

Chapter One

Dear Diary,

The plan to surprise James didn't quite go as one may have thought. I don't think I can ever tell my brother what actually happened though.

London, England

May 14, 1812

Angelique Grafton had imagined the arrival at her brother's house in London in several different ways. However, she had not envisioned finding a stranger sleeping in her bed. Moving thoughtfully from one foot to the other she pondered her options. The best course of action would be to find her brother or the butler. Yet she wasn't moving. Biting her lower lip, she glanced across the room to her bed again. Standing in the doorway she could only see very little of the man, but she was curious. Who would her brother have allowed the use of her room?

Having just arrived from their country home where she lived with their aunt and uncle, Angel had dismissed the butler as she was fully capable of finding her own room. Why had Dobbins not mentioned that the room was occupied? It was highly improper for her to be alone with a man, even if he was fast asleep. Yet for some reason, she couldn't make herself turn around and leave. The sight of a man in her bed was so out of place, to think that his naked body shared the same space where she normally slept. She shivered slightly at the thought.

The stranger was lying on his back with the sheets pulled up over his chest, a bare arm flung across his face. Little as it was, it was more bare skin than she had ever seen on a man. A quiet life in the country provided no sights like this. The thought made her smile slightly. Overcome by curiosity she took a few hesitant steps closer. This was madness, but she just wanted a better look. Ignoring the fluttering of her nerves she walked up to the bed, knowing she was doing something she really shouldn't.

Standing by the bedside she tried to lean over to see more of the stranger, but his arm blocked most of his face. His skin looked smooth and tanned, much darker than her own pale complexion. It looked utterly touchable. Throwing a glance towards the open door she made sure no one was in the area before using her teeth to loosen her gloves at the fingertips. Pulling them off she quietly put them on the nightstand by the bed. She just wanted to touch that exposed skin. Just once.

Reaching her hand out she pulled it back quickly when the stranger let out a small sigh. What was she doing? She must have lost her wits. You didn't just walk into a room and touch someone simply because their skin looked warm and inviting - even if they happened to be sleeping in your bed. Smiling ruefully, she shook her head and retreated a few steps.

She almost bit her tongue in surprise when the man suddenly reached out and grabbed her bare arm. Before she had time to react she was pulled down onto the bed.

"Not leaving so soon, sweetheart?" the stranger mumbled, the hoarse quality of his sleepy voice sending shivers down her back.

"I..." Angel did bite her tongue then, trying to keep herself from saying something inane. "I do believe I should."

The man's fingers were long and lean, tanned like the rest of his arm, maybe even a little bit more so. She stared at the hand, so dark in comparison to the paleness of her arm. Having a man touching her bare skin was an entirely new feeling, and not entirely unpleasant. But wrong. So very, very wrong. She moved her arm slightly, but while not hurting her, his grip didn't waver. How frustrating. Or well, it would have been had she not quite enjoyed his touch. But that was beside the point.

"Oh, but sweetheart, what would be the fun in you leaving now?" The man was stirring, slowly sitting up. In fascinated horror, she watched as the sheets fell from his chest and bundled around his waist, revealing a flat chest with sculpted muscles. A pair of dark eyes fastened on her, making her want to squirm. They stared at each other for a moment and Angel found herself looking at quite the most handsome man she had ever seen. It was rather unsettling.

He had the kind of perfect face one would expect an angel to have. Yet with his tanned skin and unruly black hair he was probably more like a fallen angel, or a satyr. His strong, square jaw was covered with a dark shadow of stubble. Her throat felt dry as her mind swam with visions she'd never even realized her mind could conjure. He had high cheekbones, a straight nose and black brows which all suited him very well. Almost too well. And then there was the mouth. Angel could feel her cheeks flush as she found herself staring at his mouth. It was full and sensual with a slight upward bend in the corners, definitely giving him more the air of a wicked satyr. What was a man like this doing in her bed?

The stranger seemed to be looking her over as well, but while Angel was very appreciative of what she was seeing, he seemed much less so. Looking at her from top to toe his eyes were turning darker every moment until he finally met her gaze. "Who are you? I don't

know you.”

“I’m well aware,” Angel replied in an attempt to make a jest, but her voice was oddly breathless and she was alarmingly aware that he had yet to let go of her arm. The feeling of his warm hand against her bare skin was sending odd tingles throughout her body. That could not be good.

“Who the hell are you”?

“I... This is my room,” she blurted out. Not the most eloquent thing she’d ever said, but she was quite happy to have been able to say anything coherent at all. Why had he not let go of her arm? She was certain that she would be able to focus much better if only he would.

“Your room?” The man frowned and looked around the room as if he only just realized where he was. “This isn’t the guest room.” Understanding dawned on his face and he abruptly let go of her as if he’d burned himself, sitting up straight and almost dislodging her from the bed.

“You’re Gowthorpe’s sister!” That didn’t sound like a joyful statement by any standard. More like an accusation. Angel got off the bed, deeming it a good idea to put some distance between them.

“I marvel at your remarkable skill of deduction,” she said, gaining a dark look from the stranger. “Who are *you*, if I may be so bold? Since, after all, this is *my* room.”

Judging from the scowl on his face he’d just as well throw her out of aforementioned room headfirst.

“Nathaniel Howerty,” he muttered after a few moments of silence. “What the he...” He cut himself short before he could curse in her presence for a second time, and ran a hand through his dark hair. “What are you doing here? Gowthorpe didn’t expect you for another fortnight.”

