausted. The poor man looked wretched, tired, and disheveled after the three-course meal they'd just enjoyed downstairs.

She stopped herself from announcing that she thought him joining the family had been too soon, that he would only make himself tired and possibly make himself unwell if he joined them, and from looking at him now, she was correct.

From the paleness of his skin, the dark circles beneath his eyes, and the slow, labored rise and fall of his chest, she was certain she was not wrong.

"How can I help, my lord?" She came and stood before him, and he looked up at her like a man who had lost his way—a flicker of shame and fatigue filled his eyes that tugged unexpectedly at her heart.

"I should not have asked, my lady. To help me would not be proper, but maybe you could ring for my brother to join me."

"I do believe Lord Whitmore is with the duke still, my lord, and from the laughter I can hear from downstairs, he's now joined the ladies in the parlor." Her voice sounded too breathy, too soft, and she hoped he hadn't noticed. Instead, she knelt before him, smoothing her skirts beneath her.

“Come, I’ve been helping you almost the past two weeks, and I shall not have any talk or embarrassment should you need me to help you dress for sleep.

You are injured, sir. You’ve been shot, if I do not need to remind you.

I do not think I’m in any way in danger of you stepping outside the bounds of propriety and causing a scandal. ”

His lordship’s eyes settled on hers, and the flicker of heat in his gaze, quickly masked, sent an odd thrill through her. Angelica squashed the sensation as soon as it rose within her, reminding herself he was meant for the church and wasn’t an eligible gentleman for marriage.

In truth, the man ought to be more concerned that she would do something improper, not the other way around. There was something about his lordship that she liked very much, and she feared that even if she enjoyed her Season, her mind would forever think back on this time at home.

“Of course, no, my lady. I would never.”

A shame ... She stifled a sigh and busied herself instead in preparing him for bed. “Undo your falls, and I shall help pull off your boots and silk breeches before anyone knows I was in here. If you hurry, I shall be able to have you in bed and myself out of this room before anyone’s the wiser.”

“I cannot. Lady Angelica, that would be improper.”

She shrugged, ignoring the tremor of anticipation that coursed through her veins.

“Do I need to remind you, my lord, that I’ve seen you in such a state of undress for some days now?



I cut off the breeches you were wearing the day you were shot.

You will not shock me, I assure you. I will not swoon if that is your fear. ”

“That is not my fear...” He bit his bottom lip—a quick, almost boyish gesture that sent a warm flush spreading over her cheeks —and then, thankfully, reached for his falls and pulled the buttons free.

She pulled his boots off, before he wiggled on the bed, pushing the breeches down his hips before Angelica grabbed the hems, careful not to brush against him more than necessary, and pulled them free of his legs.

Before he could move away and hide under the blankets, she checked his bandages and was pleased to see the wound did not seem to be bleeding. The smell of linen, faintly tinged with the sharp tang of salves, rose between them.

“All looks satisfactory here. The doctor is to call tomorrow, but I do not think he’ll be displeased with your recovery.”

“No, I believe you will be right.” He sat on the bed in only his long shirt and Angelica fought not to think of his nakedness beneath. How very close she was to his anatomy...

“Do you wish to change into your nightshirt? It’s right here on the chair.” She stood, smoothing her hands over her skirts, and collected the garment, her fingers brushing over the soft lawn fabric.

He shifted his bedding over his lap and then lifted his shirt from his body, throwing it aside.

Angelica stilled at the sight of his sun-kissed, muscular chest. Her pulse kicked up a

beat and a sweet flutter settled low in her belly.

Of course she'd seen him without a shirt on days before, but he'd been listless, and her mind had not been distracted as it was now.

He was broad, defined, with a faint dusting of hair that glinted in the lamplight. She had thought men of the cloth would be pale and bookish, but this man—this man was strength and sinew, warmth and heat.

She rallied her self-control and her wayward mind, clamping down on the dangerous longing that threatened to undo her, and helped him slip the nightshirt over his head. Her fingers grazed the hard curve of his biceps—his skin warm and firm beneath her touch—and her breath caught.

What was happening to her? Why did he make her feel all sixes and sevens, as if she could not catch her breath—and nor did she wish to. The feeling was new and wonderful, and she wanted nothing but to bask in it for a few moments longer.

“Thank you, Lady Angelica. I do not know what I would do without you.”

With his shirt now on, he reached for her hand, his fingers warm and strong, and brought her fingertips to his lips, pressing a soft kiss there.

Angelica cleared her throat, her breath catching, and fought not to gape at the sight of his lips brushing her skin. The warmth of his touch, the intimacy of the moment, made her heart gallop.

Dear heavens, had God sent him to her in some form of test? Had she misbehaved at some point in her short life, and he was here to see if she passed some virtue questioning?

“It is no trouble,” she murmured, though her voice sounded strange to her ears—low, breathy, and a little hoarse.

Lord Benedict shifted, attempting to slide up the bed to lean against the bedhead, but a sharp wince and the paling of his face had Angelica reaching for him without thought.

“Let me help you.” She slipped her arms beneath his and, with his assistance, they managed to get him upright. His breath, warm and shallow fluttered against her cheek, sending a shiver down her spine.

She pulled back, her hands still on his arms, and their faces were but a breath apart. His gaze—green, so green, the color of the hills in spring—dipped to her lips, and his grip on her arms tightened.

For several heartbeats, loud ringing sounded in her ears, and she could not move.

Was he debating kissing her? Would she let him kiss her should he try?

Oh yes, I would let this handsome, sweet man do more than kiss me...

The thought burst unbidden in her mind, and her breath caught, a soft gasp escaping her lips. Lord Benedict seemed to stiffen, as though the thought had leapt from her mind into his own, for he pulled back, a flush staining his cheeks.

Angelica stood quickly and stumbled a little at her hastiness. With the distance between them now proper, she met his eyes with some semblance of calm.

“You should return downstairs, my lady. You have helped me more than you should have already, and it sounds like there is much gaiety still to be had.”

“Of course,” she said, though her voice trembled, and she did not argue. She fled the room as if the devil himself were nipping at her heels, her skirts tangling around her ankles as she all but ran down the stairs.

By the time she entered the drawing room, she had managed to compose herself—or so she hoped. She found Isabella lounging on a settee, her chin propped on her hand, eyes fixed on Lord Whitmore with a contemplative look that spoke of trouble brewing.

“Tell me something to distract me,” Angelica blurted, dropping onto the seat beside her sister and trying not to fidget, though the memory of Lord Benedict’s lips on her fingers—and the forbidden ache it had stirred—lingered in her bones.

The man was destined for the church, and she had almost leaned in and kissed him.

She was certainly destined for the fires of hell for even thinking about kissing the man. Not only was she unmarried, but he intended never to be so.

Oh dear. Oh dear!

“Lord Whitmore is a flirt. I like him,” her sister said, her eyes narrowing slightly as she watched the marquess.

Angelica’s gaze slid to him, and her heart gave a quick, traitorous flutter when he reminded her of another upstairs. “Yes, he is, but I do think he’s kind and not mean-spirited.”

“Except he’ll break some lady’s heart.” Isabella’s tone sharpened. “Unless someone breaks his heart first.”

Angelica nodded, silently agreeing. “Do you like the marquess?”

Isabella turned toward her, tilting her head, her expression keen. “No more than any other woman who enjoys gazing upon a handsome man... But what is wrong with you, more like? You’re positively ashen.”

“I am?” Angelica instinctively reached for her cheeks, as if her palms could smooth away the flush—or the guilt. “Well,” she whispered, her voice tight but she needed to confide in someone. “I suppose I am a little, because just before I came down...well... I almost kissed Lord Benedict.”

“What!” Isabella’s outburst cracked like a pistol shot into the room, and the conversation about them faltered.

Angelica smiled weakly, waving her hand in a futile attempt to deflect attention, and thankfully, after a few curious glances, conversation resumed.

“Shh, Isabella. I do not need anyone to know.” Angelica cringed, sinking into the settee, wanting nothing more than for the ground to open up and swallow her whole. “I cannot believe I would act so fast with a man of the cloth.”

“He’s not a Catholic priest yet. He’s merely contemplating it.”

“That does not make what almost happened any better.” She shook her head, her heart still fluttering painfully. “I will just have to pretend that nothing occurred.”

Her sister’s lips curled into a sly smile.

“But something almost did occur. Do you think he’s not thinking about it too?”

Maybe he’s not suitable to be a Catholic priest. He can still be a reverend in a country parish.

I'm certain even Ravensmere may give him a living at our church when it becomes available. ”

The idea was not one she had considered, but it stirred something—a fragile, dangerous hope that she tamped down at once. “Rosalind is coming over. Do not say a word.”

Her sister chuckled under her breath. “Of course not. I'll be the soul of discretion.”

### Chapter

### Nine

Benedict lay in his bed for what felt like several hours before his brother came upstairs to retire himself, but not before checking in on him.

He'd slept on and off, the linen sheets beneath him warm and slightly damp from the lingering fever, his mind as restless as his body after his earlier interaction with Lady Angelica.

The flickering light of a single candle on the bedside table cast shadows across the walls, reminding him of the confessional booths he had once knelt in—a sharp contrast to the raw temptation he now battled.

What was he going to do? Or a better question—what did he want to do?

His pulse raced, the weight of the decision heavy on his chest. He'd spent years debating what his future would hold. As the second son, a life in the church or His Majesty's Army were the opportunities for him.

Thankfully, their father had been a man of honor and had not wasted their inheritances over the years, leaving both him and his brother far wealthier than they needed to be.

In fact, he had a manor house not far from the main Whitmore estate in Derbyshire, where, if he wished, he could marry, settle, and have a very good and comfortable

life.

But he'd never been a man to idle away his time.

He'd always felt as though his life would be better served helping others, and hence, why the option of the church would have suited him well.

The memory of standing in a candlelit chapel, his breath mingling with incense, returned to him, stirring guilt deep in his soul.

The thought he may have to defend his homeland in the militia had never been an concern, but killing another human had, and so he'd settled on the church, a task that his father had considered and agreed would suit him before his passing.

Your father had not thought you meant the Catholic church...

"How are you feeling, brother?" Whitmore asked, sitting on the chair beside his bed and studying him, his eyes a little bloodshot from the ample wine being served downstairs.

"We need to talk, and you must help me," he blurted.

His brother frowned and leaned forward, resting on his knees. "Whatever is it? You've only been upstairs two hours or so—whatever has made you distressed in that short time?"

Benedict cringed, not wanting to confide in his brother.

The weight of temptation clung to him like a damp cloak, suffocating and impossible to ignore.



His brother had the character of a tease and could use the information he was about to impart against him at any inappropriate time, yet he needed to speak his truth and have some insight that was not his own.

"Believe me, that was plenty of time for me to almost do something that I cannot. I do not know what is wrong with me..."

His brother held up his hands to halt his words. "Now, stop this babbling and tell me what you did. Surely it cannot be so wicked?" His brother paused and looked around the room. "Did you break something?"

"No," Benedict said, trying to stop the annoyance in his tone.

His pulse thudded heavily in his throat, his hands clammy, the guilt pooling low in his belly.

His problem was not his brother's doing, and he should not take out his frustrations on others.

"Lady Angelica was here earlier, I found myself unable to prepare for bed nor ring for your valet, and, well..."

His brother leaned forward, his eyes growing wide with interest. "And well...what exactly?"

Benedict cringed, remembering what had occurred.

Heat flushed over his skin, a mix of mortification and longing.

"She helped me prepare for bed. I do not know what I was thinking, but if that wasn't bad enough, when she helped me with my shirt I, well, I..."

" He swallowed, meeting his brother's gaze.

"Something happened, a shift in the air, a thickening, almost, and for a moment, just a split second, I thought I would kiss her. "

His brother threw himself back into his chair and slapped a hand over his face, clearly holding back expletives.

"You lie." He paused, still clearly shocked.

"You like her, or you would never have even contemplated such a thing, certainly not after all you've done to secure the future you wish.

" His brother stared at him as if he had grown a second head, and Benedict couldn't be sure he had not.

His stomach clenched, the memory of her soft scent—lavender and something purely Angelica—oh how it haunted him.

"I do not know what I was thinking, but she helped me into my nightshirt and before I could think straight, I had clasped her arms, holding her near me, not even a feather's distance between our lips, and an overpowering urge to kiss her overcame me.

" Benedict held up his shaking hands, showing his brother. "Look, even now, talking to you about her, I'm all sixes and sevens. I'm literally trembling with who knows what. "

"Well, I know what you're shaking for," his brother said, a smug look upon his features.

"Well, do not keep it to yourself, tell me, man!

" Not that he truly wished to know, but he'd also never been with a woman.

He'd not only never been intimate with a woman, but he'd never kissed one either.

The sensations, the oddities happening within his body were new and strange, and not to mention, quite wonderful.

The throb low in his belly, the heat pooling beneath his skin—Lord have mercy, what was wrong with his cock twitching as it did when she was near?

He cringed, knowing that in the profession he'd chosen, he could not think like that, could not feel that, and want more of it.

"You want her, sexually," his brother said matter-of-fact. "And I think you ought to consider if these feelings she's evoking in you are a sign from the God you admire so very much, telling you that you're not meant for the church. That you're meant to be in her bed, fucking her."

"Hartley!" Benedict scolded, his cheeks burning, the crude word igniting a shame so fierce he wanted to sink through the floor. "You cannot speak so vile. Do remember yourself."

His brother shrugged. "Your cock twitched, did it not, when she was close to you? When you could feel the kiss of her breath on your lips? When you could smell her sweet scent? Tell me I'm wrong."

Benedict shut his mouth with a snap and refused to tell his brother anything about what his body had been doing.

The memory was there though—sharp, hot, and impossible to banish.

That his elder sibling was correct was not helping the matter at all, and nor would he give his brother the satisfaction of knowing exactly what his bodily functions had been.

"I'm going to be a Catholic priest."

"Perhaps you ought not. What if in the future, another woman, long after Lady Angelica is married and settled, someone else sparks interest in you? A widow perhaps who comes for communion."

"Confession, you mean," he growled, knowing full well his brother knew what solace people found in the church.

"Ah, yes, confession, and during those times you're in that tight little box, alone and listening to her lilting voice, your cock twitches again, and before you know it, you're tugging her through that speaking hole the confessional has."

Benedict didn't know if to be offended or absolutely terrified of the future his brother was stating for him.

The image—Angelica kneeling in the dark, her soft voice confessing her sins—rose unbidden, dangerous and far too tempting.

His breath hitched. That he could, right at this moment, only think of Angelica telling him of her troubles, what she wished and longed for in the confessional also did not help.

The idea of them being alone in a dark, quiet place where no one was to intrude made him think things he ought not.

Not ever.

"You're not helping, brother." He ran a hand through his hair and realized his scalp itched with sweat, his shirt clinging uncomfortably to his back. "I must leave, sooner than we planned."

"Oh no, no, no, we shall not be doing that."

You've been shot, and you need to rest. Two days' travel in a jostling carriage to London will not do your leg any good, and I shall not have a lame brother.

Could you imagine me, the Marquess Whitmore, with a lame brother who dragged his leg about after him? I would be mortified."

"Do be serious and stop your nonsense," Benedict said, knowing his brother would never, in truth, act so heartless. The worry for his future gnawed at him, relentless and bedevilling like a wolf at the door. "I cannot stay here. I'm being tempted by the flesh."

His brother burst out laughing, and Benedict glared at him. The sound grated in his ears, mocking and maddening, feeding the storm inside him. The man was impossible and, right at this moment, quite easy to curse to the devil himself.

"Maybe, little brother, whom I care for most in the world, your body is telling you something that you ought to listen to."

I know you've always believed the church was your calling, but perhaps it is not.

" He paused, his visage turning serious.

"I know father agreed this was best for you, but you were barely sixteen when he died."

Too young to know for certain. And now, at the age you are... "

"I'm two years younger than you, Whitmore. Do try to remember I'm eight and twenty."

"Yes, yes, at the age you are, that you've not taken your orders yet, maybe a part of your subconscious has been stalling, trying to get you to see that the future you thought for yourself is, in fact, the wrong one.

And the correct one is currently asleep but a few doors down the passageway.

" His brother paused, a smirk curling his lips.

"I should imagine her bed attire is quite fetching. She's a pretty little thing."

"And you'll keep away from that pretty little thing," Benedict warned, his chest tightening, the possessiveness within him making no sense at all. "One week, and no matter my healing progress, we're to leave. Promise me," he demanded, holding his brother's eyes.

His brother sighed. "Very well, one week. Even so, a lot can happen in seven days."

Benedict did not need the reminder. The weight of his choices pressed heavy on his chest, the scent of lavender still clinging in the air, and the ghost of her touch burning across his skin.

### Chapter

### Ten

Over the next two days, Angelica was distracted with fabric choices, designs and fittings for the gowns she'd wear for the London Season. Not to mention Evangeline and Lord St. George, who were traveling to collect her and take her to London were arriving any day.

She was looking forward to their arrival, and to seeing London for the first time, but a part of her also did not want to leave. Not if Lord Benedict was still recuperating under her ancestral roof.

The man took up far too much time in her thoughts and as much as she tried to remind herself that he was not for her, that he'd chosen a different path in life, she could not help but admire him and enjoy his company.

Not to mention he was one of the most handsome men she'd ever met in her life, and after the other evening when she believed herself about to be kissed...

Well, she could not get the thought from her mind.

The warmth of his breath, the nearness of his lips lingered in her memory like a half-savored dream.

And he would be in London when she was there.

Would he attend the balls and parties? She did not think he would, and the thought left her a little disappointed. How she would love to dance with him, to be in his arms, to see if maybe he would throw all his thoughts of joining the church aside and choose her instead.

The very idea sent a longing ache through her chest, one she tried hard to ignore but could not.

Determined to stop pining after a man who was not for her, Angelica shook the thought aside and instead tried to concentrate on the gardeners who were pruning shrubbery and weeding garden beds, preparing them to look their best for the summer months while she sat outdoors, enjoying the warm afternoon sun.

Bright lavender and pale-pink roses bloomed under their careful hands, the plants' scent sweet and thick in the early afternoon air.

Again, her mind turned as to why Lord Benedict would not choose her.

He was not the type of flippant man who would throw all his hopes and dreams aside for a woman whom she did not even know.

They were friends, yes, but more than that made her a fool.

She needed to stop thinking about him or she would make herself sick.

Angelica inwardly groaned as the very man she was trying to forget appeared in the gardens, walking on the lawns beyond with his brother. He was as tall as Lord Whitmore, who strolled beside him, there to reach and help his injured sibling should he require assistance.

Even from a distance, Lord Benedict's stride—though uneven—carried a quiet



strength. The pale linen of his waistcoat fluttered slightly in the breeze, and the golden sun caught the strands of his dark, unruly hair.

For all of Lord Whitmore's naughty habits, flirting being one of his most distinguished, he did adore his little brother and seemed genuine with his care for him and his wishes for him to get better.

"Lady Angelica," Lord Whitmore said, throwing her a wave as they came closer.

Angelica stood, smoothing her hands over the soft muslin dress dyed a pale blue that matched the day's sky, and smiled as they joined her.

"Lord Whitmore, Lord Benedict, it is a perfect day to be outside. How are you feeling, Lord Benedict? It is good to see that you're walking better at least." Her words came out sounding like nervous babble and she hoped his lordships did not notice.

