



Dangerous

Amanda Quick

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....

DANGEROUS

Bantam Books by Amanda Quick
Ask your bookseller for
the books you have missed

AFFAIR
DANGEROUS
DECEPTION
DESIRE
I THEE WED
MISCHIEF
MISTRESS
MYSTIQUE
RAVISHED
RECKLESS
RENDEZVOUS
SCANDAL
SEDUCTION
SURRENDER
WICKED WIDOW
WITH THIS RING
SLIGHTLY SHADY

Dangerous

Amanda Quick



BANTAM BOOKS

New York Toronto London Sydney Auckland

FOR
SUZANNE SIMMONS GUNTRUM:
One of the sisters I never had.

Contents

Cover
Other Books By This Author
Title Page
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
About the Author
Copyright

 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.

For a few seconds she was so startled to see him turn into an apparition before her very eyes that she could not think clearly. Then she realized what the problem was.

"I beg your pardon, my lord." Prudence hastily removed her spectacles and wiped off the cloudy mist that had begun to obscure her vision. "It is so very cold outside, you know. When I stepped into this warm room it caused a vapor to form on the lenses. It is one of the annoying problems one faces when one wears spectacles."

Sebastian elevated a black brow. "My sympathies, Miss Merryweather."

"Yes, well, thank you. Not much that can be done about it. One gets used to it." Prudence replaced her spectacles on her nose. She frowned at Sebastian. "I expect you're wondering why I'm here at this rather late hour."

"The question did cross my mind." His gaze skimmed over her old cloak, which had parted slightly to reveal the prim, unfashionable fawn-colored ball gown underneath. Amusement danced briefly in his eyes before it was replaced by a speculative look. "You came alone?"

"Yes, of course." She looked at him in surprise.

"Some people would say that was rather unwise."

“I had to see you alone. I am here on a very private matter.”

“I see. Pray be seated.”

“Thank you.” Prudence smiled a little uncertainly as she perched on the other large chair that faced the fire. She reminded herself that she had liked Angelstone on sight earlier this evening, even though her friend Hester, Lady Pembroke, had been horrified when he’d forced the introduction.

Surely he was not as bad as everyone insisted he was, Prudence told herself as she watched Sebastian settle back into his chair. Her instincts about people were generally very reliable. There had only been that one unfortunate occasion three years ago when she had found herself sadly mistaken about a man.

“This is a trifle awkward, my lord.”

“Yes” Sebastian stretched his booted feet out toward the fire and went back to slowly stroking the cat. “It is also a trifle dangerous.”

“Nonsense. I have a pistol in my reticule and the coachman who brought me here has agreed to wait for me. I assure you, I shall be quite safe.”

“A pistol?” He eyed her with some amusement. “You are a most unusual woman, Miss Merryweather. Did you think you would need the pistol to protect yourself from me?”

“Good heavens, no, my lord.” Prudence was genuinely shocked. “You’re a gentleman, sir.”

“Am I?”

“Of course you are. Pray do not tease me, my lord. I brought the pistol along as protection against footpads. I understand they are very prevalent here in Town.”

“Yes. They are.”

The cat crouched on Sebastian’s lap and gazed at Prudence with an unwinking gaze. It struck her that the beast’s eyes were almost the exact same shade of gold as those of its master. She was momentarily distracted by that observation.

“Does your cat have a name, sir?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

The faint smile briefly edged Sebastian’s mouth again. “Lucifer.”

“Oh.” Prudence cleared her throat discreetly. “Yes, well, as I was saying, I am not at all unusual, merely a very ordinary woman who is, unfortunately, new to the ways of Town life.”

“I disagree, Miss Merryweather. You are the most unusual woman I have ever met.”

“I find that extremely difficult to believe,” she said tartly. “Now, then, I

seem to have been the cause of some trouble between you and my brother this evening and I wish to put a stop to it at once.”

“Trouble?” Sebastian’s amber gaze narrowed in speculation. “I am not aware of any trouble between myself and Trevor Merryweather.”

“Do not try to fob me off by pretending ignorance of the situation, my lord.” Prudence clasped her gloved hands tightly in her lap. “Word has reached me that you and Trevor are to engage in a duel at dawn. I will not have it.”

“How do you intend to stop it?” Sebastian watched her with lazy interest.

“As to that, I have researched the subject of duels during the past few hours and have come up with a solution.”

“Have you, indeed?”

