

Excerpt from “Angel Comes to the Devil’s Keep” Chapter 1

London 1819

The odor of the Thames as it wafted over the area beyond Greenland Docks caused Hunt’s nose to snarl, but Sir Alexander had declared that someone paid large sums of money for the privilege of a blind eye to unloaded contraband, and it was Hunt’s duty to learn more of the people involved. The wig Hunt wore itched, and he fought the urge to remove the offending item, and it did not slip his notice how his coachman, Etch, swallowed his amusement.

“Jist relax, sir. It shan’t be long,” Etch cautioned.

Hunt grunted his response, attempting to disguise his own mirth. He slouched lazily against the back of the chair, just as the baronet had taught him. It was not much, this bit of public duty he performed, but Hunt took a certain pride in doing more than being the Duke of Devilfoard’s heir apparent—more than being the Devil’s cub. His ears perked with interest at the conversation, taking place nearby.

“I tells you,” said the dark-haired man Hunt had followed into the tavern. “The viscounty means to learn more of the earl. Then we be makin’ a call upon his lordship.”

“And this Town lord knows of the earl?” the shorter of the two asked.

“That’s wat the viscounty says. Says he’s got an arr’ngement with the highest. He also say we be keepin’ the high lord company fer awhile ’til we’s know fer certain he be easy pickin’s. The viscounty be wantin’ information on who the high lord shows his attentions.”

The men rose to depart, and Hunt made to leave, but Etch placed a hand upon his sleeve.

“Wait.” The coachman nodded to the door. “Is that not Lord Newsome? Doing business in this part of London?”

Hunt’s expression screwed up in disbelief.

“The viscounty?” he wondered aloud. “This just became interesting.”

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“You are pure evil,” she declared as he chased her through the intricate maze.

Dressed all in black, he stalked her, and Angel’s body heated from the brief brush of his fingertips upon her wrist. Catching her skirt tail, she skittered away from his slow pursuit.

“A copper for your thoughts,” she taunted with a nervous giggle.

“I was considering the pure pleasure of possessing my own personal angel.” His deep, resonant voice spoke of desire, but also of contentment.

“Am I that angel?” she rasped when he caught her shoulders and spun her to him.

“Forever.”

“Miss Angelica.” Her maid shook Angel’s shoulder. “Wake up, miss.”

Angelica Lovelace rolled to her back and stretched. She despised leaving the dream behind. It was one of her favorites, and she particularly enjoyed how it always ended with her in the dark stranger’s very masculine embrace.

“What is amiss?” she murmured.

Angelica kept her eyes closed, watching the scene’s details playing out behind her lids. She could not remember a time when she did not dream of her dark lover. Even as a very young girl, she enjoyed his company. When she was a child, he was her best friend, but when she turned to womanhood, he became her secret lover, and although she had never met him, he remained the man by which she judged all others. To her, he was her “dearest Devil,” always dressed in black, his shaggy coal-colored hair streaked with hints of mahogany. Over the years, Angelica blamed her oft-spoken-of irreverent attitude on the mystery man with a wicked wit and a splash of deviltry. *If my critics knew of my sultry musings, they would agree I am quite beyond the pale.* The thought brought a smile to her lips.

“Your father, miss,” the maid encouraged. “Mr. Lovelace requests you attend him in the small drawing room. Lord Arden has called.”

Angelica forced her eyes open. “Lord Arden?” She pushed herself to a seated position. “What might the baron require?”

“Mrs. Watson be thinking the baron will make himself known as a suitor.” The maid braced Angelica on the steps beside the bed.

“Do you suppose the baron consulted Mrs. Watson?” Angelica asked, with a bit of a tease.

The maid rarely understood Angel’s light sarcasm.

“Oh, no, miss. Mrs. Watson be creatin’ a guess.”

A chuckle slipped from Angelica’s lips. “And I thought an English upper servant worth her salt prided herself on knowing everything within the household.”

“Mrs. Watson knows enough.” The maid unlaced the ties on Angelica’s night rail. “I thought the silver muslin, miss.”

Angelica fought the urge to roll her eyes.