"I'm much better and I do believe that by tomorrow we shall be able to leave and give you and your family a much-needed break from us," Lord Benedict said, with a laughing smile.

Angelica could not see anything amusing about the fact of him leaving before she was ready to let him go, which may be never. She tried not to react, but her stomach clenched all the same.

"I did not think you were leaving for another week. Ravensmere mentioned so this morning at breakfast. However will we survive without our guests? We shall miss you."

"I have convinced my brother that I'm well enough to travel and so he has relented."

“But we shall see each other in town, Lady Angelica,” Lord Whitmore added, looking to his brother. “Will we not, Benedict?”

Benedict threw his brother a warning glare, so quick that had Angelica not been mooning over the gentleman and watching his every nuance, she would have missed it.

“Oh yes, of course. My brother is gracious enough to allow me to practice my faith out of our home. My chaplain and mentor sometimes holds mass for us there in the home’s private chapel.

Maybe you could attend one where I’m announcing the sermon. ”

She nodded, but the thought of spending any prolonged period in a church, even one located in a private home, did not fill her with the same joviality as it seemed to give Lord Benedict.

A tightness twisted in her chest. He truly was planning to walk away from the world—and from her.

“I will try to make time, my lord, but I know my sister, Lady St. George, has much planned and I’m not of the same faith, so I’m uncertain if that is even allowed.”

“Oh, it is allowed, Lady Angelica. I’m also not Catholic,” Lord Whitmore said with a grin. “But I have given my brother leave to do as he pleases and right at this moment, he pleases to be Catholic.”

“Whitmore,” Lord Benedict said with warning. He met Angelica’s gaze, and something in him seemed disappointed by both her and his brother’s answer. She stood there, wondering what else she could say before Lord Whitmore thankfully stepped into the breach of silence.

“As thanks for all your family has done for Benedict and myself this past week, I will ensure that if you should attend one of Lord Benedict’s sermons, that he too shall attend a ball of your choosing, Lady Angelica. I think that is a good trade, do you not agree?”

Angelica smiled, thinking that Lord Whitmore was a marvel at his suggestion. “I think that would indeed be a fair trade, my lord. I shall send word to your home in town with the ball of my choosing. Pray, in what part of London do you reside?”

“We have a house on Berkley Square.”

“You do?” Angelica could not believe her fortune. “As it would have it, my sister Lady St. George resides on that very square. We shall be neighbors, how delightful,” she added, before she could think better of it.

Had she sounded too eager? The prickling of heat on her cheeks told her she had been.

Perhaps she ought not to announce too energetically how much she thought of the man before her. She did not want him to be frightened off. But also, she was looking forward to seeing him again, even if she was doomed to admire him from afar for the rest of her days.

“Lord and Lady St. George reside on Berkley Square?” Lord Benedict repeated, as if he had not listened to her words. “We shall see each other often.”

Angelica did not know if he was outraged or scared by that fact. “I promise not to haunt your shadow, my lord.” Angelica tried to hide the hurt his trepidation made her feel, but she could not. After their almost-kiss, she had not thought he would not wish to see her, at the very least.

It was not as if she were going to throw herself at his head and make him kiss her as she wished.

“Oh no, I did not mean to offend.” He reached for her hand and then thinking better of it, pulled away. “I know you’ll be busy with the Season, and, well, if you happen to see me and do not have the time to stop and converse, know that I understand.”

“Of course,” Angelica agreed, but still she could not help but believe he was trying to keep her at arm’s length. Stop what was simmering between them whenever they were near each other and certainly when they were alone.

Friendship, longing, desire...or something deeper still?

“But I always make time for my friends.”

“We would not think you would do anything less,” Lord Whitmore said. “I should imagine you’ve had a busy few days. Was that not a modiste I saw arrive with an abundance of silks just this morning?”

“Yes, and I shall have all new dresses for London, of course. I do think my sisters Evangeline and Rosalind are determined to spoil me.”

“Well, it may be the last time that they’re able to do so. Should you marry, you’ll move away and settle elsewhere. I should think they would relish giving you everything that you want,” Lord Benedict said, his attention on her more unnerving than it ever had been before, sounding almost heartfelt.

Angelica’s throat tightened. His gaze lingered, not with possession but with something near wistfulness. Was he imagining her married to someone else—or to him?

His words sent a delicious shiver down her spine. Maybe he was torn, understandably so, considering his future employment. Was he debating his choices? Had his meeting her perhaps muddled all his plans?

As unscrupulous as she was being to think that way, she hoped that meeting her had. She liked him far above anyone else she'd ever met, and something told her that even a Season in London would not change that.

No one else could make her breath catch or her heart race like he did with a single glance.

"It is true, my sisters are very kind," she said, playing into his words. "I look forward to stepping out and enjoying the gaiety of the ton."

"The men will flock to your skirts," Lord Whitmore said, wagging his brows at his brother, whose features hardened at the marquess's words.

Lord Whitmore was a terrible flirt and said the most outrageous, scandalous things. Still, she did like him, even if he were a little naughty.

"I do not know about that, but I hope to make friends, certainly. I do not know anyone outside of my family, so I will admit to you both that I'm fearful of being excluded."

"No one would dare exclude an angel." Lord Benedict reached for her hand and, taking it this time, linked their fingers. The warmth of his hold, his fingers slipping over hers, left her breathless and everything within her stilled.

Her heartbeat roared in her ears, her skin prickling at his touch.

"The world could not be so cruel to someone so kind as yourself," he added, before

letting her go.

She smiled, missing his touch the moment he pulled away. Angelica collected herself and hoped her words would not sound as breathless as she felt. “I hope you’re right, my lord, and suppose only time shall tell.”

“I should imagine so,” he agreed.

### Chapter

### Eleven

“Well, now that all is settled, I’m off for a glass of wine.

It’s past luncheon and I believe Ravensmere will join me should I persuade him,” his brother said with a laugh.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Without another word, Whitmore left them alone in the garden, unchaperoned apart from the gardeners working away behind them.

Still, Benedict hardly noticed the moment his brother disappeared down the gravel path. He was too aware of the quiet left in his wake—and of the woman still standing near him.

Lady Angelica.

She smoothed the front of her gown, her gaze dipping briefly before returning to the flower beds, but Benedict saw the hesitation in her posture. She was debating whether to stay.

He ought to let her go. Ought to turn and limp back into the house, shut the door to his bedchamber, and pray for strength to ignore the pull of her presence.

Instead, he cleared his throat. “You mentioned being nervous about the Season,” he said, his voice softer now that they were alone. “May I ask why?”

She turned to him, eyes wide with surprise. “I didn’t think you were listening so well, my lord.”

“I hear more than people think. Comes with being the second son—I’m used to listening.”

A smile touched her lips, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It’s silly really. I’m two and twenty, hardly a fresh debutante.

Most ladies will be younger, bolder. I’ve never attended a London Season, and now I’m expected to make friends, attract suitors.

Blend into a world I’ve only heard of in letters and novels. ”

“You won’t need to blend in,” he said, his voice tinged with unexpected heat. “You’ll stand out.”

Her brows lifted, a faint blush painting her cheeks a pretty rosy hue.

He cursed himself inwardly. He was meant to offer reassurance, not flattery.

And yet, he continued. “You are intelligent, gracious, and thoughtful. You are already everything the ton pretends to value.” And more.

More than any other woman he had known. She unsettled him in a way that was both exquisite and terrifying.

“And yet I doubt they’ll see me that way,” she murmured. “I’ll be seen as an old maid.”



Benedict watched her closely. The sunlight glinted off her golden hair, gathered at the nape in a simple knot. A few tendrils curling loose around her ears and throat. She looked nothing like the simpering ladies his brother often tried to parade before him.

“They’ll see a woman who is kind and worth friendship,” he said finally. “And if they do not, they are fools.”

She smiled again, more genuinely this time, but there was still doubt lingering in her expression. “And what if I do not make friends? What if no one talks to me, or I say something wrong and they whisper behind their fans?”

“You worry too much,” he said, stepping closer, the ache in his leg protesting. “But if it brings you comfort, I shall make you a promise.”

She tilted her head, interest sparking in her pretty green eyes. “What kind of promise?”

“If ever I’m in the same room as you, I will ensure someone is speaking to you.”

She laughed softly, the sound warm and honest. “You’ll be the priest at the back of the ballroom, glaring disapprovingly at anyone who dares slight me.”

“Possibly,” he allowed. “Though I’ll have to leave the glaring to the dowagers for they will all be jealous of your presence. My duties will likely keep me away from the gaiety.”

Something in her smile faded.

The ache in his chest caught him off guard. He had meant to comfort her, to distract her. But her presence, her scent—roses and something softer, something purely her—was undoing him piece by piece.

“I should return inside,” she said, dipping into a slight curtsy.

She turned.

He didn’t think.

His hand shot out and caught her wrist—gently, but firmly enough that she stopped. Their eyes met, hers widened in surprise. “I—” He faltered, his heart hammering. “Forgive me. I simply…” He stepped forward, closing the distance between them.

“This isn’t proper,” she whispered.

“No,” he agreed. “But it’s honest.” Benedict drew her into his arms.

At first, it was only an embrace. A thank-you, he told himself. For her kindness, for her care, for the softness she had shown him when he’d been at his lowest. He held her gently, her body slight but warm against his chest, her breath a flutter against his collarbone.

But then—something inside him shifted.

It wasn’t gratitude burning through him.

It was fire.

Pure, consuming, and unholy.

His arms tightened. She didn’t resist.

This was not what a man of God should feel. This was not what a future priest should crave. But he did. He craved her.

He turned his face slightly, his lips grazing the skin just below her ear. A soft, sensitive patch that smelled of lavender and warmth. He half-expected her to pull away, to scold him, to remind him of his path.

Instead, she tilted her head, granting him more access.

Benedict's restraint shattered. He pressed a kiss to her neck—slow, reverent, scandalous. His lips moved along her skin, savoring her. Her breath caught, and he felt the tremble pass through her as if it were his own.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, though he didn't know if he meant it. Didn't know if he could pull himself from her arms.

Her fingers clutched his coat, keeping him near. "Don't be."

"You make me question everything," he admitted, shamed, and yet the honesty also freed a part of him that had felt restrained for so long.

With Angelica everything was different, he was different, and while he did not know what that meant right now, he knew one thing for certain—he craved the woman in his arms and had never felt this way before in his life.

"And you," she said, her voice barely audible, "make me believe, make me hope for something I should not."

He swallowed hard. The weight of her words lodged in his chest like a brand. "I cannot promise you anything, Angelica. Not truly. Not yet."

"I know." Her gaze lifted, clear and steady. "But I also know what I feel."

He released her slowly, as if pulling away from a dream. They stood in silence in the

garden alive with the sounds of summer, of birdsong and wind in the hedges.

“I must leave,” he said, voice rough. “Not for my health or because I’m now well enough to travel, but because of what I’ll do if I stay. There is much to think about.”

Angelica nodded, as if she understood his quandaries. “And I must go to London to find a husband.”

Her words cut him like a knife. “But this moment,” he said, brushing his fingers over hers that held his lapels still. “I will remember.”

She smiled, just barely. “As will I,” she said, slipping from his arms.

Benedict watched her go, and every step she took felt like a nail being driven into the coffin of his conviction. And yet, somewhere deep within, he was no longer certain that coffin would hold.

### Chapter

### Twelve

#### The Season, London

Angelica stood in the glittering ballroom of Lord and Lady Cecil, marveling at the beauty, the dresses and jewels of those in attendance. People danced and laughed, courted and whispered in secret of the latest on dit or flirtations to those they courted.

The sight was one to behold and even in her most imaginative days on thinking what her time in the Season would be like, she could not have invented anything more beautiful.

She glanced down at her gown of white silk with gold embroidery on the bodice and hem, checking that all was as it should be and nothing out of place.

Her sister linked their arms and pulled her along to take a turn about the room, guiding her past those her sister knew and making the appropriate introductions when needed.

"Ah, Angelica, may I present to you Lady Mary. She's the youngest daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Fox." Her sister smiled between the two of them, before Angelica dipped into a small curtsy.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lady Mary."

"And you also," the young woman said, moving closer to her to ensure privacy from those who stood nearby.

"I was hoping Lady St. George would introduce us.

She said that her sister was to have a Season this year, and I've been positively excited to have another friend.

I believe we're the same age, you see, this is my third Season in town. "

"Really?" Angelica said, a little shocked to hear the young woman, a duke's daughter no less, had not married during her first year. Her surprise must have registered on her face for Lady Mary chuckled and shrugged.

"I'm very particular, you see, and no one has sparked an ounce in interest in my heart just yet, but I'm hopeful for this Season."

Angelica liked the young woman immediately and her candor to speak what she thought, very much like herself.

Not to mention being the same age, her nervousness of being excluded was halved if she would have Lady Mary at the ton nish events this year.

"Do you think there is anyone interesting here?

You must tell me all of those of the opposite sex I should avoid and those who show promise. "

"Well, Lord Whitmore is definitely one to keep clear of. I heard his first night in London last week was overshadowed by where he was dragged from by his brother in the wee hours of the morning. Apparently it was not a gentleman's club, and most

definitely not in Mayfair."

"Is Lord Whitmore here?" Angelica asked, scanning the room with more interest than she should. For two weeks she'd not seen Lord Benedict, not that Lord Whitmore being here meant his brother was also, but at least she knew now for certain they were in town.

She spied his lordship talking with Lord St. George, whom he'd met in Hampshire briefly before they departed for London. Her heart gave a skip, her eyes scanning those who stood nearby Lord Whitmore, but alas, she could not see Lord Benedict.

"Well, maybe Lord Whitmore is suitable after all," Lady Mary said with a small, knowing chuckle.

Angelica turned back to her new friend and shook her head. "Oh no, you're quite mistaken if I gather your meaning, but we met Lord Whitmore and his brother Lord Benedict recently. They were guests at my home in Hampshire."

"Oh dear, that was you? I had heard Lord Benedict was injured by a highwayman. I cannot believe it was your estate that he recuperated at."

"Yes, it was quite a surprise for him to arrive as he did, but we were so fortunate to save his life." She turned back to Lord Whitmore and still found him engrossed in conversation with her brother-in-law.

"Did I not hear Lord Benedict is looking to join the Catholic Church? What a difference of character the brothers seem to have. One is purely sin, and the other salvation." Mary paused. "Not that we're Catholic, you understand, not many of the ton are."

Angelica nodded, although she could not entirely agree with Lady Mary's opinion on

the Deverell family.

While yes, Lord Whitmore was terribly naughty, Lord Benedict wasn't too dissimilar to his older sibling.

She was certain he had thought to kiss her twice in Hampshire.

So many days ago now, that she often struggled to remember exactly the interaction, no matter how much she tried to close her eyes and relive the pleasure.

"Lord Whitmore is a nice man, however, even if he is a little naughty, but Lord Benedict is as you say, a very kind soul."

"And devastatingly handsome when attired for a ball." Lady Mary nodded to where Lord Whitmore and St. George were standing and the breath in Angelica's lungs seized.

The sight of Lord Benedict, standing tall and elegant beside his brother, his black-silk knee-high breeches and boots, along with his shirt and waistcoat and black jacket made him appear far more elegant and untouchable than he ever had been before.

She could barely reconcile the man who had almost died under their care in Hampshire to the virile, tall, muscular gentleman who stood beside his brother, engaged in conversation and sipping a whisky.

"He looks so well. It is good to see that he's finally on the mend and past any danger from his brush with a highwayman," she agreed, unsure yet if she could be so honest with her new friend and tell her that in truth she was well on the way to being utterly infatuated with the man.

However would she survive if he were to join the church and marry God and not her?



She'd never thought to ever be jealous of anyone, nevertheless God, but here she was.

"I would say he's doing very well indeed." Her friend sighed. "If only all the eligible men in London looked half as good as the Deverell brothers. A shame both are out of the question."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Angelica couldn't help but continue to ogle his lordship, but then, really she should stop lest he catch her staring. She didn't want to look as desperate as she felt.

"Lady Mary, Lady Angelica, a pleasure." Lord Jermyn bowed before them, having been introduced earlier in the night by her sister. "Lady Angelica, would you do me the honor of the next dance?"

"Of course," she said, giving his lordship her hand and rallying herself to do as she must, push on through the Season and find a kind husband whom she could fall in love with and marry.

There was nothing to say that Lord Jermyn could not fill those requirements. And from what her sister Lady St. George had said, he was an upstanding man in the ton, had no scandals following him about, and was wealthy enough to support her in their future.

Still, as she slipped into his arms and he smiled down at her, commencing a conversation regarding his troubles in finding adequate riding boots, she soon came to realize he would not do at all. There was no spark, no stomach-churning nerves or delectable flutters in her stomach.

Nothing whatsoever.

"How delightful that you're here, Lady Angelica. Lord and Lady St. George have

spoken highly of you and tell me you enjoy riding horses. Are there any other pursuits you like that you're competent at?"

She pulled herself away from thinking about a certain future priest and turned her attention to Lord Jermyn instead.

"I'm afraid I'm terrible at playing the piano forte and I do not embroider at all.

But I do hope that I shall be able to get a kitten soon.

We were not allowed pets growing up, and I would so love a cat. "

"A cat?" Lord Jermyn's mouth turned down into a disgusted snarl. "What would you want one of those rodent-catching animals for? They belong in barns and nowhere else, mind. I would never allow such a pest in the house. A dog, however, would be suitable."

Angelica fought not to let her hackles rise, but knew within herself she was failing miserably.

"But do you not think dogs have an odor that is quite unbecoming?

I know that whenever I've picked up a cat I do not have the stench of their fur on me afterward. But with a dog that is not the case." She threw him a smile to soften her words that may have come out a little harsher than they needed, but who was he to say what was allowed or best. She was not married to him and nor would she be.

"My mind will not be altered on this topic, my lord."

"A shame your opinion is so wrong, my lady. Maybe in time I shall be able to change your mind about such things."

She continued smiling, but her mind raced to tell him he could go shove his opinions where they belonged, down his wrong throat. "No, I long for a cat, not a dog. I fear we shall disagree on this matter and best we change the subject before we're at odds."

Lord Jermyn chuckled, but the gesture was laced with sarcasm. "But you are mistaken, my lady. I cannot allow you to continue believing such false pretences."

Angelica stared at him, wishing she had not agreed to the dance at all and willing it would end. Now preferably.

### Chapter

### Thirteen

The sight of Lady Angelica in the arms of Lord Jermyn ought to not affect him. What did he care if Lady Angelica or any debutante for that matter danced with a man? They were in London to find husbands, what else were they meant to do?

However, that was not the case, not even a little.

At the sight of Lady Angelica, smiling up at the earl, his body had become an unknown part of himself, tight and unyielding, his stomach in knots as if there were troubles ahead he did not know how to navigate.

Like the time when they had been boys and had to cross a swollen river at their country estate. The wood they had to crawl across moved in the churning water and would have sent both him and his brother to their certain drowning deaths had they fallen.

Just like then, he held on to nerve and fought the panic that wanted to assail him, make him take a misstep. He could not do that now. As much as he cared for Lady Angelica, the friendship needed to remain just as it was, benign.

There was no future for them, and he was certain after returning to London and attending his lessons, that his choice was correct.

Until tonight.

He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat at the sight of Lord Jermyn speaking eagerly to Lady Angelica.