“Yes. An apology will end this piece of idiocy. As soon as I realized what had to be done, I immediately tracked down Trevor at the Atkinses’ soiree and spoke to him first. Unfortunately, he proved to be ridiculously stubborn about the whole thing, even though I could tell he was terrified of what is going to happen at dawn. He is very young, you know.”

“Not too young to offer a challenge, apparently.”

Prudence shook her head. “He kept saying he had to go through with it because my honor as well as his own is at stake. *My honor*. Can you imagine?”

“That is generally the case in such affairs. Duels would be unbearably dull for all concerned if there wasn’t the issue of a woman’s honor involved.”

“What rubbish. Allow me to tell you, my lord, that if you actually believe that, you have no more common sense than my brother.”

“An unnerving thought.”

Prudence ignored the sarcasm. “It’s utter nonsense to think that I have been insulted simply because you spoke to me and asked me to dance with you. I was not insulted in the least. I told Trevor as much.”

“Thank you.”

“The thing is,” Prudence said earnestly, “Trevor has felt very protective of me since the death of our parents. He feels that as the man in the family he has certain obligations. He means well, but sometimes he gets carried away with the notion of looking after me. It is ridiculous for him to call you out over such an inconsequential event.”

“I’m not entirely certain it was an inconsequential event.” Sebastian’s elegant fingers moved thoughtfully on the cat. “You and I did have a rather extended conversation at the ball.”

“About matters of mutual intellectual interest, nothing more,” Prudence said quickly.

“And we did dance the waltz.”

“So did a great many other people. Lady Pembroke tells me it is all the

rage. Everyone is dancing the waltz these days. Really, Trevor's challenge is beyond belief."

"Not in the eyes of some people."

Prudence bit her lip. "Well, since he has issued the challenge and since I cannot talk him into apologizing to you so that the duel may be properly called off, there is only one solution."

Sebastian's golden eyes met hers. "I am extremely curious to hear your solution, Miss Merryweather."

"It is really quite simple." Prudence gave him a hopeful smile. "You must apologize to him."

Sebastian's hand went very still on the cat. His ebony lashes veiled his gaze. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. You must apologize to him." Prudence leaned forward. "It is the only way, my lord. Trevor is barely twenty, you know. He is nervous and I believe he knows he is in over his head, but he is much too young and too hotheaded to admit that this situation has gotten out of hand."

"Your brother may not feel that it has gotten out of hand. He may be entirely convinced that challenging me was the only proper response under the circumstances."

"Ridiculous. You must try to understand, my lord. Ever since Mama and Papa were killed in a carriage accident two years ago my brother has been attempting to shoulder his responsibilities as the head of the family."

"I see."

"He is at that dreadful age when young men feel things so very intensely. I expect you were young once yourself."

Sebastian gazed at her, clearly fascinated. "Now that you mention it, I believe I was. It was a very long time ago, of course."

Prudence flushed. "I did not mean to imply that you are old now, my lord."

"Thank you."

Prudence gave him an encouraging smile. "Heavens, you are probably not much above forty."

"Thirty-five."

Prudence blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I am thirty-five, Miss Merryweather. Not forty."

"Oh. I see." Prudence wondered if she had offended him. She sought to recover whatever ground she had lost "Well, you certainly have the aspect of the sort of sound maturity one would expect in a much older man, sir."

"Kind of you to say so. Others have said that my face bears the marks of a blighted soul and too much hard living."

Prudence swallowed. "The thing is, my lord, I fear we must rely on the

wisdom and common sense that you have no doubt acquired during the past thirty-five years *if* we are to put an end to the foolishness of a twenty-year-old boy.”

Sebastian studied her for a long moment. “You’re serious, aren’t you, Miss Merryweather? You actually expect me to apologize to your brother.”

“I am quite serious. This is a matter of life and death, my lord. According to my sources, you are an extremely excellent shot.” Prudence tightened her clasped hands. “I understand you practice regularly at Manton’s and that this will not be your first duel.”

“You appear to be remarkably well informed.”

“I am very good at investigating things, my lord,” Prudence said stiffly. “It is a hobby of mine, as I explained to you earlier this evening.”

“So you did. But I was under the impression that your primary interest was the investigation of spectral phenomena.”

Prudence glanced at the cat. “It is true that I have specialized in such matters, but I assure you my interests are actually quite wide-ranging. I enjoy finding answers to puzzling questions.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Merryweather?”

“I myself am extremely skeptical on the subject,” Prudence admitted. “But many people do believe in ghosts. They often think they have evidence of spectral phenomena. My hobby involves examining that evidence and attempting to find a logical explanation for it.”

