

AMANDA QUICK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LATE FOR THE WEDDING*



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In the darkest hour
of the night a lovely lady
must keep her wits to
win true love...

SEBASTIAN WRAPPED ONE HAND AROUND THE BEDPOST AND LOOKED AT HER WITH HOODED, UNREADABLE EYES. "I wish to speak to you about this engagement of ours. I have had enough of this foolishness."

Dismay swept through her. "You wish to end it so soon, sir?" Prudence floundered for a logical, rational reason that would forestall the inevitable. "What about our investigation?"

"Forget the damned investigation. I am beginning to think that if the matter were put to the test, I would finish a poor second to your interest in conducting investigations."

"I did not mean to imply that you are not also quite interesting, my lord," Prudence said desperately. "Indeed, I have never met a more decidedly *interesting* man."

"*Enough.*" He released the bedpost and came toward her with an air of grim intent.

"Sebastian? What are you about?"

"Why don't you apply your intellect to that question, Miss Merryweather? I'm certain you will very quickly arrive at the answer,"

He caught hold of her and swung her up into his arms before she realized what he intended....

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FOR

SUZANNE SIMMONS GUNTRUM:

One of the sisters I never had.

One

 It was the darkest hour of the night, nearly three o'clock in the morning, and the chilling fog clung to the city like a ghost. Prudence Merryweather reluctantly concluded that it was an uncomfortably suitable time and setting in which to pay a call on the man known as the Fallen Angel.

She shivered in spite of her bold resolve as the hackney drew to a halt in front of the mist-shrouded door of the town house. The new gas lamps that had been installed in this part of town were useless against the thick mist. An eerie silence gripped the cold, dark street. The only sounds were the rattle of the carriage and the thud of the horses' hooves on the pavement.

Prudence briefly considered ordering the coachman to turn the hackney around and drive her straight home. But she banished the thought as quickly as it had come. She knew she must not falter now. Her brother's life was at stake.

She summoned up her courage, adjusted her spectacles more firmly in place, and stepped down from the cab. She tugged the hood of her aging gray wool cloak down to shield her face as she started determinedly up the steps of the town house. Behind her the hackney began to roll forward down the street.

Prudence stopped and whirled around in alarm. "Where do you think you're going, my good man? I said I would give you an extra few coins to wait for me. I'll only be a few minutes."

"Don't fret yerself none, miss. I was just adjustin' the reins, is all." The coachman was a featureless dark blob in his heavily caped

greatcoat and a hat that was pulled down low over his ears. His voice was slurred from the gin he had been drinking all evening to ward off the bitter chill. "I told ye, I'd wait for ye."

Prudence relaxed slightly. "See that you're still here when I return. Otherwise I shall be quite stranded when I finish my business."

"Business, huh? Is that what ye call it?" The coachman sniggered as he tipped his gin bottle and poured the contents down his throat. "Pretty fancy piece o' business, if you ask me. Mayhap yer gentleman friend will want ye to warm his bed for the rest o' the night. Bloody damn cold this evenin'."

Prudence scowled at him but decided there was nothing to be gained from engaging in an argument with a drunken coachman at this late hour. She did not have the time for such nonsense.

She gathered the enveloping cloak more tightly about her and hurried on up the steps to the front door of the town house. The upstairs windows were unlit. Perhaps the notorious owner of the house was already abed.

From all accounts that would be an unusual state of affairs. It was said that the legendary Earl of Angelstone seldom went to bed before dawn. The Fallen Angel had not earned his formidable reputation by keeping reasonable hours. Everyone knew the devil preferred the cover of night.

Prudence hesitated before raising her gloved hand to knock on the door. She was well aware that what she was about to do carried a certain risk. She was country bred and new to London, but she was not so naive as to think it was normal for ladies to pay calls on gentlemen at any hour, let alone at three in the morning.

Prudence rapped sharply on the door.

It seemed to take forever until a disgruntled-looking, half-dressed butler opened the door. He was a balding, heavy jawed man who put Prudence in mind of a large, ferocious hound. The candle he held in one hand revealed first annoyance and then growing disgust on his bleak features. He took in the sight of Prudence's cloaked and hooded

figure with severely disapproving eyes.

“Yes, miss?”

Prudence took a deep breath. “I have come to call upon his lordship.”

“Have you, indeed?” The butler’s lip curled into a sneer that would have suited Cerberus, the three-headed dog that was said to guard the entrance to Hades. “I regret to inform you that his lordship is not at home.”