Were they getting along well? From what he'd been advised by his brother, this was the first ball for Lady Angelica, her own coming-out ball next week.

Her brother-in-law having let their plans be known at White's the other day to Whitmore.

His brother of course only too keen to listen and inform him of this news.

He'd pretended he would not care, that the news of Lady Angelica in town did not bother him, and yet, damn himself to the pits of hell, it did. At every moment that arose, he glanced out the front windows of his brother's home and looked for her across the park.

To admire her from afar for but a moment, but alas he'd not seen her, not even in Berkley Square taking the air with her maid. Not one glimpse of her coming and going from the St. George house while they prepared for the Season.

Nothing.

Until tonight.

He drank in the sight of her, hating himself for being affected by the vision of a pretty woman. It went against everything he'd thought to become, what he wanted in life and strove to achieve.

He'd never been affected by the female form, not even the many times he'd collected his brother from a brothel or gaming hell, his brother covered in women, many of them unclothed and willing to offer their services.

For years he'd thought himself immune, the perfect candidate for what he'd chosen for his career. How wrong he now seemed to be.

The dance came to an end and Lady Angelica was led back to where another young lady, the Duke and Duchess Fox's youngest daughter stood.

"I do not wish to pry, brother, but I have the feeling your mind at present is very much muddled. A particularly beautiful debutante from Hampshire wouldn't by chance be on your mind?" Whitmore asked, leaning close to ensure privacy.

Benedict fought not to allow his attention to yet again divert across the room, but no matter what he did, he seemed constantly drawn to the angel who saved his life.

"I think I must speak with my mentor and ask for guidance.

I cannot continue in this way, being pulled in two different directions and not knowing what is the right one for me. "

"Well, not that you'll believe me, but I do think you know deep down what is the right path for you. All you have to do is reach for it."

"That is unhelpful, for that could mean either of my choices."

"As a man who's fond of female company I can assure you I do not mean the church when I speak of correct choices. In fact, I'm certain that should I set one foot in such a sacred place, I would surely burn to ash."

Benedict threw his brother a withering glance, sure that would not be the case. In any event, as much as it pained him to admit, he feared his brother may be correct in this instance.

If he could not stop thinking about Lady Angelica, looking out for her whenever the opportunity arose, maybe his choice for a life of prayer wasn't right. Maybe he had merely been waiting to meet the right woman and had not done so.

Until now.

"The least you could do is dance with her this evening, if your leg is up to it of course. She will enjoy that I think."

"Do you think so?" he asked, having debated what Lady Angelica felt for him since their departure from Hampshire.

An endless merry-go-round of thoughts, of wants and needs haunted him, but did they plague her?

After their near-kiss in his room at her estate and then their embrace in the garden, that still to this day sent heat to course through his veins, he doubted if everything he experienced was but a dream.

"You cannot be so blind. That chit," Whitmore said, pointing toward Lady Angelica, "practically mooned all over you in Hampshire. She was by your side and often refused to leave you from what I heard the day that I arrived."

All true, she had been the best caregiver he'd ever experienced. High praise indeed since their mother, may she rest in peace, had been loving and one of the most caring women in his life.

"Very well, I shall ask her to dance as thanks, mind, and nothing more. Please do not act as some matchmaker this evening. You know that the choices that I face are great indeed and need much consideration."

His brother held up his hands in defeat.

"I would not dare try to sway either one of you to admitting more than you already do.

In any case," his brother said. "You both already feel more for each other than you know, and it is only a matter of time before you both realize you're perfect for each other. I need do nothing at all."

"I think you're confusing emotions, dear brother.

Lady Angelica helped in saving my life, I would have bled to death had she not intervened, but that does not mean she cares for me more than a friend.

I think our gratefulness to her is being confused with emotions that are not as strong as you believe. "

"And I think," his brother said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"You're denying how she affects you. You're scared, that is all, now go," Whitmore said, nodding toward where Lady Angelica stood with her friend.

"Ask her to dance at least, and see how the Season plays out. If she affects you not at all after the dance, then I shall stop insinuating that the church is not the future you should pursue."

Benedict sighed at his brother's words, which were not at all helpful. He broke away and started around the ballroom floor in the direction of Lady Angelica.

His height thankfully gave him the ability to keep his gaze on her, to drink in her laughter, her smile, her eyes and how they twinkled with delight when speaking to



her friend.

He came before them and bowed. "Lady Mary, Lady Angelica, good evening," he said.

Both ladies dipped into curtsies, but his attention slipped and settled on to Lady Angelica and would not relent.

"Good evening, Lord Benedict," Lady Mary asked, throwing him a wide smile. "Are you enjoying the ball? Is this your first for the Season?"

"I am indeed, and yes, my first, and possibly my last." Benedict closed his mouth with a snap, unsure why he'd said what he did. With Lady Angelica attending event after event, he was certain to attend more, even if he refused to admit they were anything more but friends.

"I hope it is not your last, my lord. You promised me a dance, do you not remember?" Lady Angelica watched him and he had the feeling she could read his mind.

Dear heavens he hoped she could not.

He swallowed. "I did indeed, as thanks for your help in Hampshire and in that vein, will you do me the honor of dancing the following with me, my lady?"

She slipped her hand about his arm, clearly acquiescing to his request. "It's to be a waltz, my lord. Have you ever waltzed with a lady before?" she asked as they moved toward the ballroom floor.

He had not, and the thought of stepping on her toes and being awkward sent nerves to settle in his stomach. "I have not. Not until this night."

### Chapter

### Fourteen

Angelica slipped into Lord Benedict's arms as if she were meant to be there, a perfect coupling of minds and hearts. Very well, she may have been reading into their near-kiss more than she should, but even now, stepping into the waltz, she could not help but sense this was where she belonged.

Her last dance with Lord Jermyn had not ignited any spark of joy or thrill. His conversation had been dry, and his opinions so at odds with hers that she knew she would never dance with him again—nor consider him a candidate for marriage.

"You look much better, my lord. It is good to see you're able to dance without the effect of your injury." She watched him closely, noticing his gaze fixed somewhere over her shoulder.

He seemed distracted, his eyes following a movement across the room, or perhaps he stared into nothing, lost in his thoughts.

She fought the urge to glance behind and see what he was looking at, or maybe he simply did not wish to look at her. That thought gave her pause, and she could not help but wonder if he was resisting the feelings that she certainly experienced whenever around him.

"My leg is a little stiff and painful at times, but I'm well on the way to being back to my normal self.

" He paused, finally meeting her eyes. "You do not know how much I appreciate you and all that you and your family have done.

I'm glad we're able to dance this evening.

I suppose it is in a small way payment for your services. "

His tone was sincere, yet uncertain, his brow drawn with unease.

"Lord Benedict, you do not owe us anything. We would have fought for any person's life had they been in your situation. I hope that our dance this evening is not so much in payment for my care, but because you wish to dance with me."

His mouth opened and closed several times. Was he struggling to find the right words? Certainly, his last ones had not landed well.

"Of course I wish to dance with you, but...

" He frowned, his gaze briefly dipping to her lips.

"I do not think it is right for me—for us, to continue to see each other, Lady Angelica.

I've been set on my path toward the church for some time now, and I do not wish to stray.

I hope you understand and that we can remain friends. "

There was a flicker of pain in his expression, and though his voice was calm, tension coiled beneath every word.

Everything within Angelica tensed. She struggled to breathe past the sharp tightness in her chest. "May I speak plainly, my lord? And while I do not wish to offend, I must say what I know and believe."

"Of course." He watched her, the muscles under her fingers tensing rigid.

"I've never been the kind of child, or now woman, who pretends to feel or say things I do not mean. I pride myself on honesty. And so, with that in mind, I must tell you—whenever I'm around you, Lord Benedict, something happens within me that I cannot explain. Nor do I wish to change it."

His eyes widened. His frame, already tense, became immobile under her hand.

"I like you, Lord Benedict. More than a friend.

Beyond that I do not know. But if you were open to courtship, I would not say no to your wooing.

" She paused, her voice low. "I know now that you do not feel the same and that my emotions are not returned, and while I'm saddened, I cannot blame you. You are faultless in this. I knew, from our very first words, that you intended to join the church. My attachment was foolish. I only hope what I've said does not make our time together awkward, and that we may still see each other socially. "

Around them, violins swelled as the orchestra reached its crescendo. The scent of beeswax candles and crushed roses and her hopes permeated the air.

His hold on her tightened.

For a fleeting moment, she thought he'd changed his mind. That her words had reached his heart. That he might drop to his knees and beg her for a chance.

"You are the sweetest, kindest woman I've ever met, and I am honored by your words. Of course, I wish to remain your friend. Always."

Angelica nodded and swallowed the ache in her burning throat. She would not cry. There were other men who would make her feel the way Lord Benedict did.

Surely there were.

"Excuse me, my lord," she whispered, and without another word, fled the dancefloor.

She pushed through the crowd, ignoring the music, the heat, the crush of chatter and laughter, searching for solitude. She longed to scream—or perhaps simply disappear.

Angelica stumbled through the terrace doors. The night was cool and still. Other guests mingled along the balustrade, but she slipped into the shadows, around the corner, unseen.

She found a stone bench tucked beneath a rose arbor and slumped onto it. The moon glowed bright above, casting silver over manicured hedges and gravel paths.

The air was thick with the perfume of roses, damp grass, and the faint scent of orange blossoms drifting from a nearby bush.

"Lady Angelica?"

Lord Benedict's voice startled her and she gasped. "My lord, you frightened me."

She didn't rise, merely watched him through eyes suspiciously blurry, hoping he would leave before he saw her cry like a child.

She swiped at her cheek, pretending a gnat had landed on her skin.

He came and sat beside her, taking her gloved hand in his, entwining their fingers. "I struggle with what's happening between us too," he said softly, staring out into the moonlit garden.

She turned to him, her heartbeat an erratic flutter beneath her bodice.

"At times, I do not know what I want or which path is the right one. I've never doubted before—not once in all my eight and twenty years—until I woke to find an angel hovering over me, saving my life."

She chuckled through the tears, shaking her head. "That may be a bit dramatic, but I can't lie, it makes my heart leap."

He flipped her hand over, resting it atop his knee. Their gloved hands touched, but the heat between their bodies was unmistakable.

"To abandon what I believed was my calling now feels wrong. But the thought of you walking away, of marrying someone else... It makes me want to tear away the very skin that masks my body."

"Lord Benedict," she said gently. "I think it's honorable, joining the church. But did you ever try to court a lady before making that decision? Have you ever kissed a woman?"

His brow furrowed, pain flickering behind his eyes. "I've never been good with women. Awkward, embarrassed...awkward. But you... With you, I can speak freely. I can breathe. And no, I've never wanted to kiss someone more than I want to kiss you."

She blinked. Kiss her? Had he truly said such a wondrous thing? "You do? I thought I was the only one so affected. You hide your emotions behind such a well-built

mask."

"You were right. We almost kissed in Hampshire. Or rather, I almost kissed you and then that day in the garden, where I took liberties I should not have. You do not know how I have suffered with want of you, with the guilt of wanting you."

"Why did you stop? I would not have denied you anything."

He sighed. "Fear of rejection, of having to reevaluate everything. My life has been clear, my path decided. Until you."

"And I unsettled you?"

"You did. And now I don't know what to do."

Angelica leaned closer. "Then perhaps you should kiss me now... and we can discuss the consequences and the effects of that kiss later."

He hesitated for one heartbeat. Then his hand rose, cupping her cheek. She leaned into the warmth of his palm, her breath catching.

He dipped his head and her heart sang. Finally his lips would touch hers. The longing that tore through her was overwhelming and sweet as she waited for what was to come next.

Her first kiss.

Chapter

Fifteen

I cannot...

"I shouldn't kiss you." Benedict pulled back, but something told him he would do the opposite of his words. He would kiss her, even here, in the shadowed gardens of Lord and Lady Cecil's ball.

The moonlight filtered through the rose arbor, casting ghostly shadows along the flagstone path. The air was cool, laced with the scent of roses and something sweeter—perhaps Angelica's perfume.

What was wrong with him? That he did not know, nor could he answer, but right at this moment all he wanted to do was be with the woman at his side and damn the consequences.

You are not yourself around her...

She looked up at him expectantly, and his mind raced. He'd never kissed a woman before. How was a man to instigate and do such a gesture right?

He slipped his hand about the nape of her neck and pulled her close. Their lips were but a breath apart and something hot and turbulent rumbled in his soul. Instinct took over.



All his trepidation and fear vanished as his lips brushed hers.

So soft that he moaned at the feel of them after weeks of wanting this woman before him.

The taste of her—sweet, heady—made his head spin.

She was pliant and giving in his arms, her hands reached up to clasp the lapels of his jacket, holding him near.

Not that he was going anywhere. She need not hold on to him at all.

She kissed him back, pressed against his mouth and he tilted his head, wanting more of her, to revel in her kiss. She gasped and their mouths crashed together. The kiss, seeking and learning, soon turned into a firestorm of giving and taking.

She pressed her body against his, her breasts soft against his chest, and his ability to think straight vanished. He was lost at sea and did not know how to swim in this world of desire, of wants and needs that she made him endure.

Want clawed at him, a fierce, unfamiliar burn in his blood.

Desire shot through his body like a drug, and he drank from her, their tongues teasing, slipping against each other. He wrenched her close, almost on his lap, his hand sliding down her back to clasp the globe of her pert ass.

Sweet heaven, he was in hell.

No, Benedict—you're going to hell after this.

So be it. If this was hell, he would burn for eternity to have one moment in his angel's

arms.

Her fingers spiked through his hair, holding him to her lips. Never had emotions stormed through him like they were now, and he knew what he'd been missing in his life.

Angelica.

She was the difference that he'd never experienced before.

Up until this night, a woman had never sparked anything above polite interaction.

With Angelica, he wanted her. He wanted to consume her, kiss every part of her body, relish her sweet, yielding flesh and drink from her mouth until there were no kisses left to have.

"Benedict," she moaned as his hand flexed on her bottom, grinding her against his body in a way that made him ache bone deep.

A sound—a voice, distant with its warning—pulled him from his haze and he wrenched away, standing and putting much-needed distance between them.

Angelica's eyes went wide, her lips swollen and red from their kiss.

"Brother, I think you ought to let Lady Angelica return to the ballroom," Whitmore said not far behind him, casual and cautious so as not to draw attention.

Lady Angelica stood and adjusted her gown before she slipped past them both, moving into the light and away from him.

Benedict swallowed, rubbing a hand across his jaw as if to wipe away the evidence of

his sin.

"What are you doing?" Whitmore accused, coming up to him, his tone demanding an answer that Benedict wasn't sure he could give.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "I have no damn idea what I'm doing.

" His mind reeled, his body ached and he reached down and adjusted his hard cock that had decided to work for the first time in his life.

"I upset Lady Angelica during our dance and I followed her, to explain that I was sorry that I would not court her, and, well...

" He frowned, still unsure what had happened or how.

Damn it all to Hades.

"One moment I was apologizing," he continued.

"And the next she asked me if I'd ever kissed a woman to see if the church was the right step for me, and then the next I was kissing her.

" He ran a hand over his jaw, feeling the prickle of stubble against his palm. "I couldn't stop. Once I'd started—had you not arrived—I'm not certain where my madness would have ended. "

His brother's seriousness broke and he grinned knowingly.

"As much as it pleases me that you may have found another use for your life, I doubt very much you would have tugged her on the stone bench. Even you are not so bold. But me, however, I will say that a stone bench is not the most comfortable place to

dip your cock into a woman.”

"Hartley," Benedict scolded, shaking his head, and yet his mind ventured elsewhere, somewhere it ought not. To a visualization of him and Lady Angelica, her gown shuffled up about her hips, her lips on him, as she lowered herself over and, wonderfully, over again on his rigid member.

His cock twitched at the imagining and he sighed. "I must go, seek solace in prayer and speak to my church mentor of what I've done."

"Do not do that, Benedict—not yet. While I urge you to think over your actions, do not say a word until you're certain your first kiss and your reaction to it meant more than it did.

You could have merely been overexcited that you were kissing a woman.

It may not mean that it was Lady Angelica who sparked this response. "

He frowned. "But you said in the ball that you thought I ought to pursue her. I do not understand you, brother—you're as confusing as my own thoughts."

"What I mean is, you're new to kissing or anything intimate.

And while I do think you care for Lady Angelica more than you want to admit, and perhaps she is the same after tonight's little dalliance, just take a step back.

I do not want you to regret your choice, no matter what that ends up being. That is all."

"When did you become so serious in thought?"

Whitmore chuckled and slipped his arm over his shoulders.

"Believe me, I did not want to interrupt, and you certainly seemed to know what to do.

I was worried as an older brother that you would never know or enjoy what a kiss with a woman can feel like.

But then, Lady Angelica is the daughter of late Duke Ravensmere and the sister-in-law to the current one, and after all they have done for us—for you in Hampshire—I could not allow you to be caught and have her reputation ruined. "

Benedict's chest constricted, the thought of causing any trouble for his angel unbearable.

He tried to shake that thought aside—she wasn't his angel.

She was Lady Angelica. But he did not want to take a choice away from her.

What if after their kiss she realized he was nothing exceptional?

That she had changed her mind and did not want him to pursue her? Then what?

His kissing her would have removed that choice. And his, too, would have been impacted. His decision to become a priest stripped from him before he could really decide if that was the true course of his life.

"I ought to apologize for my lack of manners and the kiss, should I not?

" he asked. "I should not have kissed her—I know.

And I did not follow her out into the gardens to do such a thing, but then in the shadows, with the hum of the music filtering through the fragrant garden, with Lady Angelica looking at me expectantly, longingly—well, I could not help myself. I had to taste her."

His brother chuckled as they came around the corner and started toward the terrace doors.

"Oh yes, women have their wiles. But you cannot kiss her again until you're sure of your choice.

Now you have a taste of what both lives would be like, and you must see which one you'd prefer.

" His brother opened the terrace door, holding it wide for him.

"I know which life I would choose." He grinned wickedly.

"And I hope you do as well. How else is the name of Whitmore to continue without heirs? "

Benedict gave his brother a withering glance. "You too will have to find a woman whom you do not want to stray from and marry to beget one of those. You cannot rely on me, and we have no other brothers to do the job, so as eldest, that does in fact fall on your shoulders—not mine."

"A shame that it does, do you not agree? I think you suit fatherhood far better than I would myself." His brother's lips turned up in revulsion. "They cry all the time and want feeding far too often for my liking. I do not want the responsibility."

"That's what a wet nurse is for."

Whitmore sighed. "True. But still—wife and children are not for me."

### Chapter

### Sixteen

Angelica returned to the ball and over the next several days she attended two dinner parties, a night at the theater, a ride in Hyde Park with Evangeline, and four balls, all of which Lord Benedict did not attend.

Of course, she should not be surprised he was not in attendance. He wasn't in London for the Season and had said that to her almost from the very first moment of their friendship, but still, after that devastatingly life-altering kiss—for her at least—she had thought she would see him again.

A fluttering flooded her stomach at the memory of the kiss, of his lips taking hers, his strong hands pulling her against him, making her body come alive for the first time in her life.

Perhaps she was being foolish and a little immature in thinking he would wish to at least speak to her regarding what had happened between them.

Of course, seeing Lord Whitmore at several events had not helped her disappointment at Lord Benedict's absence, for the brothers were similar in looks and reminded her of the other.