“I see.” Sebastian gazed into the flames on the hearth. “It was because I had heard of your rather unusual hobby that I asked to be introduced to you.”

Prudence smiled ruefully. “I am well aware of that, my lord. I realize I am accounted an Original here in Town. You are not the first gentleman who has sought an introduction simply because he was curious about my hobby. Do you have any notion of how irritating it is to be asked to dance merely because one is considered odd?”

“I believe I have some idea,” Sebastian said, his tone curiously dry. “The *ton* is always intrigued by the unusual. It reacts like a small child with a new toy. And if it happens to break that toy, it will toss it aside and go on to another bright, glittering object.”

“I understand.” Prudence’s heart sank. Had she actually hoped that he had found her a bit more interesting than a new toy? This was the Fallen Angel, after all. “You are telling me that you asked me to dance because I am the newest of the *ton*’s entertainments. You were merely amusing yourself.”

“No.” Sebastian watched her with hooded eyes. “I asked you to dance because you intrigued me, Miss Merryweather. It occurred to me that you and I might have some interests in common.”

She stared at him in astonishment. “Really, my lord? Are you involved in investigations of spectral phenomena?”

“Not exactly.”

“What, then?”

“I don’t think it’s important at the moment. There are more pressing matters concerning us, are there not?”

“Yes, of course. Your duel with my brother.” Prudence pulled herself back to the business at hand. “Then you will apologize to Trevor? I know it will be dreadfully irritating to do so when he is the one in the wrong, but surely you can see that this duel must be stopped.”

“It is not my habit to apologize, Miss Merryweather.”

She moistened her dry lips. “The thing is, I cannot convince Trevor to do so.”

“Then I fear your brother must face the consequences.”

Prudence felt her hands go cold. “Sir, I must insist you act the part of a mature, responsible man. Trevor is as new to the ways of Town as I am. He did not know what he was doing when he challenged you.”

“You’re wrong, Miss Merryweather. Your brother knew precisely what he was doing. He knew who I was and he knew my reputation.” Sebastian smiled faintly. “Why do you think he was so outraged over the fact that I asked you to dance?”

Prudence frowned. “I have learned a great deal about your reputation during the past three or four hours, my lord. It seems to me it has been blown out of all proportion to the facts.”

Sebastian looked briefly startled. “Do you know the facts, Miss Merryweather?”

“Most of them,” She ticked them off rapidly on one gloved hand. “Years ago your father defied his family to run off with an actress. The Fleetwoods were furious. Your parents were forced to leave the country because of the scandal. There were never any announcements of a wedding made, so everyone, including your relatives, assumed your father never actually married your mother.”

“That sums up most of my relevant history.”

“Not quite. When you returned to England two years ago, the *ton* took great delight in labeling you a bastard.”

“So it did.” Sebastian looked amused.

“It was very cruel of people to say such things. You were certainly not responsible for the circumstances of your birth.”

“You are very understanding, Miss Merryweather.”

“It is a matter of common sense. Why should a child be blamed for the actions of his parents? However, as it happens, you were not born out of wedlock at all.”

“No.”

Prudence eyed him thoughtfully. “For reasons of your own, probably because you found it amusing, you were content to let everyone go on thinking that you had been born on the wrong side of the blanket.”

“Let us say I could not be bothered to correct the impression,” Sebastian conceded.

“Until your uncle, the old earl, died last year. He had never married, so he left no son to inherit the title. Your father was next in line, but he unfortunately died four years ago and you were presumed to be a bastard. Thus, everyone thought that your cousin Jeremy, whose father also died some time ago, would become the next Earl of Angelstone.”

Sebastian smiled and said nothing.

“But,” Prudence said, “you confounded the entire social world by producing conclusive proof that your parents had, indeed, been legally married before you were born. You were the legitimate heir to the title. I am told your relatives have never forgiven you.”

“A circumstance which does not particularly bother me.”

“In addition, at the time you came into the title, you had already made a fortune of your own which cast the Angelstone inheritance into the shade,” Prudence said. “That is something else that your relatives do not appreciate.”

Sebastian inclined his head briefly. “I compliment you on your investigations, Miss Merryweather. You have learned a great deal about me in a relatively short span of time.”

“There was no lack of people willing to gossip about you, my lord.”

“There rarely is.”

“Your reputation borders on the legendary.”

“Perhaps with good reason,” Sebastian observed softly.