“Another virginal gown. Why is it English ladies announce their marital state with their gown’s color? What could be the harm in wearing a bright red or a royal blue?”

“You may choose whatever color most pleases you once you marry,” the maid observed in severe tones. “Lady Peterson wears only shades of purple. Can you imagine, miss? Purple dresses every day?”

Angelica frowned her disapproval.

“I am not certain I could tolerate the monotony. Needless to say, it would simplify the need for accessories. A few pairs of slippers and gloves would match one’s attire.”

“You’re so practical, miss,” the young girl observed.

Twenty minutes later and without breaking her fast, Angelica swept into the room. She and her father had imposed upon the earl and her mother’s sister Sarah by imploring upon her maternal relatives to open the earl’s Town house for the Season and for Lady Mannington to assume the position of Angelica’s sponsor in Society. Her mother’s older sister married Lord Mannington some five and twenty years prior. This was long before Angelica’s birth and before Lady Victoria Copley married Horace Lovelace and traveled to America.

“You sent for me, sir?” Angelica paused as her mother had taught her. *‘Allow the man to take your full measure.’* The words rang clear in Angel’s mind. It was comforting to have a bit of her mother with her.

Her father struggled to his feet. “There you are, my dear.”

Each day, Angelica became more aware of the man’s mortality. That particular fact was one of the reasons she had agreed to this venture. Her mother had passed two years prior, and her father

insisted on carrying out his wife's dying wishes. For years, Victoria Lovelace spoke of bringing her only daughter to England for a proper debut, but Lady Victoria succumbed to consumption before her wish knew fruition. Therefore, without the love of his life, Angel's father made the journey.

"Please come in." He gestured her forward. "You are acquainted with Lord Arden, I believe."

"Yes, sir." She curtsied to the man standing aristocratically beside the hearth. "The baron and I stood up together at the Breesons' ball on Tuesday last."

Arden executed a respectful bow.

"It is singular you have such perfect recall, Miss Lovelace."

"Angelica has a quick mind," her father remarked with pride, but then blustered. "Of course, my Victoria would say a learned lady was not a virtue by English standards." He winced when shock crossed the baron's features. "I apologize, Arden. I offer no censure. My late wife always accused me of acting a cake when speaking of our daughter. So many years away from my homeland must make me appear quite the heathen. I am accustomed to a freer-speaking society."

"It is quite acceptable, Lovelace." The baron grasped the hand Angelica extended in his direction and offered the obligatory air kiss. "Despite the consensus to the contrary, many Englishmen prefer their wives to possess a sensible nature."

Angelica gestured to a nearby chair. "But the author of *Pride and Prejudice* proved in her first novel that *sense* and *sensibility* are different from intelligence, my lord," she countered.

"I am surprised you have read the lady's novels," Arden remarked.

Angelica seated herself on the edge of the cushion and straightened her dress's seam.

"Would your *surprise* be because the author is British rather than American or because the author is a lady, and women should not trespass upon the male dominated world of authorship?" She did not wait for his response before adding, "Perhaps your astonishment rests in the fact *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel rather than a serious tome?"

She smiled prettily at the man. Her mother may have determined Angelica required an English aristocrat for a husband. However, Angel had decided only a partner who could accept her flaws, as well as her substantial dowry, would do.

Arden frowned in what appeared to be confusion. He clearly did not expect a challenge to his opinions. "I suppose all three, Miss Lovelace."

"But you hold no objection, my lord, to a woman who develops her mind through extensive reading?" Angel chuckled internally at the familiar line from the British author's books. She was certain Arden possessed no idea of the remark's source.

"I would imagine my wife would oversee our children's educations. Therefore, I would expect a certain rationality—"

"Which brings us to the reason for Lord Arden's visit, my dear," her father interrupted. "Arden has requested my permission to call upon you with the intention of a courtship. That is, if you are agreeable."

"A time to learn if we would suit?" Angel took a closer look at the baron. His thick dark brown hair had a tendency to curl about his collar. Barely six feet, the man struggled to appear more than a walking block of wood, but he possessed a pleasant countenance.

The baron bristled. "Customarily, such details are not discussed before the lady."