Still, she would not sulk for the rest of the Season. Lord Benedict had, by his absence, shown that his interest in her was not there. That he did not care if he saw her at all.



Maybe their kiss had been an act of kindness, a goodbye of sorts. That she did not know, but it was certainly not the beginning if his actions since were any indication.

So why was she standing before the side entrance of Lord Whitmore's Berkley Square home, staring at the door into the family's private chapel, her chest tight, her heart beating hard against her ribs?

She should not have sought out Lord Whitmore and asked for permission to visit Lord Benedict, but scandalously she had, and the knowing, wicked smirk from Lord Whitmore did not help her nerves or stop her from feeling like some desperate debutante chasing down a gentleman who did not want her.

Did he want her?

She cringed and clasped her hands in front of her person, her gaze on the brass door handle that she ought to reach for and turn.

Was Lord Benedict inside? Would he even wish to see her? After his absence in her life, a resounding no reverberated about in her mind. She turned to leave, chastising herself for being so silly, when her name was called and everything within her stilled.

"Lady Angelica, is that you?"

Lord Benedict. She closed her eyes but for a moment and reveled in the sound of his voice. It washed over her skin, prickling and teasing her senses as much as his touch had the other evening.

Angelica schooled her features and smiled before facing him.

He strode toward her, a long, black robe over his clothing, and several books cradled in the corner of his arm.

She drank in the sight of him, before despair washed through her.

He had made his choice, he was still learning to take his orders, and she would not win this battle.

She doubted in truth if she ever stood a chance.

"Lord Benedict, how lovely to see you," she managed, thankful her voice did not yield the distress running through her heart.

"Your brother mentioned that you worshipped here, and I was passing by and thought to call.

" All lies of course, she'd practically accosted Lord Whitmore at last night's ball, and had, in a not-too-polite way, demanded to know where Lord Benedict had been these past days.

Not to mention, did people even drop in on future priests for a social visit? She didn't think they did.

How mortifying.

Heat kissed her cheeks, and she fought not to run out onto the street and return to her sister's home to hide.

"I've just finished some study and was heading into the church." He looked up at his brother's home, before meeting her eyes. Something softened in his gaze and she wondered what he was thinking, what was going on in that beautiful head of his.

"Would you like a tour?" he asked. "The Catholic faith is not as accepted as it once was, and so Whitmore allows me to use this small chapel built onto the family home

for my own use. There are no services penned in for this afternoon."

Angelica's mind struggled with what to do. For a heartbeat or two she debated if she ought to or not, but in truth, they did need to speak about the kiss and she needed to know for certain if he was at all debating the path set out for him.

"That would be lovely, thank you. I always find churches so peaceful. Do you not agree?" she asked, as he reached for the door to open it.

"They are indeed, and many people of all faiths often visit merely to see the exquisite architecture, which is a marvel and quite extraordinary. Although our private church is not nearly as grand as others."

"Of course." They entered through the door, the cooler air from the church kissing her skin. Goosebumps rose on her arms and she couldn't help but wonder if God was angry at her for trying to seduce one of his flock from him.

Wooden pews lined each side of the church with an aisle separating them.

The altar was ornate yet small and looked to be crafted of marble.

Lord Benedict showed her the space, not a long tour as the church wasn't big before they sat on one of the front pews, studying the large cross on the wall before them.

"Over to the left there," Benedict said, "is a confessional." He gestured to the side of the church.

Angelica nodded, and glanced behind her to see if there was anyone about. "May we talk in private a moment, my lord? I feel there is much to say."

His lips thinned into a concerned line but he nodded. "Come, we shall use the

confessional. No one will interrupt us there."

She followed him across the church, and he drew back the heavy velvet curtain, motioning for her to step into the small wooden booth. Inside, she sat on the cushioned seat, and he closed the curtain behind her. A moment later, his presence on the other side of the screened partition made her start.

"I think I owe you an apology, Lady Angelica. My actions the other night were not those of a gentleman, nevertheless of a man of faith. I'm sorry if I hurt you. That was not my intention."

Angelica listened and tried to keep her emotions in check, but the sound of him apologizing, of his regret, tore her in two. She liked him, far more than any others she'd met so far in London—why could he not return those feelings?

While she wanted to support his choice, be happy for him no matter whatever his choice of employment was. But if he were so very keen on being a priest, why kiss her? Why do any of the things they had if he were not certain?

"I'm not so much hurt," she lied, "but confused. Our kiss, Lord Benedict..." she sighed. "How can you expect me to think that there was no emotion or feelings behind such an experience? For either of us. That it meant nothing to you."

He was silent and she could almost feel his body coiling in on itself with tension. The screen partition gave her a partial view of his features, and as much as she tried to study him, understand his thoughts, she could not.

"There were feelings, Angelica," he said, using her given name for the first time and forgetting the honorifics.

The sound of her name on his lips sounded intimate, and far more meaningful than it

ever had before.

"I will not deny—certainly not where we are now—that you make me confused and at odds with what I thought I wanted. "

She leaned closer, wanting to reach for him, to touch him, but she could not. "Is this the life you want? Will it truly satisfy you? For I do not think that is so. Not anymore."

He frowned and shook his head, confusion clouding his green eyes. "I do not know..."

"Tell me this," she said, breaking into his words.

"When we kissed, did you like it? I hope you do not feel obligated to me after our care of you in Hampshire, for I can assure you, I did not kiss you out of obligation.

I want to kiss you again—even here and now.

I've never felt so out of sorts than when I'm with you. Like my skin tingles and my breath stalls. I do not suffer those wonderful feelings with anyone else and if you feel even the slightest, smallest way the same, then I think we should act on those feelings and not ignore them." She paused. "I suppose what I'm saying, Lord Benedict, is that perhaps the church isn't for you."

He looked up and met her eyes. "Do you truly mean all that you say when you're around me?"

He sounded surprised, as if the notion that anyone could find him alluring was an oddity he'd not thought possible.

"You do not want to know how much I want you, Lord Benedict.

" She leaned forward, all but a breath from his lips, even if the troublesome screen separated them.

"Like now, in this quiet, dark space, alone with you, all I can think about is what I want you to do to me.

Kiss me again on the lips, neck, breast. I ache for you. "

He stared at her, his eyes wide with shock. "You ache?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, very much."

He stared in stunned silence, the tension reverberating about them thick and pungent.

Angelica's heart pounded, her breath shallow as she waited for him to move, to speak, to do anything that might tell her she hadn't just destroyed everything between them.

But he only sat there, his lips parted, eyes stormy with a thousand unspoken thoughts.

Her shoulders wilted, and she offered a small smile, his silence speaking volumes.

"I should go," she whispered, pushing to her feet, the hem of her gown brushing the floor. "Please do not come after me unless you mean to change everything."

Without another word, she slipped out of the confessional, the scent of old incense clinging to her as she fled the sacred space—and the man she might very well be falling in love with.

### Chapter

### Seventeen

Before Benedict could think better of it, he threw the curtain aside and reached for Angelica before she could get very far. He dragged her back into the confessional, sealing them off from the world.

The space, sacred and solemn, now felt stifling and fraught with temptation. He shouldn't be here. Not like this. Not with her. But God help him, he couldn't stay away.

"Angelica," he whispered, his voice thick with longing, a prayer and a plea in one. His fingers curled about her hips, and he didn't—God forgive him—stop her when she moved closer, brushing her lips against his.

The kiss undid the last restraints he clung to. The carved wood pressing into the back of his knees, the scent of wax and wood polish, the dimness did nothing to bring clear thought and sense to his mind. He shouldn't want this. Shouldn't want her. But he did.

Fiercely.

He tried to recall a psalm. Any psalm. But her kiss erased scripture, replaced it with heat and softness and the dizzying taste of her mouth. His cock stirred and a heavy need pulsed in his groin.

She opened for him, like a blossoming flower, and he kissed her deep and long. Their tongues danced, fought for domination, and he braced himself to be struck by heaven itself for his sin.

His hand slipped about her nape and there was no longer any hesitation, any barrier to their desire. He kissed her hard, drank her sweet moans and urged her to touch him, to hold him as he held her.

The desperation of their kiss stole his breath and sent his pulse pounding in his ears.

"Please choose me, Benedict," she begged.

Her words were like a punch to his lungs. How could he choose? God's service or this woman who made his body ache and his soul quake?

You could always choose a different faith, the Church of England...

"I cannot deny you anything," he said, truth and torment tightening his throat. "Even here." God forgive him, but let him have this moment. Have her...

He backed her against the confessional wall, his lips trailing across her jaw, his hands taking his fill and learning every delicious curve, every sweet mound of her person.

Without thought, he lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs about his hips, her core pressed against his, sending his mind to shatter into a million pieces.

Never had he ever felt this way. Never touched a woman so intimately, so scandalously. Never known the weight of his own desire until now.

And it terrified him.



Her hips moved against him, teasing and taunting like a seductress. Her moan lit something carnal within him he didn't know he possessed.

He set her down, breath sawing between his teeth. "Touch me, Angelica. I need you to touch me." His words were desperate and vulnerable. His skin was too tight, too constricting, and if she did not free him from this torment he would surely perish.

"Where?" she asked, her lips swollen from their kisses.

Benedict took her hand and guided it to his arousal. "Here," he said. "Touch me here."

She bit her lip, her eyes widening at the initial contact of her hand upon him. Benedict closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of her doing what he yearned for almost from the very first moment of their meeting.

Her touch was hesitant, reverent even, as though learning through her inexperience. Both of theirs in fact. Still, her petting undid him.

He clenched his jaw and scandalously pressed into her touch. He wanted to say more—confess his inexperience, his fear, that he wanted to touch her in return. Make her feel as good as she was making him.

"Like this?" she asked, looking up to meet his eyes.

He groaned as her fingers curled around his member and pulled. "Yes, just like that." He paused, taking a calming breath. "You make me want to do things—dirty things—to you."

It was wrong. It was blasphemous. But it was also honest.

“I want that too.”

He'd not thought she would ever ask for him to touch her, and yet her plea only made him more determined to satisfy her.

He reached down, lifting the skirt of her gown.

His hand slipped about her thigh, stroking her soft, warm skin.

Her silk stocking teased his fingers before he moved to stroke her between her legs.

He didn't stop, just watched her as his hand slowly moved over her mons to dip between her legs.

Her breath hitched and her body trembled as he pressed his fingers between her wet, hot folds. He swallowed a moan, fought not to spend in his breeches as she watched him, her cheeks flushed with need, her lips parted in awe.

He would never be the same. He was falling. Not from grace—but into love, into her.

“Benedict,” she moaned, her voice breaking over his name like a psalm gone ragged.

Their hands moved with increasing urgency, stroking, coaxing, tempting. He felt her need, matched it with his own. They were on a precipice—and he wasn't sure if he wanted to leap or be saved.

“I've never felt this way before,” she said. “You're making me feel so good, Benedict.”

He pressed harder into her grasp, biting back a groan. “Stroke me, Angelica.”

She reached to undo his breeches, and he caught her hand. “No,” he rasped. “Not here.” Not in God’s house. Not where absolutions were offered. Not when he hadn’t yet faced his own.

“I need you.” She pouted and his resolve almost crumbled. Damn it all to hell, was there nothing that this woman couldn’t do without him losing his senses?

“I will see you again,” he promised, his heart pounding. Because if he didn’t, he feared he might lose her forever—and if that happened, he didn’t know how he’d survive the weight of his choice.

“But you should go before anyone comes and finds us alone.” He kissed her once, twice, as if imprinting her against his soul, then slipped out of the confessional, making himself stride back to his small office and away from the temptation that was almost too much to deny.

Even here.

Her presence clung to him like incense. Her scent. Her taste. Her touch.

And yet, all he could think as he crossed the church floor was her and when he would see her again.

What have I become?

Right at this moment, he did not recognize himself. He doubted he would, even should he look into a mirror.

### Chapter

### Eighteen

The Darnley ball was in full swing by the time Benedict arrived the following evening. He entered the ballroom and moved through the throng of guests, none of which paid any particular interest in his attendance.

Just as he preferred it. Especially since his reasoning for being here was...

questionable. After yesterday afternoon with Angelica in the confessional.

The small space that was once filled with prayer and was replaced with panting, with gasps of delight, of moans of need, he doubted he'd ever look at the location in the same light.

And with that interaction, something inside of him had snapped.

As a young man, maybe he ought to have sought out the attentions of the fairer sex, seen and experienced what it would be like to lie with a woman, even if she was one who was paid for her services—at least then he would have known for certain if his path into the Catholic church was the correct one.

But he had not. And now, after meeting Angelica, after tasting her lips, holding her to him, feeling her body yield and ignite beneath his hands—damn it all to hell, he could not think straight.

He did not want to go another hour without being in her presence.

He was besotted. And there was nothing he could do about that, other than throw himself at her slippered feet and beg that she give him more of her time.

As terrible as that was—and it went against all that he'd worked toward—he really only had himself to blame. A lifetime commitment as a Catholic priest was not his only choice. He could have joined the Church of England, where marriage was allowed.

He did not have to give up his direction, and yet, because of his shyness, his inability to outrageously flirt like his brother, always a shadow walking a step behind his older sibling, he'd chosen the easier way out.

A way that allowed him to disappear.

Until Lady Angelica saw him.

He spied her standing alone beside a potted plant, her small smile lifting her pretty lips as she watched couples take part in a minuet. She rocked slightly with the music and he did not think he'd ever seen anyone more beautiful.

She quite literally took his breath away.

He started toward her and bowed when coming to her side. Her eyes lit up at the sight of him before she dipped into a curtsy.

"Lady Angelica, you are simply stunning this evening. I must demand the next dance with you," he said, proud that he was being bold and forward. Not his usual nature, but with her, he wanted to try.

"And I would be willing to give you that dance, Lord Benedict," she replied, an amused smile on her face.

He came and stood beside her, and shock ran through him at the touch of Angelica's hand slipping into his, their contact hidden by the many folds of her gown.

Her fingers linked with his and a jolt of heat went straight to his chest.

"I have missed you today," she stated without looking at him. "I do believe I may come to church more often and take confessional. Repent my sins and those that occupy my mind more than they ought."

He swallowed.

Hard.

Only too well did he know what would happen if she did and what she meant by sins.

He'd sinned later that night in his home, quiet in his room where he imagined her touch, her hands on him once more, but this time he came.

His orgasm ripping through him so violently it took all of his strength not to call out.

His cock twitched at the memory. "You should not say that here. My self-control is holding on by a knife's edge, and your words are not helping, Angelica." He dropped the honorific again. He wanted to say her name, plain and unadorned.

She smiled and slipped her arm about his as the current dance came to an end and another began.

"Shall we dance, my lord?"

"Of course, my lady. It would be an honor."

He led her out onto the floor and pulled her into his arms, closer than he ought—not just as a man, but as a man soon to be a priest. Still, he did not care what others might say. He had not taken his orders yet, and every time he held Angelica in his arms, he doubted he ever would.

The music began. A waltz.

Perfect.

She fit flawlessly in his arms. His body no longer felt like his own when she was near, and it was a sensation he could grow addicted to.

"Seeing you at balls and parties is not enough. When can we see each other—alone and without interruption?" She smiled up at him, all innocence that went against what she was saying. "I still need you."

Oh dear. Benedict could not trust himself should they be alone entirely. At least in public there were others to keep them in check. "You know what would occur if we were unaccompanied without interruption, Lady Angelica."

She tipped her head, exposing the soft skin of her neck. The urge to lean down and kiss her softness, to tease the lobe of her ear, burned within him.

"But that is the point, Lord Benedict. I must get my fill of you before you leave me to marry the church. However shall I survive knowing you're lost to me forever?"

The thought pierced him. He never wished to be lost to her. But that was exactly what would happen. "You make me question all that I've ever known or planned for. What am I going to do with you?"

"Well," she said, leaning closer—scandalously close. Her scent, a soft floral perfume, teased him. "More of what you did yesterday may be nice. And anything else that couples find enjoyable."

Hell. He wanted to kiss her breasts, see if she liked it. He wanted to fall to his knees and kiss her mons where his fingers had delved yesterday and see if she liked it. He wanted to do everything wicked he could think of and see if it made her sing.

Everything was new and unknown, and he wanted to experience it all with her.

"What do you think other couples find enjoyable?" he asked, desperate for insight. His inexperience a hindrance for the first time in his life.

"We have a book at home in Hampshire, filled with drawings that I studied one day. You know my father would not visit for months, and I often wandered the library. I happened to come across this book and it piqued my interest."

"And you read it?" His heart pounded. He would give a month's stipend to find that book in his brother's library and read it thoroughly if the book was, in fact, what he thought she was alluding to.

"I did. I took it to my room, and the images—well, they were quite scandalous." Her fingers danced near the back of his neck. "The images that are sketched into my mind make me want to do those things with you. Positions that lovers do together when alone."

Everything within him stilled. Hunger stirred—deep and unfamiliar. He closed his eyes. Just for a moment. Just to find some calm. "Angelica, there's something you must know. I'm not ashamed to admit it, but you ought to be aware."

She frowned slightly. "What is it?"



He looked around, ensured they were far enough from the other revelers.

"You're the first woman I've ever kissed.

The first I've ever touched, as we did yesterday afternoon. I've never been with a woman before, not in any way. And I fear I won't be enough for you. That I won't know what to do to satisfy you. "

Her mouth gaped a little and for the life of him he could not read her expression.

"I think you don't give yourself enough credit, Benedict.

I believe, from what I know of nature, things progress naturally.

I think if anything were to happen between us, and I dearly hope it does, we shall manage just fine.

" Her fingers stroked across his nape and a shiver ran down his spine.

"We muddled through well enough yesterday I thought. I want you so much that even now I want to crawl into your lap and rub against you like cat."

Hunger tore through him again, hot and wild. What was he doing? What was he becoming? Could he abandon his faith? His calling? Or had he merely misheard it all along?

"You feel all discombobulated like I do?

That you do not know what to do with yourself, or how to act?

" He pulled her close as they spun through the waltz.

"You do not know how to mask the undeniable attraction we have for each other, for I do not. Nor do I think I wish to pretend anymore," he admitted.

"I do not know how to do any of those things, not when I'm around you."

A shiver traced down Benedict's spine and he tightened his grip on her hand.

They needed a quiet moment.

Alone.

## Page 19

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### Chapter

### Nineteen

Angelica followed Benedict as discreetly as she could. She took one last look at the ballroom and the many guests mingling about the grand room and, satisfied no one was watching them, slipped out into a darkened corridor.

Before she could say a word to Benedict, he pushed her up against the wall and kissed her as if the world were ending and she was his only means of survival.

The hard, paneled wall was cool against her back, contrasting sharply with the heat of his mouth on hers.

Her body hungered for him, ached in the same places he'd teased yesterday afternoon.

She had left him then feeling unsatisfied and hungry for something she did not know, but an inkling told her it was something associated with the images in the book she'd found and what the couples were doing to each other.

She held him close, reveling in the press of his chest, the coarseness of his waistcoat and jacket against her sensitive flesh. Her silk gown no barrier to his hardier clothes. His hand slipped up her waist and cupped her breast, squeezing her a little until she whimpered in need.

"Oh, did I hurt you?" Benedict pulled back, a concerned shadow in his eyes.

"No," she said, shaking her head and reaching for his hand, placing his hold against her yet again. "Not at all. I like your touch, possibly too much."