“It is so formidable, in fact,” Prudence continued smoothly, “that it could certainly withstand the few inconsequential remarks that might be made if you were to undertake an apology to my brother.”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened. Then his eyes gleamed with reluctant admiration. “A telling blow, Miss Merryweather. And very neatly executed, if I may say so.”

“Thank you, my lord. I merely pointed out a small truth. You could apologize to my brother and come away with your extraordinary reputation still intact. Those who learn of your act of generosity toward Trevor will view it as a kindness on your part.”

“I am not known for being kind, Miss Merryweather.”

Prudence smiled encouragingly. “You will be, after word gets out that you refused to meet my brother. Everyone knows that you could have lodged a bullet in him, had you chosen to do so.”

“It is an interesting and rather amusing perspective on the situation.”

“I’m delighted you understand, my lord. I believe my little scheme will work very well. All you have to do is apologize to Trevor.”

Sebastian reflected on that for a moment. “I must confess I do not quite see any clear benefit to myself in all of this.”

“You will be spared the inconvenience of a duel at dawn,” Prudence pointed out. “Surely that is a great benefit.”

“As it happens, I am generally awake at dawn, anyway.” Something cold flickered in Sebastian’s eyes. “A duel would be no great inconvenience.”

Prudence stared at him in shock. Then she thought she detected a devilish amusement in his amber eyes. “My lord, you are teasing me.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, I do. Surely you can have no great desire to fight a duel with a young, inexperienced boy. You have nothing to prove. Promise me you will end this with an apology before blood is spilled.”

“You are asking me to set aside the small matter of my own honor.”

“I am asking you to be reasonable.”

“Why should I bother to be reasonable?”

Prudence was nearing the end of her patience. “My lord, I must insist you cease acting like a cork-brained idiot. We both know you are too intelligent to want to engage in something as foolish as a duel.”

“A cork-brained idiot?”

Prudence flushed. “I apologize, sir, but that is how your behavior appears to me. I expected better of you.”

“I am desolate to know that I have not lived up to your expectations. But then, I rarely live up to anyone’s expectations. I am surprised you did not learn that in the course of your investigation this evening.”

“You enjoy confounding others,” Prudence said. “I realize that you undoubtedly feel that you have just cause to carry on in such a manner. It is no doubt your way of getting some revenge on Society for the way it treated you before you assumed your title.”

“That’s a very magnanimous attitude on your part.”

“However,” Prudence said very deliberately, “I am asking you to rise above your inclinations in this instance and behave like the generous, responsible, kindhearted man I know you are capable of being.”

Wicked laughter briefly lit Sebastian’s eyes. “What in the name of the devil makes you think I’m capable of behaving in such a manner?”

Prudence was exasperated. “You are a well-read man with an inquiring mind, sir. I learned that much about you on the dance floor when we discussed my investigations into spectral phenomena. You asked perceptive questions and you displayed a keen intellect. I refuse to believe you cannot behave with some generosity of spirit.”

Sebastian rubbed Lucifer's ears while he considered that suggestion. "I suppose it might be a novel experience."

"Just the thing to relieve your boredom." Prudence hesitated and then added gently, "I understand you suffer from ennui."

"Who told you that?"

"Almost everyone," she admitted. "Is it true?"

Sebastian leaned his head against the back of the chair and gazed at the fire in front of him. His mouth curved without any real humor. "I don't know," he said quietly.

Prudence stared at him. "You don't know what you are feeling?"

He slanted her a strange look. "Much of the time I am not certain that I feel anything at all, Miss Merryweather."

"I experienced a similar sensation for a while after my parents were killed," Prudence said softly.

"Did you?"

"Yes. But I had my brother, Trevor. And Lady Pembroke was very kind. We were all able comfort each other. My spirits eventually revived."

"That I can well believe." Sebastian's tone was laced with mockery. "You are definitely not without spirit, Miss Merryweather. But the matter of whether or not I suffer from ennui is neither here nor there. Let us return to the subject at hand."

"Yes, of course." She gave him an anxious little smile. "I'm aware that I am asking you to do me a great favor, my lord."

"Very true. Apologies are extremely foreign to my nature. And so is the business of granting favors."

"I'm sure you'll survive the experience."

"That remains to be seen," Sebastian said. "I should perhaps remind you that when one grants a favor, one expects to be able to collect payment in return at some future time."

A fresh flash of alarm went through Prudence. She eyed him warily. "What, exactly, are you suggesting, my lord?"