Angel forced her mouth into a straight line. Since making her debut a month prior, she had delighted in ruffling the feathers of a number of gentlemen who saw her dowry as an inducement to marriage, even though it would be to a hoydenish American. When her father suggested this journey, Angel reminded him, as she had often reminded her dear mother, Angel's ways would not sit well among the English elite for she spent too much time studying her father's book on antiquities, tending to Horace Lovelace's growing string of thoroughbreds, and overseeing the health and happiness of her father's workers. Those were the things that brought her contentment in her Virginia home, but they were not qualities most men of the English peerage sought in a wife.

“We Americans often take a divergent course. I pray that fact does not present a difficulty to our future felicity, my lord,” she said with a practiced smile.

“Certainly not.” Despite his words of assurance, Arden frowned. “I welcome your frankness, Miss Lovelace.”

Angel heard the man’s insincerity, but she had promised her Aunt Sarah not to make predisposed judgments.

“Then how should we proceed, sir?”

“I thought I might escort you on daily outings,” he began. “If it is agreeable, we could drive today during the fashionable hour. I also hoped you would consider accompanying me to the theater tomorrow. My sister and her husband will join us.”

Angel stood to end the conversation. “I am amenable, Lord Arden.”

He followed her to his feet. “Then I will call for you this afternoon.”

“I shall anticipate it.” She directed him from the room, but before Angel opened the door to the main hallway, she paused. With her hand resting on the latch, she smiled innocently up at the man. “Might I ask one question before you leave us, my lord?”

He appeared surprised and then assumed a cynical expression. “By all means.”

Angel hesitated, undecided, but, in truth, she meant to set guidelines before their courtship began. “During this time where we determine whether we might suit, am I to limit my interactions with other gentlemen callers? I would prefer to understand our agreement.”

The baron’s eyes narrowed. “I would expect your undivided attention, Miss Lovelace.”

She smiled sweetly. “Then I would expect the same from you, my lord.”

“Of what do you accuse me, Miss Lovelace?” he huffed.

Angel withheld a glare of disgust. “I meant no offense, sir.” She schooled her features to portray politeness. With that, she opened the door and turned the baron over to the waiting footman.

“Was that necessary?” her father grumbled as he poured himself a glass of claret.

She resumed her seat. “I studied the list of potential candidates Uncle Lancelot provided us. Arden has a long-standing title, but he is deeply in debt. My dowry must appear quite tempting. The baron would accept a woman lacking in effeminate ways to salvage his estate. I mean to keep the baron off balance until I am certain of his motivations. Who knows? Perhaps we shall suit, but I shan’t be his subject. When I marry, I wish a relationship as loving as yours and mother’s.”

“Lady Victoria Copley was one of a kind,” her father said wistfully. “Your mother possessed a magnanimous heart. My Victoria deserved better than a minor son, but I am more than grateful she chose me from among her many suitors. You will find it difficult to discover a man of even half Lady Victoria’s merit.”

Angel thought of her devilish dreams. A man of passion and compassion would do well for her. “I require a man of vision, like my father,” she said in earnest.

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The slow carriage procession drove Angel nearly to Bedlam, but she kept the smile upon her lips. She had agreed to the craziness of the “Marriage Mart,” as her Uncle Lancelot termed it, but she preferred to be anywhere else. The baron’s gig crawled along behind a Stanhope. Every few feet, the man would slow the carriage to acknowledge another member of the *beau monde* before introducing her to his acquaintances. The *ton* practiced their pompousness with prescribed efficiency, and Angel found it blatantly boring. With amusement, she wondered what *her devil* would say to such pretentiousness. Mayhap he would use it as a prime argument in defense of passion ruling the world. Not that Angel knew anything of passion. In fact, she had never known even the most faithful of kisses.

“Woolgathering, Miss Lovelace?” a brittle voice broke through her thoughts.

Angel flushed as she looked up into the countenance of a frowning earl. “I beg your pardon, Lord Townsend, I was simply enjoying the park’s splendor on a spring day.”

“You should always carry a parasol, Miss Lovelace,” Lady Townsend warned. “We would not wish to see you become too brown from the sun.”