He growled and took her lips, kissed her into madness until they were both writhing against each other, heedless of where they were or who could come upon them at any moment.

The distant strains of music from the ballroom were a world away.

It was madness, and absurd behavior for two people in their situations, but still the kiss did not stop.

The strokes of hand across her body left trails of need and sensation in their wake.

The undulation of bodies, pressing, seeking a release she believed would be life-shattering, but continued to be out of reach.

She clutched against him, fisted her hands into his hair and held him to her mouth, drank from him and reveled in the slide of his tongue teasing hers.

"I want you, Benedict. I cannot go much longer without having all of you."

He pulled back, stared at her, and, taking her hand, looked up and down the passage before pulling her into a nearby room. The space was void of people, the fire unlit and the curtain drawn partly closed.

There were settees near the fire and a billiard table situated at the other end of the large room.

Benedict reached behind her and closed the door, the snick of the lock loud in her ears. "Come." He pulled her toward the settee and she sat, looking up at him.

"Tell me what some of the things in that little sketch book you found has illustrated. Tell me what interests you most?"

Her mind tumbled over the many images she had seen and which ones had intrigued her the most. One came to mind, but how could she tell him of it without feeling unbearably embarrassed?

He kneeled before her, his large, warm hands on her thighs. His fingers squeezed her legs and she pressed her legs closed, trying to alleviate the want that pulsated at her core.

"The image that I saw, well, it was quite scandalous." Heat kissed her cheeks and the tips of her ears, her pulse thrumming in her throat. She was glad for the darkened room, the moonlight coming in through the curtains giving them just enough sight to see each other.

"Tell me of it. I want to satisfy you above anything else." Benedict bit his bottom lip and slowly started to push her legs apart.

His eyes were hooded, burning with a hunger and determination she'd never seen before. It left her breathless, as if she had run about Hyde Park. Her dress thankfully gave her some modicum of modesty, but his actions told her that it would not be for long.

"Very well, I shall tell you, but know that I do not expect you to do what I say.

I know we're both untutored." She paused, rallying her mind.

"The lady sat just as I am now, but her gown was up about her hips and the man's head, well...

His head was between her legs." Angelica closed her eyes as mortification swamped her.

Oh dear, had she really just said what she did? What must Benedict think of her?

She started when with slow, torturous strokes, Benedict slid her dress up her legs, exposing first her knees and then her thighs before she was bared to him from the waist down.

Angelica watched him, his face a mask of hunger and a delicious shiver stole down her spine.

This man was determined to please her, and something told her their friendship would never be the same again.

Everything would change after tonight.

No, that was not true. Everything had changed between them when they had almost kissed in Hampshire.

He dipped his head and brushed a kiss on the inside of her knee.

The sensation was intimate and soft, and Angelica fought not to demand he move faster, kiss her where she ached like some wanton hussy.

But she longed for him, having him kneeling before her, hers to command, did something strange and wonderful within her, made her want to be wicked and bold.

Benedict did not want to rush, to have this intimacy with Angelica end, and yet, he could not halt the need that pulsed through every part of his body.

Pulsated through his cock and left it pressing uncomfortably hard against his silk breeches.

He kissed along her thigh, licking her soft skin and making her squirm beneath his hold. She smelled divine, like a sweet, forbidden fruit just ripe for the picking. She lay back against the settee, watching him with a fascination he would forever cherish.

"I'm assuming this sketch showed the man kissing the woman here," he said, pressing his lips just above her mons, "and here." He slipped his hands beneath her legs and pulled her to the edge of the settee, giving him leave to do as he pleased and with very little restraint.

She attempted to close her legs, but he pressed them open, clicking his tongue in warning that she wasn't doing as he wished. He needed to see her glistening sex, her excitement for what he was about to do to her. Hungered to see how much she wanted him.

Benedict dipped his head, kissing along her wet folds before licking her sweet flesh.

She tasted divine and he moaned, unable to hold back what she did to him, what he wanted from her.

He clasped her legs, grounding himself and took his fill, suckled her soundly until she was writhing beneath him.

She gasped, watched him, her eyes bright with wonder as he licked her soundly, kissed her most sensitive, most private of places.

Honored him with her trust.

Thankfully it did not take him long to understand the mechanics of his actions. Her

movements with each flick of his tongue or suckle of his mouth told him she liked what he was doing. She undulated against him, his tongue lapping at her sweet flesh, unable to get enough of her.

He could stay here forever, if it were permissible.

“Benedict.” Her fingers spiked into his hair and he moaned, wanting her with a need that surpassed all else.

He reached for his falls, ripping them open and taking himself in hand. He'd not done so since he was a young man, and yet in two days he'd touched himself twice. But tasting her sweet cunny was too much and if he could not have her wholly, he would damn well find release another way.

She mumbled sweet nothings he could not make out, pressed closer to his touch and rolled her hips against his mouth. "Benedict, I'm... I do not know what, but..." She moaned his name, over and over as he stroked his cock and licked her cunny.

He wasn't so innocent that he didn't know what was going to happen to her and he looked forward to being the man who brought her exquisite pleasure. Her release seemed to wash over her in waves. She clutched at the settee, spread her legs and allowed him to wring out every last tremor of her desire.

He sat back and watched her as she slowly regained her perspective, stroking his cock, wanting desperately to join her.

She sat up, her eyes widening at the sight of him pleasuring himself. "I want you."

He shook his head, not allowing them to go that far, and yet he did not stop her when she climbed off the settee and onto his lap. He sat back on his heels, reveling in the feel of her wet cunny as it brushed against his engorged cock.



His head spun.

Damn it all to hell, he would never survive this night.

He clasped her hips, attempting to hold her at bay, to stop what she clearly wanted, what they both wanted, but he knew the fight wasn't in him. Not anymore.

"Please, Benedict. I want to share this with you. With only you."

Her words undid him. He kissed her deep and long. Their tongues tangled, his mind lost to the pleasure of having her in his arms, pliant and giving, a beautiful woman, inside and out, that made his heart sing.

He lifted her slightly, clasped his cock and positioned himself at her core. She held his gaze as she slowly sank down onto him, pausing every so often to adjust to his size.

He breathed through the emotions that swamped him as she claimed him, as they claimed each other. His heart hammered in his chest, his mind tumbling through ideas of what he wanted to do with her, things that they were probably both not ready for.

She rose up and slid back down on his cock and he groaned.

Lost to sensation and need. Without thought he clasped her ass, picked her up and lay her back on the settee.

He came above her, her legs slipping about his waist before he thrust into her, took her with a need that left him breathless.

She writhed beneath him, her pretty features contorting into a mask of pleasure.

Never had she ever looked so utterly beautiful in her life. He pumped into her, making her his, over and over again. She slipped her arms about his neck, holding him close, and rose to meet his every thrust.

Stars danced behind his eyelids, and he knew he would never belong to the church again.

### Chapter

### Twenty

The following morning Angelica lounged in a warm bath, a little tender after her escapades with Benedict at the Darnley ball, and yet she could not regret what had happened.

She could not regret giving her heart to a man she adored and trusted.

All her worries that he would choose the church after everything that had occurred between them floated away with the bubbles of her bath.

He would not have been so intimate with her had he been looking to leave her to continue his Catholic learnings.

He would not have placed her at risk of ruin had his intentions not been honorable.

No, she was certain that he would marry her. A man of his character would never act otherwise.

She finished her morning ablutions before heading downstairs. Her family was nowhere to be found, and she ate alone in the breakfast room, before calling for her maid to prepare to go out.

She would visit Benedict again. After their time yesterday, maybe he had already informed his mentor at the church that he'd chosen another path. Excitement

thrummed through her veins at the thought of their impending betrothal.

Several minutes later her maid appeared with her shawl, gloves and bonnet. "I'm ready, Lady Angelica."

"Thank you," she said, moving to put on her gloves and hat before slipping the shawl over her shoulders. The footman opened the door, and she moved down the steps and onto the street, heading in the direction of Lord Whitmore's home across the square.

"I shall be calling on Lord Benedict this morning.

You may wait for me at the back of the church, thank you. "

Her maid cast her a concerned glance that Angelica ignored. "Are you certain, Lady Angelica? Lady St. George said that I'm to ensure your safety and reputation is unharmed at all times."

Angelica smiled at her maid, knowing very well her sister had no doubt cautioned her to ensure she was never at risk of ruining her reputation. But Benedict was different. He would be her husband, she was certain of it. There was no danger with him.

"I'm visiting his lordship at the Whitmore's private chapel and will not be long.

I merely wish to check on Lord Benedict and see how his leg is feeling after last night's ball.

" And after what they had done. The memory of him, claiming her with a fierceness a desperation that left her head spinning made her stumble and she reached out to her maid to stop herself from falling.

"Very well, my lady," her maid acquiesced, letting her go once she'd regained her

balance. “I shall wait at the back of the church.”

“Thank you.” Angelica took a calming breath, trying to still the nerves that tumbled in her stomach at seeing Benedict again. Was she being scandalous seeking him out at the church again? Possibly, but she also could not help herself. She needed to see him, to touch him—if not kiss him again.

She was terribly attached to the gentleman, and did not know what she would do should he continue believing the church was for him. It was not. She was for him—for if she had not been, he would never have kissed her in the first place, nevertheless what else they had done.

After several minutes of brisk walking, they arrived before the large Georgian town house across the park. She started down the side path of the home and entered the church without thought as to what she may find. The sight that beheld her left her stupefied.

Lord Benedict stood before a small congregation of people. All of whom listened patiently to his sermon. His words...

“Choices—heavy, aching choices—meet us all.

We may find ourselves torn between duty and desire, between the vows we made and the voice that whispers, 'What if?

' Yet even in doubt, we are not alone. God does not ask for perfection—only faithfulness in the midst of confusion. Let us remember: the heart may wander, but grace never does.”

Angelica slumped down beside her maid for several minutes. She caught Benedict’s eyes, his widening with recognition, before his face turned ashen and he continued

his speech.

She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat that his reaction to her presence meant regret. He was merely tired after a late evening at the Darnley ball, nothing more, and she ought not read into his pallor any more than that.

But then, what was he doing still holding a mass? Surely after what they had done last evening he would have told the Catholic faith he could no longer continue as he was before?

That his choice was to marry her and possibly join the Church of England.

The service went on for several more minutes before coming to an end. Angelica remained seated, watched as those who came to the service shook hands with Benedict and another priest who seemed to have watched in silence near the altar, before leaving the church.

The other priest spoke quickly to Benedict before he too left the church, leaving them finally alone. Angelica stood and started for the front of the church, Benedict too striding to meet her halfway. "Lord Benedict," she said. "I did not expect to find you so occupied this morning."

A muscle worked in his jaw and he cast her maid a quick glance before meeting her eyes. "You should not be here, Angelica," he warned, his voice low and with purpose. "You must think of your reputation."

Angelica frowned, unsure why her presence here would offend him.

"I wanted to see you. I thought that you would feel the same.

" She paused. "My being here and listening to your sermon is no more scandalous

than anyone else who just left.” She hoped her tone wasn’t as biting as she believed it to be, but what was wrong with him? Why was he so hot and cold toward her?

"I do feel the same." He sighed, rubbing a hand across his jaw. "The sight of you makes me want to strip that pretty little green gown from your person, lay you bare on the altar and make you scream a second time. That is why you ought not be here," he whispered.

His words went a little way in alleviating her fear that she’d been mistaken regarding what was happening between them. "I cannot stop thinking of our time alone either.”

"I feared," he continued, "that the congregation would see how much I wanted you too. Perhaps it was fortunate that the service was almost over by the time you arrived, for you are one delicious sweet that I want to gorge myself on."

"Truly?" She fought not to grin like a cat who had found the cream, but she could not help it. "I'm so pleased to hear you say so."

Benedict glanced around the church and reached for her hand. "Come, follow me to my office. It is at the back of the church."

Excitement thrummed through her, wicked and warm.

She followed as demurely as possible, but inside she was a ball of desire, of expectation and hunger.

Her mind fought to remember the naughty sketches, wondering which ones they could do next.

What ones he’d like to do if she could envision and voice them.

Down a short passage they came to a door which Benedict opened and pulled her through. The room was plain, with white walls and tall windows, a desk and two chairs. The ceiling, however, had a pretty painting of clouds and cherubs dancing in the heavens.

Benedict closed the door and leaned against it as she took in the room, the hint of sandalwood in the air reminding her of him.

A wickedness overcame her now that they were alone and she leaned against the desk, facing him. Without shame, she lifted herself to sit upon the dark mahogany and started to raise her gown, revealing her silk stockings and half boots.

Benedict did not move, but a muscle worked in his jaw, revealing the tension in his body. His hands fisted at his sides, reminding her of a predator before it pounced.

"I slept so wonderfully last night and had the most relaxing bath this morning. The feel of the water on my skin reminded me of your touch, and I had to come see you."

"You're wicked, Lady Angelica," he murmured, pushing away from the door, ripping at his falls with each step that brought him closer.

She watched, fascinated and relieved he wanted her again. He clasped behind her knees and pulled her to the edge of the desk, his manhood erect and engorged in his hand.

"I'm going to fuck you on my desk. Don't make a sound."

She nodded, fought to swallow the whimper that threatened to voice itself.

The way he spoke, dominant and commanding, did odd things to her, and she knew in that moment she would do anything at all that he asked.



He pushed her gown out of the way, hoisted her legs about his hips and guided himself into her, taking her completely.

Delicious sensation swamped her, and she lay back onto the desk, watching him above her, strong and muscular, rigid within her, making them one.

His fingers dug into her hips, and he thrust.

Hard.

Angelica moaned, bit her lip in an attempt to stop the sensations that overwhelmed her, but the struggle was hard.

He filled her, inflamed her every nerve with each thrust. The sight of him in his robes, pushed out of the way as he claimed her on his desk, was wicked, but something she also could not help but revel in.

"Yes, Benedict," she gasped, as he rolled his thumb over her sex, teasing her as he took her.

The sensation was too much, and for a moment Angelica could not catch her breath.

"I'm going to make you come," he promised, his voice dark and determined. "But don't scream, darling. Do you understand? You cannot make a sound."

She nodded, covering her mouth with her hand as he pumped relentlessly into her.

She clasped on to the edge of the desk, unsure she was ready for such overwhelming sensations.

Their coming together was quick, frantic, and she fought to ground herself as sweet,

telltale sensations started to spark within her body.

“Benedict,” she gasped, not wanting this moment to end, but also craving what he could give her.

The precipice they climbed surfaced, and helpless to fight how he made her feel, she tumbled over the cliff. Tremor after delicious tremor rolled through her and she clamped her mouth closed in an attempt not to call out his name—not to scream yes .

“Angelica...” Benedict made a low, guttural moan through his release, and she reveled in the sound of his pleasure.

She opened her eyes and watched him and knew she could not live without this man. She was his, and he was hers—and nothing, not even God himself, would take that away from her.

### Chapter

### Twenty-One

Angelica made it home before Evangeline and Lord St. George returned from wherever it was they had gone in the morning. She sat in the rear drawing room, looking out onto the terrace and watched what remained of the beautiful day pass by.

And what a wonderful day it had been, especially after her interaction with Benedict.

She could no longer question her feelings for the gentleman, she knew what she felt for him was true and sound. She adored him, and had fallen utterly in love with the man.

Now she needed him to marry her.

After today, and their delicious meeting in his office, there was little chance he would not ask for her hand. He could not keep away from her any more than she could keep away from him, and he would do the right thing and ask her to be his wife.

She would soon be part of the Deverell family. How wonderful that sounded.

"Ah, here you are, my dear," Evangeline said, coming into the room and walking over to the bellpull, ringing for a servant. "What a morning. I went shopping. I saw that you were sound asleep and so did not wake you to join us. I hope you do not mind."

"Not at all," Angelica stated. "But now that you're home, I do have something I wish

to discuss with you. Have your thoughts, if possible."

"Oh, of course, dear." Evangeline sat just as a servant entered the room. "Tea and a light repast for two, thank you," she ordered before giving Angelica her attention.

"Is Lord St. George not joining us?" Angelica asked.

"No, he's headed off to his club for the afternoon.

"A small, knowing smile crossed her sister's lips, and Angelica now understood the look a little more than she did a few weeks ago.

The look of devotion and love and secrets a couple kept for themselves...

It made her heart flutter—perhaps one day very soon she would wear that same look.

"What is it that you wanted to discuss?" Evangeline asked, settling back on the settee and giving Angelica her full attention.

"Well, as to that, I need you to know that for some time I have had a friendship with Lord Benedict. I like him very much and enjoyed his company and learned much about him when he was recuperating in Hampshire."

"Lord Benedict," Evangeline repeated, watching her closely. "Whitmore's younger brother who's set to enter the church. The Catholic church?"

Angelica cleared her throat, knowing what her sister was getting at. "Yes, the very one," she continued. "Well, I do not think that he will join the church now. I do believe we've formed an attachment, and he is but days from asking Lord St. George for approval to ask for my hand in marriage."

"Truly?" Evangeline said, her eyes wide with surprise. "Are you certain, dearest?"

The image of them on his desk in the church floated through her mind. The feel of him thrusting into her, his hand on the sweet spot between her legs, telling her not to make a sound when all she wanted to do was scream.

She swallowed. "I'm most certain. I do not think he will continue with his studies to join the church and will, in fact, ask me to be his wife, and I would like you to talk to St. George so that it is not a shock to him as it clearly is to you."

"A shock, yes." Evangeline smiled, just as the tea and some sandwiches were brought in.

"Thank you," Evangeline said to the maid before once again they were alone.

"Men who join the Catholic church do not normally sway from their chosen path.

Has something happened between you that makes you believe that he shall? "

Angelica paused, reaching for a macaroon.

While she wished she could tell her sister everything, she knew if she did, Evangeline would tell Lord St. George and marriage would be forced between her and Benedict, which she did not want.

She wanted him to marry her because he wanted to. Because he loved her above all else.

"No, nothing has occurred and I'm unsure what you mean," she ventured, hoping her sister would stop such rationale. "I think I love him, and I believe he loves me, that is all, and I want to marry him."

Evangeline sat forward and poured them both a cup of tea before handing her a cup.

"I like Lord Benedict, I truly do, and you're going to think me terribly rude for saying what I'm about to, but it is so early in the Season and you've barely given yourself time to meet other gentlemen, nevertheless form a friendship with them.

What if there is another you're yet to meet that makes you feel more than you do with Lord Benedict. What then?"

Angelica shook her head and took a sip of tea, the warmth grounding her resolve. "That will not occur. And we have been in London a couple of weeks already, and I have danced with many, many men, none of whom have raised one goosebump on my arms, nothing."

"You get goosebumps when you're near Lord Benedict?" Evangeline asked.

A delicious shiver stole down Angelica's spine at the mere thought of him. "I do, yes. I experience all sorts of things when I'm around him. He makes me want to be married to him, to be alone with him, without people forever keeping us apart—that is how I feel when I'm near Lord Benedict."

Her sister watched her for a moment before she nodded. "Very well, I can see that you're in earnest, and if Lord Benedict feels the same as you, well then, how wonderful for you both. I shall be very happy for you and will welcome Lord Benedict into the family with open arms."