"Merely that in return for my doing you this favor tonight, you will agree to do one for me should I ever request it."

Prudence held herself very still "What sort of favor would you expect in return for sparing my brother's life?"

"Who knows? One cannot see into the future, Miss Merryweather. I have no notion now of what sort of boon I might someday require of you."

"I see." She drew her brows together in concern. "But you expect to collect this favor from me at some point?"

Sebastian smiled slowly. His eyes and those of his cat reflected the firelight.

“Yes, Miss Merryweather. Someday I shall most definitely collect what is owed to me. Do we have a bargain?”

A dangerous silence settled on the shadowed library. It was broken only by the crackle of the flames on the hearth. Prudence could not look away from Sebastian’s steady, unreadable gaze.

She would have to take the chance that her intuition about this man was correct. He might be dangerous, but she did not believe he was evil.

“Very well, my lord,” Prudence said quietly. “I will agree to this bargain.”

Sebastian studied her for a long while, as if seeking to see beneath the surface, just as she had sought to penetrate his secrets. “I do believe you are a woman who keeps her bargains, Miss Merryweather.”

Prudence scowled. “Of course I am.”

“You need not be offended. Genuine honor is a rare enough commodity in either men or women.”

“If you say so. Does this mean you will apologize to my brother?”

“Yes. I shall see to it that the duel is called off.”

Relief poured through her. “Thank you, my lord. I am so very grateful. It is really very good of you to do this.”

“Enough, Miss Merryweather. I do not need your thanks. We have struck a bargain, you and I. You will repay me soon enough.” Sebastian set the cat down on the carpet.

Lucifer blinked at Prudence in irritation, as if he blamed her for being disturbed from his comfortable position. Then he flicked his tail and strolled off to settle himself onto a red and gold silk pillow.

Sebastian uncoiled from his chair and reached down to take hold of both of Prudence’s hands. He pulled her to her feet.

“My lord?”

He did not reply, but his eyes were banked flames as he drew her close. He bent his head and brought his mouth down on hers.

Sebastian’s kiss was a deliberate, calculated statement of sensual intent. Prudence had never received such a kiss in her entire life, yet some part of her recognized it instantly for what it was. A shocking thrill went through her all the way to her toes as she realized that in some indefinable manner, Sebastian was claiming her for his own.

Prudence was stunned.

She trembled. She could hardly breathe. A fierce excitement shimmered within her. Her entire body was suddenly alive with a new, pulsing energy.

The whole thing was over before Prudence could even begin to adjust to the sensual onslaught. She gasped when Sebastian raised his head.

“Now that we have sealed our bargain, Miss Merryweather, it is time you

went home.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, of course.” Prudence struggled to adjust the hood of her cloak with shaking fingers. She told herself she must be as nonchalant as he was. She was five and twenty, not a green girl. “No one will have missed me, however. Lady Pembroke’s household is extremely well run and I left distinct instructions when I retired to my bedchamber that I was not to be disturbed.”

“How did you get out of the house?”

“Through the kitchens. It was a bit difficult to find a carriage, but I managed. The coachman said he would wait.”

“The hackney in which you arrived has already been sent on its way.”

Prudence looked up sharply. “It has?”

“Do not concern yourself. I shall see you home, Miss Merryweather.”

“That’s really quite unnecessary,” she said quickly.

“I have already ordered my carriage brought around.”

“I see.” She could not think of anything else to say.

Sebastian guided Prudence out of the library, into the hall where the hound-faced butler was waiting.

“My coat, Flowers.” Sebastian smiled his strange, humorless smile. “By the by, it appears I do not have an appointment at dawn, after all. Please see that breakfast is served at the usual hour.”

“Yes, my lord.” Flowers cast Prudence a startled, questioning glance as he assisted Sebastian into a black greatcoat. But like the well-trained servant that he was, he said nothing. He opened the front door without another word.

A black carriage horsed with two black stallions waited in the fog. Sebastian handed Prudence up into the cab. Then he climbed in and sat down across from her. The coach lamps cast a fiery glow across his stark, forbidding features. In that moment Prudence had no difficulty understanding why the gossips had given him the title of the Fallen Angel.

“I appreciate your escort, my lord, but this really isn’t necessary,” Prudence wrapped her old cloak more securely about her as the coach started down the dark street.

“Ah, but it is necessary, Miss Merryweather. You and I are bound by a bargain now. And until I have collected the favor that you owe me, it is in my own best interests to keep you safe.” He smiled again. “Have you not heard that the devil looks after his own?”