Angel doubted the woman’s sincerity. She was certain the *ton* would celebrate any flaw Angel sported. She despised the British standard for unblemished skin. White pasty skin. Virginal white gowns. Proper manners, which hid prejudice and censure. A bland lifestyle wrapped in formality. She missed her American friends and her home in the picturesque Virginia mountains, and she missed riding at break neck speed across her father’s land.

“I am grateful for the suggestion, ma’am, and honored by your attention.” The carriage nudged forward, and Angel prepared to greet the baron’s next acquaintance. “What a crazy tradition!” she observed. “Would it not be wonderful to give the horses their heads?”

“A proper gentleman would never place his cattle in danger,” Arden said in chastisement.

Angel stiffened. His tone increased her often-quick ire. The baron’s first thought was of his team. Should he not think of the park goers or of her position in the high backed gig if safety was his true concern?

“I never suggested you turn your team free. I simply made the observation it would be a pleasant experience to feel the wind upon one’s cheeks.”

“Acting such would age a woman,” he said with another scowl.

Angel considered arguing, but she stifled her words. It was useless to think she might find a mate who spoke to her soul. Dutifully, she apologized. This was her first outing with Arden, and she would not leave the man with a poor impression of her manners. She ignored his declaration, and instead focused on the families enjoying the park. *I wish for family*, she thought. *Children and a husband, who knows pleasure in me and in my devotion. A marriage where love rules our reason.*

In resignation of what may never be, Angel turned her head and watched a tall figure toss a ball to a boy hefting a cricket bat. Even from a distance, she could tell he cut a fine figure. It was brazen of her to study one man when riding out with another, yet, she could not turn her gaze. Without realizing the reason, she extended her gloved hand in his direction, as if she wished to turn him toward her so she might look upon his features. It was the oddest sensations, and Angel swallowed hard against the rising constriction in her chest.

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Huntington McLaughlin, Marquess of Malvern, ignored the continual line of carriages tooling its way along the lane leading to and from the Serpentine, as well as the Society mamas, who attempted to catch his attention. He never understood the *ton*’s desire to be on display. In fact, Hunt could not recall the last time he suffered a drive through the park during the fashionable hour. Today, he had brought Logan and Lucas, his sister’s twins, to the park. Earlier, he spent what felt like hours pacifying his father’s high dudgeon regarding Hunt’s refusal of Lord Sandahl’s virginal daughter, Lady Mathild.

“I want nothing of an innocent,” he declared.

If his father forced him to marry, Hunt would consider a widow, but no green girl straight from the schoolroom. He wished for a woman to place her love for him above all others—a woman who shared his passions for life and adventure and learning.

“What is amiss, Uncle Hunt?” Logan called as he took a few practice swings.

Hunt escorted his nephews to the park to remove them from Henrietta’s way. His twin sister was heavy with another child, and with Viscount Stoke away on governmental business, Hunt promised to see to the twins’ safeties, while permitting the boys to expend some of their unbridled energy.

“Nothing,” he mumbled, but he brought his forearm across his eyes to block the sun. Despite standing in an open field and surrounded by many of Society’s best, his loins tightened. From the long equipage line, he watched a slow-moving carriage turning toward Rotten Row. A golden-

haired beauty clung to the gig's side, the wisps of her hair alive with light, and she turned in the seat to stare at him. *Too young*, his mind argued, but his body reacted nonetheless. He hardened, and although he knew it a foolish act, as the distance between them was too far apart to distinguish each other's features, he lowered his arm so she might look upon him. "Bloody hell," he mumbled as the gig moved away.

"Come on, Uncle Hunt," Logan encouraged.

Hunt withdrew his eyes from the departing carriage, but not before he spotted what he thought was the woman reaching out to him. It was like nothing he had ever experienced, and the movement set his body on alert.

"Right away," he said with little conviction. With the girl no longer in sight, Hunt turned to the seven-year-olds. "Are you prepared?" He tossed the ball in the air to catch it again.

"It will be a fiver," Logan bragged.