"Thank you, Evangeline." Angelica wanted to jump up and twirl for joy, instead she sipped her tea and fought not to grin absurdly wide. "So you will speak to Lord St. George, ensure he understands the situation and will not argue with Lord Benedict when he comes to call?"

"Of course I shall. I will speak to him this evening before we attend the Austen dinner, which I think you'll be pleased to hear has Lord Whitmore and Lord Benedict on the invitation list."

"It does?" she asked. "How did you find that out, considering I've only just now raised the possibility of my affections for Lord Benedict?"

Evangeline waved her question aside. "Oh, I asked Lady Austen the other evening who would be in attendance, just making conversation, and she ended up telling me everyone on the list and her reasoning as to why she'd invited them.

So be pre-warned that Lady Austen is a conversationalist and will keep you from Lord Benedict should she think you're interested in what she's saying, for no doubt, she'll have more interesting things to say that you ought to be listening to. "

Angelica chuckled. "I shall keep that in mind for tonight." For she would hate to have an evening entirely devoted to a subject that did not interest her and kept her from Benedict. But perhaps this too was part of her preparation—learning the art of hosting, of patience while in society.

The idea wasn't abhorrent, and she looked forward to the day she and Benedict welcomed her family and friends to visit or to host special entertainments during the Season.

Angelica tried to curb her enthusiasm and not get too far ahead of herself imagining such a future with Benedict, but she could not help herself.

They had been intimate twice and had kissed several times—there was no doubt in her mind he wanted her for his wife.

He merely needed time to notify his faith and then they could publicly announce their

betrothal.

"I believe there will be music and games after dinner this evening as well.

I'm certain that if you're not seated beside Lord Benedict at dinner, you'll certainly have time to speak to him alone after the fact.

And," her sister continued, "it shall give St. George and myself a chance to speak to Lord Benedict more, hopefully let him know without saying anything discernible regarding our discussion today, that we like him very much and think he's a most suitable gentleman. "

"Oh, yes, please, Evangeline. That would be so kind of you both. But please, do not be blatant with your efforts—I do not want him to feel forced."

"Of course, dearest, I would never do so, no. We shall merely have a lovely conversation with him and let him know without words that we enjoy his company and like him very much."

"Thank you." Angelica finished her tea and reached for a sandwich. Would she get any time to be alone with Benedict this evening? Probably not, but then a stroll onto the terrace would not be amiss or bring too much attention—not if others were doing the same.

"I have much hope for my future, Evangeline," Angelica admitted, almost giddy with the idea of being Benedict's wife. Of marrying him, promising him a wonderful future that they could share.

"And that is how it should be, Angelica. We expect a call from his lordship any day."



### Chapter

### Twenty-Two

The dinner at Lord and Lady Austen's was a lively affair with over twenty people in attendance, mostly married couples, some of whom had their daughters debuting the same year as Angelica.

Unfortunately, she wasn't seated beside Lord Benedict, who happened to be seated across from her instead and beside the pretty Miss Langley, a young woman of eighteen whom Angelica had never met before.

"You're for the church, I understand, Lord Benedict. How wonderful and honorable a field of work that shall be for you. I'm quite jealous." A light blush stole over Lord Benedict's cheeks, and Angelica couldn't help but feel a little guilty at his unease.

She supposed after what they'd been doing of late he wasn't very honorable after all in his profession, not that Miss Langley would ever know the truth of their time together.

The ton would know soon enough when he asked her for her hand in marriage.

"Thank you, Miss Langley. It is a big undertaking and requires much thought."

The young woman studied him and frowned. "I should hope that thought does not mean that you're thinking of leaving the church. I must admit, I attended one of your sermons this week and was quite moved. You suit the position well."

Miss Austen's frosty glance across the table at Angelica made her stomach knot. Had Miss Austen been at the church the same day she visited? She did not dare speak up and ask which sermon she attended. Surely she had not seen Benedict pull her toward his office...

Angelica picked up her wine and took a hardy sip, grateful when Lord Hedding at her side engaged her in conversation. "How are you finding the Season, Lady Angelica? I hope you'll be attending the Goose ball tomorrow evening. I would so love to scribble my name on your dance card?"

She smiled at Lord Hedding. Having not known him before tonight's dinner, she had been delighted with his cheerful demeanor so far.

"Of course, my lord. I shall ensure a space is left for you.

" She heard a clearing of a gentleman's throat and looked up to find Benedict staring at her, displeasure written across his handsome features.

Angelica ignored Benedict's unease for there was very little she could do to stop a gentleman from asking her to dance, especially when Benedict had yet to propose.

"I understand you hail from Hampshire. I'm from Surrey, the county just over. We're practically neighbors," Lord Hedding continued.

Angelica tore her gaze away from Benedict and back to her dinner companion. "Yes, we essentially are. Have you ever visited our estate, my lord?"

"Only once, and only to collect a horse I had ah... I had bought from your father, my lady."

Angelica picked up her wine and sipped. "You mean you won it from my father?"

She chuckled. "All is well, my lord. I know the vices of men and what they enjoy when in London, my father no exception I'm sure."

He raised his brows at her words but did not state his disagreement.

"I must say for all your father's mettlesome lifestyle, his daughters are remarkably levelheaded.

It must be trying to know the late duke, may he rest in peace, has three illegitimate daughters, but a few blocks from where you now live.

The late Duke Ravensmere, as much as you adored him, clearly enjoyed his Seasons in town a little too much, do you not agree?

" Lord Hedding grinned, oblivious to the shock that catapulted through her at his words.

Sisters? Illegitimate sisters? In London?

Everything in Angelica stilled. She looked to Evangeline, noted her sister was oblivious and engaged in conversation with Lady Austen and had not overheard what Lord Hedding had said.

She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and pushed back her chair. "Excuse me, Lord Hedding." Angelica stood, both out of shock and the boldness of a perfect stranger up until several minutes before who could state such a thing to her without caution.

Evangeline followed when she noted her moving toward the door. "Angelica, are you well?" she asked.

Angelica turned, knowing they needed to return home. "No, may we leave? I'm feeling unwell."

"Oh, of course." Lord St. George stood and turned to this evening's hosts. "We're very sorry to leave, and do apologize," he said, joining her and Evangeline at the door.

Lord Austen waved them off with his napkin. "No, of course we understand if the young Lady Angelica is unwell. We hope you're feeling better soon, dear."

She nodded and soon was ushered outside and into the carriage.

Evangeline sat next to her, fussing, and Angelica clasped her hands, stilling her mothering.

"Does Father have three illegitimate daughters in London?"

Lord Hedding says that he does. Do you know of them?

" she asked, unable to comprehend such a thing to be true.

Sisters? No, it was impossible.

Evangeline stopped fussing and frowned. "Father does not have any more children other than us of course. What nonsense Lord Hedding speaks."

Her sister's words went some way in easing her concern, but when she glanced at Lord St. George, he unfortunately did not look quite so shocked by this news. "Lord St. George, do you know something that we do not?" she asked.

His lordship cringed before meeting his wife's eyes.

“Ezra?” Evangeline questioned.

Her brother-in-law let out a resigned sigh. "What Lord Hedding says is true. The late duke had a mistress during his time in London and fathered three daughters. They have agreed to remain out of society and wish to remain so considering they are tarnished by who their mother was."

"How do you know such things?" Evangeline asked, looking at Lord St. George as if he'd grown two heads. "This cannot be true."

"Ravensmere told me before I proposed. He thought I should know."

"You should know?" Evangeline blustered. "What about what we should know—you know, the sisters of these other ladies?" Evangeline shut her mouth with a snap and clasped Angelica's hand. "Does Rosalind know?"

St. George nodded. "Yes, she does."

"Well, I never." Evangeline looked at Angelica and she could see by her sister's scowl that she was angry at the situation.

"That is not the kind of secret a family ought to keep."

And Lord Hedding blurting out such remarks at dinner to Angelica, who knew nothing of it, is just scandalous.

I shall write to Rosalind tonight and demand to know everything, including where they live. "

"You cannot call on women who are illegitimate, Evangeline. It would not be proper."

Her sister tipped her head up into the air and stared out the window. "I shall do whatever I like as the Countess St. George, and anyone who says otherwise can go hang."

"Evangeline," Lord St. George warned, his voice low, which to Angelica's amusement did not seem to have any effect on her sister whatsoever.

"I should like to know more too," Angelica said. "When Rosalind writes, do be sure to inform me. As much as it was a shock to find out such news, I am curious as to what they're like, and I would like to join you should you go and visit them."

Lord St. George let out a frustrated sigh. "You are legitimate daughters of the Duke of Ravensmere—you cannot go and visit women who are daughters of a whore."

Evangeline gaped at her husband, and Angelica decided to remain quiet.

"They cannot choose who their parents are.

Had we been able to choose who our father was, I can assure you, husband, that we would have chosen better for ourselves than we were afforded.

And let us not forget," she added when St. George went to say something to his wife, "that they are our sisters, and so illegitimate or not, we're not the kind of women who would not want to know all there is about them. "

"Angelica is also your sister, and associating yourself with women who are not your equal could place her reputation at risk."

"I do not believe that," Evangeline said, yet again tipping her nose up in the air and looking out the window.

Angelica did the same, not wanting to argue with her brother-in-law and certainly not wanting to get in the middle of a dispute between a married couple.

Not that St. George had anything to worry about regarding her being able to find a husband.

She was certain that Benedict would ask for her hand in only a matter of days, and so their interest in their half sisters would not affect her Season.

And if they visited them without letting anyone in society know of it, their association to their father's children would not hurt Isabella's or Cordelia's coming out either.

The carriage rolled to a halt and the footman quickly came and set down the steps and opened the door. Angelica jumped down and started indoors, leaving her sister and St. George to continue their heated discussion as they followed her up to their suite of rooms.

She shut her bedroom door and leaned against it. At least now she knew of her second family. She would be better prepared should anyone ask her of them at the ton events.

She would not be placed off guard a second time.

She rang for her maid and dressed into her nightdress and slipped into bed, disappointed that the shock of the news had kept her from speaking to Benedict this evening.

She would send a missive in the morning telling him of their plans tomorrow night—and then she would see him again, and explain why they left so hastily.

He would understand. He was too kind not to.



### Chapter

### Twenty-Three

Benedict knew right at this moment that he'd lost his senses. He stood outside in the back gardens of the St. George town house, looking up at a wall of windows, debating which one could be Angelica's.

He did not know which room he stood beneath, but he hoped, having seen the candlelight flickering on one above stair, that it may possibly be Angelica's. A gamble, and one he wasn't sure he ought to take, but one he would in any case.

He had to see her. Ensure that she was well and not too poorly.

The night was still young, and after Angelica and her family had left the dinner abruptly, all he'd wanted was to leave also and check on her. He couldn't shake the notion that Lord Hedding, whom she'd been sitting beside at dinner, spoke of something that had upset her.

The rooms upstairs were all dark, save for one that had the smallest glow, possibly from a bedside table candle.

He leaned down and picked up the smallest pebble he could find and threw it at the glass windowpane.

It clicked at contact, thankfully not too loud, but hopefully loud enough to bring whoever slept in that room to the window.

He stood on the terrace, trying to shield himself from view as much as he could with the large potted plants that sat in ornate pots on the flagstones. After what seemed like hours, a figure moved to the window and threw back the curtains.

He sighed in relief at the sight of Angelica. Luck was with him this evening, and he moved into the moonlight and waved.

She spied him almost instantly and opened the window, leaning out over the seal, her smile lighting up the night as if it were day. "What are you doing here?" she whispered, amusement tainting her voice. "If you're caught trying to gain my attention in this way, we'll both be ruined."

Benedict ought to feel concern, shame at his actions for skulking in a debutante's garden late at night, but he could not. Not if it meant he got to see her again. "You left dinner so suddenly, and I was worried. I wanted to check to see if you were well."

"I'm perfectly well, thank you." She looked behind herself for a moment and then turned back to him. "Stay there. I shall be down soon." She quickly closed the window and curtains and was gone, leaving him alone.

He stepped back into the shadows and waited.

For several minutes he anticipated her arrival, hoped that no servant chose to check the yard before locking up the house and find him loitering out in the gardens.

There would be no explaining away his actions, other than the fact he was utterly besotted by a woman and could not help himself.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Angelica opened the rear drawing room door and slipped into the night to meet him.

His breath caught in his lungs at the sight of her in her nightgown and silk pelisse with a repeat leaf design all over it. Her feet bare as she stole across the flagstones to meet him. Her smile was wide and he could see a wickedness, and pleasure burned strong in her green depths.

"I feel terribly naughty meeting you out here. Whatever would society say should they know about us?"

"They would say you're a temptress who's besotted me body and soul and I could not rest this night without seeing you again." He pulled her into his arms and held her close, breathed in the sweet scent of rose that drifted from her tonight.

"Besotted, are you?" she teased, looking up at him. "Well then I suppose I should admit to feeling the same about you."

Without thought as to where they were or if anyone happened to be about, he dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers.

She leaned into the kiss, her mouth urgent on his and all sensible thought vanished.

He drank from her, took all that she would offer him, and he knew he could not live without this woman.

"Marry me," he whispered against her lips, kissing her gasp of surprise away before she pulled back to stare at him.

"Marry you?" she said, her eyes wide. "What about the church? Everything you've worked so hard for? I do not want you to regret me."

Her concern almost buckled him to his knees, both in relief and fear, for he would never regret her or anything that they did. He loathed the thought she would ever

think that. Yes, he'd studied long hours to become a Catholic priest, but that did not mean his priorities could not change.

"While I never counted on meeting anyone like you, I cannot help but believe that fate took a hand in our paths crossing to show me what I truly long for above anything else.

I want to marry you. I cannot give my heart and my whole life to the church, nor would they wish me to, should I find myself conflicted with my choice.

And while I'm indeed conflicted, I'm thinking perfectly clear when it comes to who I want as my wife, the mother of my children.

" He pulled her closer, needing her against him.

"Marry me, Angelica. Say yes, and marry me," he begged.

She bit her lip and looked utterly adorable as tears filled her pretty eyes. She nodded and sniffed. "Yes, I shall marry you, Benedict. I adore you too," she said.

Relief poured through him, and he kissed her, unable to satisfy himself of his future wife.

"It shall take me some time to notify the church of my intentions and to make the necessary preparations to break from what is already put in place, but I assure you that I shall start first thing tomorrow in ensuring our future. I will move to join the Church of England if after reflection that is what I wish to do, but that is a discussion we can have at another time." He paused.

"We shall be married before the end of the Season. I promise you that."

"I do not doubt you." She slipped her arms about his neck and stood on her tiptoes. "I do not want you to leave."

"Nor I." He held her, finally remembering why he had come to see her. "What happened at dinner? You left so suddenly, and I can see that you're not unwell."

Angelica guided him farther into the gardens and led him toward where a wooden arbor was erected beside a fountain. She pulled him under the structure and sat on the daybed, an abundance of cushions and blankets sitting around her.

Angelica patted the place beside her inviting him to join her. "Lord Hedding divulged some troubling news that I've never heard of before and I must admit, I was quite shocked from it."

"What news?" He joined her, hoping that Lord Hedding had not said anything offensive or he should be forced to say something to the fellow. "What did his lordship say?"

She sighed and slumped back onto the daybed.

"It appears that my father, the late duke, had a mistress and fathered three daughters by her.

They live in London apparently, and both Evangeline and I were completely unaware.

Lord Hedding asked me of them tonight at dinner, which by the way I find most shocking, not only to bring up a subject that ought not to be discussed at dinner but with a lady who has nothing to do with the situation or aware of it. "

"You have siblings you did not know of here in London.

" Benedict stared at Angelica, quite shocked himself.

"I'm sorry you found out about them in such a way.

" He reached for her hand and, picking it up, kissed her palm.

"I hope you're not upset by what Hedding has disclosed.

He has a reputation for being crass and too bold with his words for his own good and that of others, unfortunately. "

She sat up and clasped his jaw, her eyes drinking in his features. "You are so lovely and kind to me, Benedict. How lucky I was to meet you."

He reached for her, knowing that it was he who had been fortunate. Had he not been shot that fateful day, had he not been cared for by her, he may have spent his entire life only surviving and not living.

"I'm the fortunate one, Angelica." He dipped his head and kissed her with a reverence he felt to his core.

"I shudder at the thought of my life had I met you after I took my orders.

I know now that I could not have remained within the institution, had I known you existed outside my realm and were unattainable, untouchable to me. "

Her gaze softened and she pushed him back onto the daybed, moving to straddle him. His body heated, hardened and he clasped her hips, forcing himself to breathe. To think straight and not lose control.

"I would not have left you alone. Not even the church could keep me away."

He grinned, knowing how true those words were. For both of them. "Amen to that."

### Chapter

### Twenty-Four

Angelica reached for Benedict's falls, knowing what she wanted. Him.

He did not protest her actions as she unclipped the buttons keeping him from her nor when she clasped his hardened manhood that pressed between her legs.

"Angelica," he moaned, his fingers clasping her hips and holding her fast. "I want you so much."

She wiggled up her nightdress and moved to take him into her.

He was so deliciously hard, and her body ached to feel that sweet release only he could give her.

She slowly impaled herself on his length, breathing deep as sensation threatened to overwhelm her.

She closed her eyes, focused on the sweet friction, the fullness, the delicious heat of their joining, fighting not to make any noise that would rouse suspicion from the house.

"Yes," she sighed, lifting herself and taking him entirely. "I know, it's impossible to get enough of you."



He sat up and before she knew what he was about he'd flipped her onto her back and thrust into her, taking her deep. Angelica was powerless to stop the moan that slipped past her lips. She wrapped her legs about his hips and rolled herself against him as he made love to her.

"You're everything to me. I long for you to be my wife."

His words kindled a wild and bright fervor within her chest, sparking heat beneath her skin. She adored his kindness, his sweet nature, and knew he was the kind of man she'd always dreamed of.

A man who loved her unconditionally, unlike anything she had ever known before.

"I cannot wait to call you husband," she whispered back. He kissed her, long and hard, their tongues tangling, their teeth clashing. Fire raced through her limbs, and the delicious ache between her legs grew with each joining.

Benedict leaned back on his heels, pulling her into him, watching her from above from this new and different angle. He pressed within her, hitting a spot that sent stars to flutter before her eyes. He rolled his thumb over her sensitive flesh, watching her, gauging her enjoyment of his actions.

He thrust into her, slower now, more controlled but in a way that left her breathless and all at sea. The action teased, built a pleasure within her that grew and taunted to be freed before it was subdued, only to build once again, leaving her wanton.

She reached up and clasped one of her breasts, squeezing her nipple to try to alleviate the desire that swarmed within her. He was so handsome, towering over her, a man in control of their lovemaking, making her sing to his wicked instrument.

"I want to make you scream my name," he breathed, his eyes heavy with need and a

promise to make what he said come true.

She breathed through the onslaught of desire. She worked herself against him, desperate for release, to gain what he wanted from her, what they both wanted. "Make me scream, Benedict."

He growled and came over her, clasping her hands above her head and pinning them onto the cushions. He thrust hard, his other hand lifting one of her legs to ensure she did not move.

She was completely under his control, and never had she ever wanted anything as much as she wanted this moment to last forever. The pounding rhythm of his body against hers, the pressure, the sensation of being possessed completely—it all mounted into a wild, trembling crescendo.

Her body tightened, bracing for the final moment, her senses igniting with every thrust. Her body was not her own and the sweet tremors rolled through her, a kaleidoscope of pleasure that pulsed between her legs, spiraling her into a world where it was only Benedict and herself who resided there.