“He most certainly is.” Prudence knew she must be firm if she was to get past the Fallen Angel’s hellhound. “I checked with my sources before making my decision to call upon him. Please inform him immediately that he has a visitor.”

“And who should I say is calling?” the butler asked in sepulchral tones.

“A lady.”

“Not bloody likely. No *lady* would be here at this hour. Take yourself off, you obnoxious little baggage. His lordship doesn’t consort with your sort. If he’s in the mood for a bit o’ muslin he can look a good deal higher than a strumpet fresh off the streets.”

Prudence went hot beneath the insults. This was clearly going to be even more awkward than she had anticipated. She set her teeth. “Be so good as to inform his lordship that a party who has an interest in his forthcoming duel wishes to see him.”

The butler stared at her in astonishment. “And what, pray tell, would a woman of your sort know about his lordship’s personal affairs?”

“A great deal more than you do, apparently. If you don’t tell Angelstone that he has a caller, I vow you will live to regret it. I assure you that your position in this household depends upon your informing him I am here.”

The butler did not appear to be entirely convinced by the threat, but he was starting to waver. “Wait here.”

He slammed the door, leaving Prudence standing on the step. The icy fingers of the fog crept close and wrapped themselves around her. She huddled deeper into her cloak. This was turning out to be one of the most miserable evenings she had spent in her entire life. Things had been so much simpler in the country.

The door opened again a moment later. The butler looked down his nose at Prudence and grudgingly indicated she should enter.

“His lordship will see you in the library.”

“I should think so.” Prudence stepped quickly over the threshold, grateful to escape the clutches of the fog, even if it meant walking into the very jaws of hell.

The butler opened the library door and held it for her. Prudence swept past him into a dark, shadowed room that was lit only by a small blaze on the hearth. The door closed behind her just as she realized there was no sign of Angelstone.

“My lord?” Prudence came to an abrupt halt and peered intently into the gloom. “Sir? Are you here?”

“Good evening, Miss Merryweather. I trust you will forgive my butler’s rudeness.” Sebastian, Earl of Angelstone, rose slowly from the depths of a huge wing chair that faced the hearth. He had a large black cat tucked under one arm. “You must understand your visit is somewhat unexpected. Especially considering the circumstances and the hour.”

“Yes, my lord. I am aware of that.” Prudence caught her breath at the sight of him. She had danced with Sebastian earlier that evening, but that was only the first time she had met the Fallen Angel. She realized now it would take more than one or two encounters before she adjusted to the impact he made on her senses.

Angelstone was anything but angelic in either appearance or temperament. It was said in the drawing rooms of the *ton* that he bore a strong resemblance to the Lord of the Underworld. It was true that it would take a formidable imagination to envision him with a pair of wings and a halo.

The firelight flickering behind Sebastian seemed a little too atmospheric tonight. The glow of the flames threw his fierce, saturnine features into harsh relief. His black hair was cut short. His curious, amber eyes blazed with a cold, penetrating intelligence. His body was hard and lean. Prudence knew from her experience with him on the dance floor that Sebastian moved with a lazy, dangerous masculine grace.

He was clearly dressed for the privacy of his own home, not for receiving visitors. His white cravat hung loose around his neck and his ruffled shirt was unfastened far enough to reveal the crisp black hair on his chest. His buff-colored breeches hugged the sinewy lines of his thighs. He had not yet removed his black, mirror-polished Hessians.

Prudence knew very little about style. It was a matter of extremely limited interest to her. But she realized that there was an innate masculine elegance about Sebastian that had little to do with his attire. It was a part of him, just as it was a part of the cat he held.

The only jewelry Sebastian wore was a gold ring on one of his long-fingered hands. It gleamed with a dull sheen as he slowly stroked the cat. Prudence stared at the ring. Earlier, when she had danced with him, she had noted that there was an elaborate letter *F* engraved on it. She had assumed it stood for *Fleetwood*, the earl's family name.

For a moment she could not seem to tear her gaze away from Sebastian's hand as he petted the cat. When she finally managed to meet his eyes again, she saw that he was smiling slightly.

She was startled at the frisson of sensual awareness that rushed through her. She told herself she was simply not accustomed to seeing a man in dishabille. Unfortunately, she'd had the same reaction earlier this evening when Sebastian had been properly attired for the ball.

The man had an enthralling effect on her, Prudence acknowledged. She wondered fleetingly if he was real. Even as she stood there staring at him, Sebastian began to dissolve like a specter into a gray fog.