Hunt laughed at his nephew's puffed-out chest. "No boasting until after you produce." Yet, while he tossed the ball to Logan, Hunt thought only of the pleasure of greeting the unknown girl with an embrace she would never forget.

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Angel pranced in a teasing manner. "Are you frightened to toss the ball to me?"

He smiled in deviousness. "Your confidence exceeds your ability."

His words taunted her, but she knew he would treat her gently. So, when he wound up as if to burn her with his bowler, Angel anticipated the easy loft. He did not disappoint her. The ball sailed within her reach, and Angel smacked it with the bat, sending it buzzing past his ear.

With a burst of pure joy, she ran to touch the post with her bat as he scrambled for the ball to tag her out. As they both raced toward the home post, he caught her about the waist and swung her around in a circle.

"No fair!" she protested between gasps of delight.

He placed her before him. "I have no sense of fair play where you are concerned." His thumb caressed her bottom lip. "You are mine," he whispered. "You deserve to be more than a mere baroness."

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Angel assumed her seat beside the baron in the Arden family box. After last night's dream, she had considered canceling her evening plans. Never before had her secret lover made such a bold statement, and it shook Angel's composure. Realizing the unfairness to Arden, as well as to her father, she met her obligations. Nevertheless, the dream remained clearly in her memory. She reminded her weary heart that she had promised her extended family to deal honorably with her suitors, and so she smiled at the man of whom she had already tired.

"Have you attended the theater previously, Miss Lovelace?" Lady Wickersham asked as she waited for her husband to assist her with her wrap.

"Quite often, your ladyship."

"I am certain it could not be of the same quality," the baron's sister declared. The Wickershams had commented on the lack of proper roads, religion, and refinement in the Americas. "How often must you have encountered a savage!" the woman exclaimed from nowhere. "Daily, I imagine."

"Never once," Angel corrected, but the trio ignored her protests. Their snickers spoke volumes as to their honest opinion of the Lovelace fortune, and Angel bit the inside of her jaw to prevent the retort resting upon her lips.

"Have you traveled to the Americas, my lord?" she asked the newly minted Viscount Wickersham.

"Heavens, no!" he snapped. "Why would I care to place myself in such a hostile society?"

She wondered if Lord Wickersham held any notice of how patronizing he sounded. With hope, Angel sought the baron's attention to intercede, but her supposed suitor turned his notice to the lower levels. Angel followed his gaze. The baron's eyes fell upon a dark-haired buxom beauty. Immediately, Angel recalled observing the same woman near the park's gate yesterday afternoon. The woman had dropped a curtsy as the baron's gig exited the park. *Coincidence?*

Suddenly, it became quite clear what bothered Angel about yesterday's excursion. Other than when he introduced her to his brief acquaintances, Arden never spoke to her except to instruct or to criticize. In the ninety-minutes' outing, the baron generally ignored her. And the same had occurred thus far this evening. He disregarded her in the carriage, spending his time discussing politics with his brother in marriage. Did Arden despise being around her? He required her dowry, but the baron seemed under the delusion he owed her nothing in return. She had shared her expectations with him, but Lord Arden gave her request no care.

Irritated by his attitude, she whispered in the baron's ear. "Do you find the lady interesting, sir?"

Arden turned his head to glare at her. "We are not yet betrothed, Miss Lovelace, but you show tendencies for jealousy," he hissed. "Should I be flattered?"

"You should be courting my favor. It is my hand you seek," she returned. Angel refused to look away. If Arden thought to have a biddable wife, he should look elsewhere.

Arden's cheeks flushed. "I will treat you with respect, Miss Lovelace, but I will not dance attendance on your every whim."

"I see," she said guardedly. With great care, she turned to the stage and began silently to count to one hundred. The pause would provide her time to make a decision. At length, turning to her party, Angel set her mouth in a straight line. "If you will excuse me, Lord Arden, I shall step to the ladies' retiring room."

"Shall I accompany you, Miss Lovelace?" Lady Wickersham asked as she adjusted her seat to address the stage.

Angel kept her voice calm. "That shan't be necessary, Viscountess. I noted a smudge on my gown, which I should address. Enjoy the opening aria."