He moaned her name, the sound mingling with her cry of release as they found the pinnacle of gratification together. Benedict slumped beside her, his breathing ragged as he pulled her into the crook of his arm, his hand idly stroking her back.

She lay against him, her leg lazily over his and she closed her eyes, reveling in the warmth of his skin, the solid weight of his thigh beneath hers, and the strong thrum of his heartbeat.

"I shall inform the church this week and start the process of leaving. I promise."

She leaned up on his chest and studied him, her fingers tracing a faint line across his

collarbone. "What will you do when you leave the church? Will you continue in the church but with the Church of England, or do you not believe that life is for you at all now?"

Benedict looked up into the night sky a moment in thought.

"I have the means to live a life of a country gentleman, and I will not make that choice until we're married and settled.

I want to be your husband, just you and me for a time and then we shall decide if my becoming a local vicar is something we want.

" He kissed the top of her head, his hold on her tightening.

"After we're married I want to travel, to live, and enjoy our time together.

I do not want to be committed to a church service every Sunday.

I would much rather be snuggling with you in our suite of rooms somewhere in the world. "

She chuckled at his suggestion and did not have to imagine how lovely those days with him would be. "Forgive me for sounding vulgar, but is that type of life even possible for us? With you being the second son, I know sometimes fathers do not do as they should for all their offspring."

"Ah, you're concerned." A wistful smile crossed his face.

"My father was a very good man, and so too is my brother.

I was left a considerable fortune for myself, no matter what I choose to do as the

second son.

There is an estate in Kent that is mine, and we shall never want for anything.

I never thought I would have anyone to share such fortune with, but I'm glad that it will now be with you. "

Angelica nodded, and while she was pleased to hear they would have enough funds to feed and clothe themselves, it was a relief to know that they would never have to worry when it came to monetary concerns.

"Your father sounds like a much better man than mine had been. How lucky you were."

Benedict's arm tightened around her, and she wiggled closer to him, wanting to feel his warmth. "I promise that should we have children, I too will be a good father for our offspring. I assure you with everything that I am that it will be so."

Angelica reached up and clasped his jaw, kissing him softly. "I do not want you to leave. I want to marry you tomorrow so we may never part again."

"I will speak to the church and then Lord St. George and we will be wed soon, very soon. I promise."

"And I shall hold you to that promise."

Angelica woke in her room and stretched under the morning sun that beamed in through her bedroom windows. After Benedict snuck out of their gardens in the early hours of the morning, she too had tiptoed back into the house and had promptly fallen into a deep sleep.

Before she could rise, her sister bustled into the room, carrying a box along with her maid who had several more.

"Dearest, your new dresses for the remainder of the Season have arrived. I thought this evening for the Goose ball you could wear the emerald dress and perhaps the diamond earbobs that Rosalind gifted you as your coming out."

Angelica threw back her blankets and rose, picking up a cup of hot chocolate that had been left beside her bed when her maid had opened up her curtains earlier.

"That would be lovely." She glanced in the box that the green silk dress lay within and pulled it out and placed it on the bed. "Oh, how darling it is." And she hoped that Benedict too would find it charming.

"It'll bring out the color of your eyes," Evangeline continued. "Please leave us, May," she said to the maid, who promptly left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Evangeline turned back to Angelica, the look on her face one of concern. "Sit, Angelica, we need to talk," she said, moving over to the settee before the fire.

Angelica did as she asked, giving her sister her full attention, hoping she would not bring up what she had done last evening in the gardens with Benedict. Not that she regretted her choice, but she also did not want to cause scandal for the family.

"I heard back from Rosalind regarding father's illegitimate daughters in London. Rosalind thought she was doing the right thing by keeping that information from us, but understood why we wanted to know the truth after what Lord Hedding said to you at dinner the other evening."

Relief poured through Angelica that her sister's conversation had nothing to do with her or Benedict. "What did Rosalind say?" she asked.

"The same that St. George explained the other evening, but she has suggested that we do not seek them out, for that is what was agreed.

They would keep out of society's way and allow us to have our Seasons. Apparently, they wish to distance themselves from their mother's employment and wish to live an honest life. "

The news made Angelica want to meet them all the more. How kind and thoughtful they sounded. "I still think we should meet them. We share a father, and they do not sound unpleasant. I do not know why we cannot be friends."

"Because Rosalind has said so, and for now we must adhere to her rules, but never say never, dearest. We shall work on her and see what comes of it."

What comes of it? Yes, them having three more sisters, with any luck.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Five

Later that morning, Angelica snuck out of the St. George Berkeley Square town house and started across the park without her maid, determined to see Benedict before the ball this evening.

Even if she only saw him for a moment, that would suffice until they could meet again.

Until she could dance and sneak away at the ball and kiss him to her heart's content.

The Whitmore town house came into view and, walking along the flagstone sidewalk, she opened the side gate to the marquess's yard and started for the church.

A smile lifted on her lips, her heart fluttering like a trapped bird, excitement thrumming through her veins at the prospect of seeing him again.

Her betrothed.

Her darling husband-to-be.

The man she loved.

She opened the church door and the chill of the room kissed her skin, sending goosebumps to rise on her arms. She pulled her shawl closer about her and moved

toward the back of the church where she knew Benedict's office lay.

Mumbled voices sounded and her footsteps slowed as she came closer to Benedict's office door, which was left slightly ajar. She stopped and listened, knew that she should make her presence known, but curiosity, thick and unwelcome, overrode her sense of propriety.

Was he discussing his future with his Catholic mentor? Was it going well, or was the church angry at him for falling in love with her and choosing a woman over his faith?

"Now, boy, listen to sense. We have all been tempted by the fairer sex. They are and can be Sirens who call to our most basic human needs, but you cannot stray from your path. I have seen you here, I have watched your sermons, and you love the church as much as it loves you."

"I still respect the church, Father, but I cannot continue my learnings. It would not be right," Benedict argued.

Angelica frowned, a lump of concern balling in her stomach. The church did sound angry—and persuasive—and well on the way to trying to change his mind.

"You have studied for so long. Do not throw it away merely because you feel obligated. I know the young Lady Angelica is, in fact, a beautiful, wealthy debutante—many will vie for her hand—but you should not throw yourself at her mercy too. You were healed under their care, and you have thanked them for it. You need not give them any more than that. She will be perfectly content with another, and if you give your decision some time to percolate, I'm certain you too will come to see that I'm right and you should pause. "

Angelica's breath caught, her pulse hammering in her ears.



The silence that stretched made her blood run cold. What was Benedict doing? Was he truly thinking she was some kind of vixen out to lure him away from his faith? She attended church just like everyone else. That did not mean she was any less of a Christian than this Father believed himself to be.

She moved closer to the door, just enough to see through the gap near the hinges. Benedict sat at the desk, a deep frown between his brows as he listened to his mentor.

“You must take some time—weeks, maybe months—to discern if this is the correct path for you. If she is willing to wait and does so, then perhaps her heart is true. But I do not think that is the case. She too has been swept up into the grandeur of your meeting and believes herself to be in love with you, but she is not. A woman’s heart is fickle, and should you give her the opportunity to prove my point, make her wait for you, you will find that I’m correct.

” The priest paused. “As much as it pains me to say such things to an honest and good man such as yourself, I do not wish to hurt you more than perhaps this parting will. But you owe it to yourself to be sure, and this will ensure it is so.”

Angelica watched Benedict, waited for him to disprove the Father’s words, to tell him that he was wrong. That he loved her. That he did not need to wait for weeks or possibly months to know that for certain.

But he said nothing. Not a single word in her defense.

She bit her lip and fought not to let her vision of him blur as he nodded.

Nodded.

Angelica turned on her heel and ran. She did not wish to hear his rebuttal, his awful, traitorous words—that he would make her wait, test her love in such a cruel way.

She moved through the church as quietly as she could, and only when she was outside, briskly walking through the park, did she allow the tears to fall, the first rush of breath to gust from her body like a sob torn from her chest.

She could not wait weeks—God forbid, months. They had been intimate. What if she was with child? Her hand clasped her stomach and she fought not to cast up her accounts.

How could Benedict treat her so? Not defend her at his first test of honor. How could he allow a man of God to so freely disrespect the woman he was supposed to love?

She had believed herself cherished. But clearly, she had only been convenient.

She shook her head as she made it back to her house, rushing through the door and starting up to her room. No true man would ever allow such underhanded views of the woman they loved. Unless that love wasn't genuine. Wasn't heartfelt.

She wasn't a test. She was a woman in love. And he had failed her.

Well, she would not allow him to treat her with so little respect. If he believed her to be so fickle, a Siren luring him to his demise, and wished to test her love with time, so be it.

That did not mean she had to play by Benedict's rules—and nor would she.

She was the Duke of Ravensmere's daughter. She didn't have to do anything any man said.

Not even the man who had once made her believe she could be enough.

Ever.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Six

Benedict sat in his carriage for an hour, watching the guests arrive at Lord and Lady Groose's ball. He didn't move, merely watched and fought with his inner voice, telling him to go, to see Angelica, to hold her in his arms once more.

After this afternoon he'd not repented his sins.

In fact, after his discussion with Father Ivan had not gone as the church had wished, he'd returned to his room in his brother's grand home and wrote the appropriate letters to Rome, announcing his departure from the faith and his inability to continue his studies.

He could not continue with the church and the direction he'd been walking.

Not when he knew, to the core of his being, that he loved Angelica beyond reason.

The church wanted him to wait, to pause and give thought to his decision, but he could not, nor did he wish to.

He loved her and would marry her and be damned anyone, including Father Ivan, who tried to disapprove her affection and make it appear shallow and weak.

There was nothing weak about his angel and she was far from shallow.

She was perfection itself.

Still, with these thoughts running through his mind, he could not make himself leave the carriage.

Nerves stilled his progress and the thought of asking Lord St. George for permission to marry his sister-in-law wasn't a small thing.

What if St. George said no? What if he had to steal Angelica away and marry her in secret?

He ran a hand through his hair, shaking off the absurd thoughts brought on after the trying morning he'd endured. St. George would approve the marriage, and Angelica had already said yes. There was no reason to be concerned, all would be well.

Just as he was about to leave the equipage, the carriage door flew open and his brother's face appeared before him. He climbed in and sat, staring at him, a light sheen of sweat over his brother's brow.

"What are you doing in here, Benedict? Scared to dance or is there another, prettier, female reason you're dallying here across the road from the ball?"

He rolled his eyes and looked toward the house he was supposed to already be inside of, enjoying his time with Angelica. "I ah...well, something has happened, and I suppose I ought to inform you of it."

His brother smirked and crossed his arms, leaning back against the squabs. "Do tell. This does sound salacious."

"You cannot say anything loathsome like you usually do, or I will never confide in you again, do you understand and agree?" he said, holding his brother's gaze and

hoping he understood he meant what he said.

His brother made a sign of the cross over his chest and nodded. "I will not say a word, or laugh or tease, I promise you."

Benedict sighed, not believing that for a moment. "Lady Angelica and I...well, for the past week or so we've become quite close, intimately near in fact, and well..."

His brother leaned forward, his mouth gaping. "And well what, Benedict?"

Benedict swallowed and took a fortifying breath, fighting off the memory of just how deliciously near they had been.

"I'm leaving the church and halting my lessons to enter the Catholic faith.

I have sinned, in the most wonderful way, and there is no other choice, not that there ever was one, not after meeting Angelica. "

"You've slept with her, have you not?" His brother made a whistling sound, his eyes alight with amusement.

"Well, well, well. Good for you, little brother. You have finally worked out what that stick between your legs is for." Whitmore laughed and Benedict debated throwing a hearty uppercut to his sibling's jaw. "Did you like it? Did she?"

Benedict pursed his lips. "Do be serious. And yes, she enjoyed my touch as much as I enjoyed hers, but that is beside the point," he quickly added. "I've asked her to be my wife, and I thought you ought to know she's agreed. I merely need her family's approval, and we will be wed."

"You should fuck her to celebrate." Whitmore smirked. "I'm so proud of you," he

said, slapping him on the shoulder.

"I was leaning more toward dancing with her this evening, but thanks for the suggestion none the less."

"I would recommend fucking, much more fun, but I digress." His brother leaned forward. "I'll be pleased to welcome her into the family. She's a lovely chit, and had I not known from the very first moment that you liked her, I may have even trifled with the minx myself."

Benedict glared at his sibling, not finding his words the least amusing, even if said in jest. "That is not comical, Whitmore."

Whitmore chuckled. "Now, brother, shall we attend the ball? Is there not a young lady who's waiting for you? I'm certain she's already wondering where you are."

Benedict acquiesced and opened the door and jumped down, glad he'd told his sibling of his choices before he heard it from anyone else. His brother followed and together they entered the ballroom, standing at the threshold to take in the throng of guests.

Several ladies turned and sent coy smiles toward Whitmore, and before Benedict could say another word his brother was off, swallowed up by the crowd and no doubt in pursuit of any of those women who showed curiosity.

He stepped into the ballroom and moved through the room, searching for Angelica. He spied Lord and Lady St. George, but as for Angelica, she remained annoyingly elusive to his eyes.

For several minutes he stood alone, observing, waiting to catch a glimpse of her. Maybe she had not attended this evening? Perhaps he ought to go speak with Lord and Lady St. George and check that his attendance here was even warranted.

But before he could move, just like the parting of the Red Sea, so too did the crowd and he caught sight of Angelica for the first time this evening.

His breath caught in his lungs at the sight of her beauty, of her laughter and wide smile, the stunning emerald empire gown that hugged her to perfection.

His fortune reverberated around in his mind that she was his and he was hers, and without thought he moved toward her, wanting to be close to her, dance with her.

Love her.

He forced his brother's crude words from his mind on how they could celebrate.

He wasn't crass and didn't need to start thinking like his sibling, whom he had started to believe was a bad influence on his normally clear-thinking mind, even if the idea did intrigue him. But that would be for another time.

"Lady Angelica, I spied you several times enter the Whitmore's private chapel over the past few weeks.

" Benedict heard as he stepped nearer. "What was it that the saintly Lord Benedict was showing you in there?

Must have been quite interesting indeed for you to visit so often," Miss Millers said, a knowing smirk on her thin lips.

Angelica smiled, and although Benedict watched from afar, he could tell she was taken aback by the question.

"Nothing at all, unfortunately, for I'm not Catholic, so my interest waned.

Lord Benedict is very nice, but I must admit, ladies, so very boring and dull.

I think I shall never wish to visit again, unless I'm in need of a nap. "

The ladies' laughter startled him, and he frowned. Her words made little sense, for her enjoyment in his arms was far from what he believed was conducive to having a nap.

What on earth was she saying? Did she find him boring? Was he a game to her—to see if he would break his faith and fall for a woman?

Was Father Ivan right and his decision to quit the church too hasty?

"Such a handsome man however," Miss Langley mentioned, gaining nods from all the ladies present in their circle of friends. "What a shame he's going to marry the church. I do not think I could devote myself to years of prayer. How droll." They all laughed, including Lady Angelica.

"It is probably best that he does marry the church," Lady Angelica interjected, "for I do not think he would make a good husband. I believe for all his Christian beliefs, he is a fickle, spineless man who at the first test of honor would fail. That he would allow his faith to dictate what he knows to be the truth and allow others to hurt those he professes to love."

"Well, that is a lot of insight, Lady Angelica," Lady Mary said, silence descending on the small group of women.

Angelica met Benedict's eyes across the ballroom and for the first time since their meeting, hers were cold. He knew in that moment, she had meant for him to hear her words, and her dagger had found its mark squarely in his heart.

He turned to leave, having heard enough.



### Chapter

### Twenty-Seven

Benedict strode through the ballroom, determined to leave this cesspit of vicious and false people whom he thought were his friends. He smiled at Lord and Lady St. George, determining not to speak to them, no longer in the mood for conversation, but St. George had other ideas.

"Lord Benedict, how good to see you and you're looking well. Do say you'll have a glass of wine with us," St. George said, fastening a glass of the beverage from a passing footman.

Benedict knew he could not avoid the interaction now and strode over to them, bowing to Lady St. George and accepting the glass.

"Good evening to you both. I was just on my way out, but I'll never decline having a drink with friends.

I hope I find you both well this evening too?

" he asked, glad his voice did not give away the turmoil that tumbled about inside him.

"We're very well, thank you, my lord." Lady St. George glanced past, her gaze turning expectant.

He didn't want to know who she searched for. He hoped it wasn't her sister, for he had little to say to Lady Angelica now. Their relations seemed to be at an end after her words this evening, and he felt like a gudgeon who'd been used for another's amusement.

"Did you come with Lord Whitmore? I thought I saw him this evening. I wished to catch up with him if I can, do mention if you see your brother that I'd like a word."

"Of course," Benedict said, taking a good-sized sip to finish his glass of wine sooner rather than later. "If I happen to run into him on my way out, I shall mention you." He took another sip, almost finishing his drink.

"Lord Benedict, how lovely to see you again.

"The false words from Lady Angelica washed over him, and a slow-burning annoyance settled deep inside his chest. Her tone told him she had played him the fool, and she did not care for him. For all his holy ways, to forgive and pray for one's soul, he could not find it within him right at this moment to pretend to be friends.

He smiled, seemingly able to play this game as well as she, even though his heart crumbled in his chest that she would believe him to be a shallow man without honor.

Why, however, he could not make out. Why did she believe him suitable to marry the church after everything that they had said to one another, the promises and love he thought radiated between them?

What had changed to make her hate him so?

"Good evening, Lady Angelica. I was just on my way out, when Lord St. George waylaid me with this very good wine," he said, hoping she understood he would not be staying.

He held up the glass, a mouthful or less left to drink.

He downed the last of it and waved the crystal glass before them all.

"Ah would you look at that, alas, it is empty now.

" He bowed before them all. "If you'll excuse me, I'm late for an appointment and must be off. Good evening to you all."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lady Angelica's smile slip, but thankfully, she could not come after him, not without raising interest from the ton .

He started for the door, her gaze burning a hole in his evening jacket. Still, he moved forward. The hurt that ached in his chest was foreign and nothing like he'd ever known.

Why had she said such a thing? After what they had shared, it did not make sense. The mocking of his faith—of him as a man—was cruel, and he could not reconcile how altered she was when in different company.

She was not who he thought she was.

The following day Benedict lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling of his room. The words of Angelica from the night before repeating their cruelty through his restless dreams and again now that he was awake.

Footsteps sounded in the adjoining rooms and he frowned, surprised to hear his sibling up at this early hour. Still the footsteps continued until his bedroom door flew open and his brother stood before him, his face bloodied, his top lip two times bigger than it ought to be.

"What the hell has happened?" he asked, throwing the bedding back and going to his brother, who stumbled toward the fireplace that had burned down to warm coals and nothing else.

Benedict threw on some small logs and was glad when the fire took hold, and the room warmed. "Tell me, who did this to you?"

His brother dabbed at his lip with his cravat and shook his head. "That does not signify, but you must know that I took part in a duel last evening, and well, we were caught and now I have several Bow Street Runners after me."

"Did you kill anyone?" Dear God, what was his brother doing taking part in a duel? "Please tell me you did not."

"I did not, but dueling is illegal. I must leave England, lay low for a while."

"Were any shots fired?"

"Yes, they were, and I'm certain I did not hit Lord Cheswick, but we were accosted by the runners right at that time so I cannot be certain. There was a tussle, and now I resemble a beast."

Benedict ignored his brother's concern over his appearance more than his dueling. "Where will you go?" He strode to his jug and basin and brought it over to where Whitmore sat.

"France, perhaps, or Italy, somewhere far away. I refuse to be thrown into Newgate, not for the likes of Lord Cheswick, the pompous ass."

"What did he do?" Benedict asked, needing to know before his brother bolted from England.

"He roughened up Kitty when I wasn't with her last evening.

Thought to take liberties that were not freely given.

I caught him boldly hitting her in Vauxhall last evening and could not stand for it.

Nevertheless, Lord Cheswick demanded a duel, and I agreed, wanting to shoot the lout in the leg or some such place. "

"But now you do not know if he's been shot at all as you fled."

"I do not think I hit him, for I was tackled to the ground before the shot rang out, so I do believe it went up into the air, but I cannot be certain, so now I must go, today." His brother paused. "I need clothing, but I do not wish to wake my valet, can you help me? I must leave immediately."

"Of course, but we must hurry. I'm certain the authorities will check here before anywhere else." Benedict strode to his brother's room, grabbing a bag and packing as many items of clothing he could manage to fit within it. His brother was a good man—even if he was a rake.

"Benedict," Whitmore said from his doorway. "You must take over the Marquessate, at least until I return. I have written a letter for my steward to give to the family solicitor, placing you in charge of everything until I can come back to England. It's on my desk downstairs."

"I cannot take over the Marquessate. I'm not the heir."

"You will not take on the title as such, but I'm leaving everything—the estates, the family money, everything that is entailed to me—into your capable hands. I may never be able to return, but the family name must go on. An heir by you will do that

should I not ever marry and beget one."

Benedict's mind raced. This could not be happening. His brother could not go and leave him here alone. He needed him now more than ever, especially after what happened with Lady Angelica.

Still, he did not want his brother to get in trouble with the law, not when he'd been doing the honorable thing and defending an innocent woman. Lord Cheswick had asked for the duel—that his brother agreed and they were caught should not fall solely on his head.

"Of course, I shall do all that I can to keep the Whitmore name safe and prosperous."

His brother smiled and, walking up to him, pulled him into a tight embrace.

"I knew you would help me. You're truly the best person I know.

" His brother stood, going to several other drawers and pulling out clothing before throwing them into a small bag also.

"I will write when I land somewhere I intend to stay for a time.

Be safe and I hope to see you again one day. "

"And I you," Benedict said, before his brother turned and fled, disappearing as quickly as he'd appeared.

Leaving him alone to face everything by himself.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Eight

The following week London was abuzz with the scandalous news of Lord Whitmore having dueled with Lord Cheswick.

It was all the ton could talk about. At every event that Angelica attended, people questioned the motives of the duel, wondering who it was over and if it included any of their set of the female persuasion.

Of course, Angelica could not ask Lord Benedict his thoughts for she had not seen him. Not since the night she'd let him know that she'd overheard his conversation with his priest and found his words offensive and wanting.

He could go and hang for all she cared.

And yet, each time she dismissed him from her mind she felt a pang of regret. Of despair that would not pass.

She supposed that was to be expected when one lost the person whom they thought they would marry, adore and cherish for the rest of their lives.

That it wasn't to be with Benedict tore her in two and for several days her stomach had been unsettled, nauseous, and she'd considered more than once that perhaps she ought to give up on this Season, return home and start fresh next year.

At least she would have Isabella at her side then and they could make the Season their own and not be so anxious over becoming a wallflower.

This evening unfortunately was no different. While she was asked to dance and said yes to every gentleman as per the rules of the ton, her heart was no longer in London. Her heart no longer existed thanks to a man whom she had gifted it to and he decided to trample it into a million pieces.

“Lord Benedict has just arrived, dearest.” Her sister nudged her a little before meeting her eyes. “Speak to him this evening. I know you’re at odds with him for some reason and I wish you would tell me why.”

“He’s a cad that is why,” she seethed. “I have nothing to say to him. I’ve heard all I need to from his lying lips to know what he’s about.”

Her sister threw her a concerned frown before answering a question from Lord St. George at her side.

Angelica swiped a glass of wine from a passing footman and decided to go for a turn about the room. Anything but to keep speaking about Lord Benedict, the godly boy who was the devil's spawn.

Shame washed through her at her terminology of his lordship.

She supposed he wasn’t so very evil, but his actions had hurt her deeply and she could not fathom why he would not have defended her.

Defended their love, if it was in fact true for him.

She passed a fireplace, downed the last of her wine and left the glass on the marble mantel.



Had she been a test for him to see if marriage was the path truly for him? Had he used her to enjoy the last few weeks of his freedom before becoming celibate for life?

Without care, she pushed through the throng of guests, her destination nowhere at all. She heard her friend Lady Mary call out her name and turning about, slammed chest first into a wall of muscle.

Arms reached out and steadied her, and she didn't need to look up to know who had stopped her from falling to the parquet floor. Angelica slowly raised her eyes, bracing herself to face her nemesis and schooled her features to one of indifference.

She would not allow him to know how very much he hurt her. He did not get to have that right as well.

"Lady Angelica," Lord Benedict said, letting her go and stepping back to ensure propriety.

"Lord Benedict," she answered coolly, glancing away from him and toward the dancers who were enjoying a cotillion. Angelica fought to keep her composure, but now, beside him, anger bubbled up within her and she wanted to rail at him, score him with words and hurt him as much as he wounded her.

He did not move, merely stood before her, possibly feeling as awkward as she did. Good, she hoped he was uncomfortable, he deserved to be so. "If you'll excuse me," she said, pushing past him and wanting to be away from him. Forever at this point.

He clasped her arm as she passed, pulling her near. "Is that it then? That's all you have to say to me? What is this biting cold that I'm getting from you? Am I not the one who should be offended?"

"You?" she blustered, pulling her arm out of his hold and glaring at him.

“Why should you be offended? I’m the one who is the victim here.

The woman as usual has been used as a man’s plaything,” she whispered, glancing around to ensure no one was listening.

“You’re a cad and seemed to have taken a page out of your brother’s playbook. ”

“What?” he stuttered, looking at her as if she had lost all sensible thought. “I heard what you said about me at the Goose Ball,” he continued. “Do not try to turn this fracture back onto me, for I’m completely innocent of it.”

“Are you serious?” She gaped. “I visited you at your private chapel and found you in discussion with your Catholic mentor, or whomever the man was.”

“You visited me?” He frowned, clearly trying to recall what day that may have been. “Was I in talks with Father Ivan perhaps?”

She shrugged, no longer very charitable about the Catholic priest either, not after what he said about her. Siren indeed... “Possibly, I do not recall who it was, but I certainly remember what you said and believed when fed to you on a spoon.”

“What I believed?” He opened and shut his mouth several times, as if trying to form words. “What did you hear?”

“That men such as yourself are often seduced by a Siren’s call and that while it’s natural to have these emotions ignited within us, that you must resist. That if I was truly meant for you, I would wait for you.

Give your poor little man mind time to make its decision as to whether my love and affection was true or not.

” She stepped closer to him, jabbing him in the ribs with her finger.

“Let us not forget that we’ve been intimate.

That I could right at this very moment be carrying your child. ”

She flailed her arms, at a loss for words, her temper giving way to decorum.

“But yes, by all means, test me over the next several months. Wait perhaps until I’m thick with your child before you decide if I’m worth leaving your precious church for.

” She shook her head, disgusted at him, at the church and Father Ivan.

She scowled, unable to fathom what she had heard him agree to and what she knew of him. How could he be so cruel?

“And that is all you heard?” Benedict let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. “That was not the entire conversation, Angelica. You left, did you not? You did not stay and hear everything that was discussed before Father Ivan departed?”

Angelica ground her teeth, but nodded. “I left. Of course I left. Why would I stay and listen to a man who disparaged my character as it was? I’m not a Siren. I did not seduce you. I fell in love with you. There is a difference.”

“And that is why you were so cutting at the Goose Ball. Why you allowed me to hear what you said about me—because you believed me to be a cad who was going to test you as Father Ivan suggested.”

She raised her brow, shrugging. “And have I been wrong? You did not defend me, and then you think you have the right to be offended when I bite back at your bad

behavior.” She shook her head.

“Well, do not worry, Lord Benedict. You shall not need to wait for me, to test me to ensure I’m genuine, for I do not want you as a husband.

I will marry anyone at all, so long as it is not you.

” She turned on her heel, but before she could take a step he had clasped her about the waist and wrenched her back against him.

She slammed up against his chest once again, but this time he did not let her go. “Unhand me, sir,” she seethed, pressing against his hardened muscles.

“Not until you listen to what I have to say,” he returned.

Angelica looked about. Before their conversation no eyes had been drawn, but they certainly were now. Including those of Lord St. George, who looked ready to flay Lord Benedict alive, had her sister not been holding her brother-in-law’s arm and stalling him.

What was Evangeline about?

“I do not want to listen to anything you have to say,” she returned, trying to wiggle out of his hold and failing.

“Yes, you will listen because you must,” he said, his hold on her tightening, and damn him all to hell, making her blood pump fast in her veins.

“I allowed the good Father Ivan to have his say. I listened as respectfully as I could, but what you failed to hear was the entire conversation. I told the Father that while I understood his concern, that he was wrong. That I love you, far above anything else,

and that to wait to marry you would be akin to torture. That you were not a Siren, but an angel, the only woman I've ever loved or will love in my life.

I have notified the Church of my leaving, and I'm no longer in any way looking to become a priest. If that life means that I cannot marry you—if that life means that I cannot love you as much as I do, if that life means that I cannot breathe without you—I do not want it.

Had you just waited, you would have heard how much I adore you and do not wish to be parted from you. ”

Angelica swallowed the sizeable lump in her throat and forced herself to stop feeling the pricking in her eyes, but damn it all to Hades, at Benedict's wonderful words, she could not. “I did not hear you say that.”

He grinned for the first time since their parting the week before and her stomach clenched. “I had thought as much.” He paused. “Was that why I heard you saying that I was a man without honor and that I would be better off marrying the church?”

“Was I wrong in thinking that after everything I heard?” Angelica took a calming breath, hoping the fear that had churned in her stomach was easing at Benedict's words—not to mention how he was holding her now.

Not letting her go...

“No, you were not, but that does not change the fact you did not hear all of my conversation and that I did in fact defend you. I defended us and will always protect us because I love you, Angelica.”

Several sighs sounded about them and Angelica looked around, noting they now had a full gaggle of interested people.

“There is no need for us to be at odds or to lose what we’ve come to feel for each other.

It was a misunderstanding, on both our behalf’s, and I refuse to allow anything to come between us.

I did not wait eight and twenty years to find the woman of my dreams, only to lose her at the final hurdle. I will not.”

A tear slipped down her cheek and she swiped it away, forcing words past the lump in her throat. “You’ve left the church? You told them so?”

He nodded, a small wistful smile on his lips. “I did. Of course I did. How could I do otherwise? I love you, Angelica. I adore you and want you to be my wife.”

Again, several ladies tittered and sighed, and a gentleman or two whistled. Benedict laughed. “I asked you once before and I shall ask you again. Marry me, Lady Angelica. Be mine.”

Angelica bit her lip, the relief, the overwhelming sensation making her legs shake.

She closed the space that separated them and held him tight, having missed his warmth, having missed him this past week.

“Yes, I will marry you,” she mumbled against his chest. She pulled back and met his gaze, his too a little misty from their reunion. “I love you too.”

He pulled her close and rocked her in his arms. “I do not ever wish to argue again. Promise me that we shall not.”

She chuckled and leaned up on her tiptoes. “While I cannot promise you that, I will

promise to always love you even when we disagree.”

Scandalously, Benedict dipped his head and kissed her softly, the action igniting a fire that she doubted would ever be doused. “Is tomorrow too soon to be my wife?”

Her sister cleared her throat and Angelica looked to her side where Lord St. George and Evangeline now stood, her sister’s eyes too a little glassy. “Tomorrow is too soon, Lord Benedict, but I think we can pull a wedding together in three days. That should suffice.”

“Sounds perfect.” Benedict smiled down at her and Angelica allowed the past week’s tension to slip from her mind and soul. Everything was right in the world, aligned and complete.

She would be Lady Angelica Deverell soon, and how wonderful that sounded.

How sweet that was.

### Chapter

### Twenty-Nine

After several glasses of celebratory champagne, Benedict was able to sneak Angelica out of the ball to have her all to himself.

The past seven days had been hell and the worst of his life and all he wanted was to be alone with her.

To assure himself she was his and he was hers and they would never lose each other again.

“Where are we going? We cannot leave,” Angelica whispered as he did exactly as she warned against, and left the town house and the revelry behind, calling for his carriage to take them home.

“Lord and Lady St. George are dancing and well into their cups. No one will notice.” His driver pulled up before them and jumped down, setting the steps down and opening the door. “And you can send a missive to your sister if you’re concerned when you’re home. That will suffice.”

“You’re being terribly naughty, Lord Benedict.” Angelica grinned. “I like it.”

She joined him on the squabs and he called for home. The carriage lurched forward and they were finally alone, away from the crowds, just the two of them, as he preferred. “I’ve missed you so damn much.” He reached for her at the same time she



moved toward him and they came together at last.

He kissed her deep and long, drinking and sating himself of her, knowing he could never go another week without being near the woman he loved. She kissed him back with a vigor that left him reeling, grasping for purchase.

She moved and straddled his lap and he clasped her waist, pressing her sweet body against him, relieving some of the pressures of the last week that had built up to a crescendo.

“I’ve missed you so much, Benedict. I want you.” She rose on her knees and clasped her gown, bundling it up about her waist.

He groaned when she pressed her sweet, wet sex against his silk breeches. The honeyed scent of her desire ignited his own and his cock ached, pressed firmly against his falls and wept for release.

Understanding what it was they both wanted, she reached between them and tore his falls open. His cock vaulted out, rigid and ready. She did not dally, she pressed herself onto him and took him with an urgency that had them both crying out.

He held her tight, fought to ground himself and not lose the battle against desire, of spending too soon and not ensuring she found her pleasure. He needed to hear her scream his name, to beg him to make her come.

She worked herself on him, taking him, riding him, and the breath in his lungs seized. Their lovemaking was frantic, fast, and urgent. Their time together was limited until they were home, the desperation to come back to each other just as pressing.

His balls ached, tightened, and he could feel the sweet thrum of release that teased. She gasped his name, kissing him between breaths of words, promises and pleas for

him to take her, to fuck her, to give her what she wanted.

He would give her everything in the world if it were possible.

“I love you, Angelica,” he murmured against her lips, thrusting into her, rolling her hips with each thrust, wanting to hear his name on her lips as much as he needed to take his next breath.

“Yes,” she moaned, her cunny tightening about his cock, drawing him in, pulling him toward a release he could no sooner stop than time itself. “I love you, Benedict.”

He held her tight, her words wrapping around him as firmly as he clasped her to him.

They took all they could, their bodies all but one, no space spare between them.

The first tremors of Angelica’s release convulsed about his cock and drew him along for the ride.

He let go of his restraint, gave in to the release and allowed it to sweep him away as much as her love swept him into her world.

He came hard, pumped his seed deep within her, took her relentlessly as she rode her own pleasure to its very end, his name a chant, a promise on her lips.

His the same as hers.

Dear God, she was the sweetest woman, and he was lost.

But also for the first time in his life, he was found.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am*

Angelica bustled into the Whitmore town house and waved the missive that had just arrived from India. “Benedict, I believe this is from Whitmore.” She sat beside Benedict, who cradled their twelve-week-old daughter who was soundly asleep in his arms.

“You read it, dearest, little Rose is asleep, and I do not wish to disturb her.”

Angelica broke the seal and scanned the letter before reading it aloud.

“It says that he’s in India and has enjoyed his time there. That the heat is ghastly, but the people are friendly and kind.” She read a little farther on. “He says that he’s preparing to travel home. That is good news.”

Benedict raised his brows and nodded in agreement. “Yes, and then we shall be able to travel to Kent and start our lives just as we wish. With the estate back in my brother’s hands, I can retire from playing lord of the manor and enjoy our little family away from London and the ton.”

“We cannot leave too soon. Isabella has just started her Season and I so want to guide her as well as I can.”

“I do not think that my brother will be back in London tomorrow, dearest. It will take several months for him to travel back, more than enough time to see Isabella married.”

That was true and relieved some of her concerns, although Isabella’s start to the Season had not been as smooth as Rosalind or herself would have liked. In fact, her

sister did not seem at all interested in the events, the balls and parties that had commenced at all.

“Whitmore writes,” Angelica said, continuing to read.

“That by the time we receive this letter, he will have already set sail. How exciting to see him again. I’m so glad his innocence with Lord Cheswick was outed.

That man ought to be ashamed of himself, pretending to be shot when all in fact did happen was he fell over and scratched his leg with a stick.

To think Whitmore was forced out of England by that fiend makes my blood boil. ”

“And mine,” Benedict growled. “But we always knew Cheswick was a liar and a thug. I’m glad he’s fled to his country estate where he will hopefully do no more wrong, but I do not hold out much hope of that.”

“True.” Just then nursemaid entered the drawing room and dipped into a curtsy. “My lady, it is time for Miss Rose’s feeding. May I take her upstairs?”

“Of course,” Angelica said, watching her husband kiss their daughter’s pretty brow before standing and handing the child to the nursemaid.

Benedict came back to sit at her side and pulled her into his arms. She snuggled up against him, enjoying the quiet and peace of their home.

“I must say that I’m looking forward to leaving London and seeing our home in Kent once more.

We shall be able to make it our own and not have to leave unless we want diversion in town.

Our private sanctuary just for us.” She leaned up and Benedict dipped his head, kissing her softly.

“And I shall have you all to myself, and the dreaded paperwork that is never ending here as acting marquess will end. I do not envy my brother his position.”

“It has been a great deal of work, but you’ve done Whitmore proud.”

“I hope so,” her husband said, watching her. “Have I told you today how beautiful you are with your hair down and pretty blue morning gown on? Almost good enough to eat.”

Heat licked along Angleica’s spine, and she shivered at his words.

They had not been intimate since she’d given birth to Rose twelve weeks before and she ached for her husband terribly, almost wantonly.

“I also saw my doctor this week, and while everything is well I assure you, he did also mention that we can resume normal marital acts.”

Benedict frowned before his eyes widened with interest. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

She chuckled and pressed into him, ensuring he received a good view of her low-cut bodice. “That is exactly what I’m saying.” She wiggled her brows and laughed when he understood her meaning. “We have some time now while the baby is asleep if you wish to join me upstairs?” she questioned.

Benedict stood and pulled her from the settee, dragging her from the room and up the stairs before she knew what he was about.

“You need not ask a second time. I’m more than willing to join you anywhere.”

Angelica grinned. “Have you missed this by chance, husband?” she teased as they came to stand before their suite of rooms door.

“Twelve weeks without loving you in that way, hell yes I’ve missed it.” He swung their bedroom door wide and swooped her up into his arms and carried her across the threshold and into their wonderful future.

Their wonderful life.

Together.

If you loved Jewel of the Ball , don’t miss Ruby in the Rough , book four in The Heiress Series , out this August!

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