The baron did not think to honor her by rising when she exited his box. Angel had never experienced such decided censure. *When did Arden's intent change? Does he mean to teach me a lesson prior to my accepting his plight? If so, the baron erred.* Reaching the main entrance, she motioned to a footman.

"Might you assist me?"

"Certainly, miss."

"I am not feeling well. Would you hail a respectable hack to see me to St. James Street?"

The man bowed. "Immediately, miss." He turned toward the nearest exit. Within moments, the footman reappeared. "Your ride awaits, miss." He escorted her to the carriage.

She slipped a coin into his hand. "One more task," she whispered. "Please inform Lady Wickersham I developed a headache. Her Ladyship keeps her brother Lord Arden company."

"As you wish, miss." With that, he steadied her step into the public coach. As the hack rolled from the curb, Angel looked back to determine if Arden followed. Instead of the baron's angry countenance, on the corner stoop, she espied the same gentleman who played cricket in the park the previous day. She recognized him from his stance and by the way her breathing hitched tighter. He assisted a very enceinte woman, who clung to his arm. *Two sons and another on the way.* With a deep sigh of regret at her loss, she refocused her attentions on London's busy streets. She was without a suitor once again. Lord Arden would be furious for she ended their courtship with a dramatic period.

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Hunt turned his head to survey the traffic, but his gaze locked on the hackney and the woman climbing into it. His arm tensed. *It is she,* he thought.

“Someone you know?” his sister asked as her gaze followed his.

“No,” he murmured.

Henrietta tightened her hold on his arm. “The girl? The one with the golden blonde hair?”

Hunt could not remove his eyes from the hack. “Saw the lady yesterday when I escorted your boys to the park. At least, I think she is the same one...” His voice trailed off as the hack pulled away from the curb.

Henrietta’s too sharp eyes followed the departing coach. “Who do you suppose she is?”

Hunt returned his attention to his sister. “Obviously no one of any consequence. Otherwise, what would the lady be doing in a public coach and alone at this time of the evening?”

“Is she pretty?” Etta’s expression lit with an interest Hunt recognized as his sister’s meddling ways.

He rolled his eyes heavenward. “First, I only saw the lady from a distance,” he cautioned. “She likely has bad teeth and crossed eyes.” His sister chuckled. He sighed. “Moreover, I am in no humor to entertain a *girl*. If I share my time with a lady, I want one who can hold an intelligent conversation.”

“Is that what Alexandra Dandridge provides, Hunt? Intelligent conversation?”

He heard the disappointment, which laced his twin’s tone. “As a genteel lady, you should know nothing of the likes of Miss Dandridge,” Hunt warned.

“Every well-bred English woman knows of women such as Miss Dandridge. We just rarely speak of them,” his sister asserted.

Hunt swallowed his amusement. “Miss Dandridge was never known for intellectual repartee.”

“Was?” Etta jumped on the past tense verb.

“Was,” Hunt confirmed. “I released Zan several days prior.”

Henrietta intertwined their fingers as he escorted her across the busy street. “I cannot say I am sorry to hear it, Hunt. I know Papa’s schemes are tiresome, but you do require someone with whom you may share your life. It is a sin against nature for you to have no children of your own. You are the perfect uncle.”

“Most certainly.” He grinned. “I spoil my nephews and then send them home for their parents to discipline.” They stepped from the way of the late arriving theatergoers. “I know my duty, Etta. I am well aware of my responsibility to the dukedom.”

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He stepped upon the stage, and Angel’s heart raced. The audience quieted, and everyone leaned forward in anticipation. Like the other spectators, she slid to the edge of her seat and waited for the opera’s opening notes. Without ever hearing him sing, Angel knew he would be a compelling baritone, one to mesmerize every female in the theater.

As he opened his mouth for the first phrases, he made a slow advance to the stage’s edge and then down the side steps beyond the imaginary fourth wall of the stage. She knew he was coming for her: His gaze remained locked upon her countenance. It was as if she could feel the heat of his breath upon her cheek. As his voice rose to fill every corner of the house, he reached for her, and Angel placed her hand in his.