Angel tried to keep her eyes on his face and not on the smooth, bare chest that was so clearly visible above the sheets. “I arrived early,” she said, sounding somewhat distracted even to herself.

“Yes, I gathered as much.” There was no mistaking the dry tone in his voice.

Angel blushed. “I begged my aunt to let me come sooner. I don’t see James very often and I wanted some more time in London before the rest of the family arrive. I thought I might surprise him.” She was blathering, something she did when nervous. A naked man in her bed definitely made her nervous.

“It sure as hell surprised me,” he muttered under his breath, and she was fairly certain he hadn’t intended for her to hear. “Why are you in here by yourself anyway? Shouldn’t someone have shown you to your room and realized I was here?”

“I told Dobbins I could find my way. It’s not like I can’t find my own room,” Angel said with a small shrug. “And I wasn’t expecting to find someone in my bed,” she added pointedly.

“Very well,” he raked a hand through his hair again, his dark eyes on her. “There is nothing to be done about it now, but I daresay this incident is best forgotten by both of us.”

Angel doubted her ability to forget it, the sight of his bare chest was surely burned into her memory for all eternity but nodded nonetheless.

“Now I suggest you leave unless you wish to see more of me than either of us had intended.” At first, Angel wasn’t sure what he meant, but when he started getting out of bed her eyes widened, and she quickly turned her back to him. There was a limit to how much naked, male body she could handle in one day. She could have sworn she heard him chuckle as she fled the room.

Nathaniel Howerty, the Marquess of Pensington, cursed under his breath as he began to dress. What had the girl been thinking, entering a bedroom with a man sleeping in there? He supposed she had been curious. If she was as overprotected and innocent as Gowthorpe always said that she was, then Nathaniel could understand that she might have been. And who wouldn't be at least a little bit intrigued to find a strange person in their bed? Still, it was foolish of a young woman to enter the room of said stranger. Very foolish indeed. Had she been caught alone with a man in her bedroom her reputation would have been ruined.

Not to mention that there were many gentlemen of the *ton* who wouldn't think twice about grabbing and seducing a friend's younger sister. Nathaniel wasn't one of those men, but she had not known that. Foolish, he repeated to himself. Or incredibly naive. He couldn't quite decide which he found to be the most appalling quality.

Once he was fully dressed he left the bedroom to go downstairs for something to eat. The food might improve his mood if nothing else. He found his friend, James Grafton, the Viscount Gowthorpe, already at the table with a cup of tea and a plate filled to the brim with eggs, bacon and toast. Next to him, his sister was sitting, a cup of tea clasped between her hands on the table in front of her. She fastidiously avoided his eyes as he walked over to them.

Gowthorpe stood up as he approached, smiling broadly. "I didn't expect you up quite yet."

"Neither did I," Nathaniel admitted. "Nor did I expect to see you." In fairness, it was

probably approaching noon by now, but they had only stumbled home in the early hours of the morning after a night about town.

“A maid woke me up to inform me that my sister had arrived,” Gowthorpe explained. “I don’t believe that you’ve met before.” He turned to his sister. “Angel, this is Nathaniel Howerty, the Marquess of Pensington, a very good friend of mine. I believe I’ve mentioned him to you?”

His sister nodded, her eyes still on her cup of tea.

“Pensington, this is my sister Angelique Grafton. But I always call her Angel.”

She stood and demurely offered her hand. Nathaniel took it and softly placed a kiss above her knuckles, then pretended not to notice that she all but snatched it back.

“As a matter of fact, we’ve met,” he said, surprising himself as much as Angel. The look of panic on her face made it all worth it. Let her worry, maybe it would teach her not to walk into rooms where strangers were sleeping.

“Really? When was that?” Gowthorpe looked from his sister to Nathaniel. “I can’t remember you two ever having met. Angel is very rarely in London.”

They sat back down at the table and Nathaniel glanced at Angel, wondering what she would tell her brother. She was stirring her tea with a small frown puckering her brow as she was presumably debating what she could say without giving away too much.

“When did the two of you meet?” Gowthorpe asked again, and Nathaniel almost laughed when Angel gave him a dark look through her eyelashes. He was enjoying this far too much, his mood much improved.

Looking at the two siblings, it was easy to see that they were family. They had the same blond hair and pale skin, although Gowthorpe’s was a few shades darker than his sister’s. Both

had high cheekbones, a finely chiseled nose, and arched eyebrows. However, where Gowthorpe's eyes were a clear blue, Angel's were light green. Angelique Grafton was perhaps not someone who would turn heads at first glance, but once you properly looked at her she was actually quite pretty, Nathaniel realized.

"I went upstairs to my bedroom," Angel finally explained, a blush coloring her cheeks a few shades darker. "I didn't realize that someone else used it in my absence."

"No one is meant to," Gowthorpe said with a frown and turned to Nathaniel. "You slept in my sister's room?"

"Apparently," Nathaniel said with a wry smile. "We were both quite foxed last night. I just took the first available room I could find."

Gowthorpe chuckled. "It was a rather good night, wasn't it?"

Angel seemed relieved when her brother didn't ask anything else about how they had met. Now and then she'd throw a furtive glance at Nathaniel, probably trying to figure out if he was going to spill her secret or not. He had to admit that he quite enjoyed watching her squirm. It served her right for having been so foolish that morning.

While the men were enjoying their breakfast, and Angel was nursing her tea, Gowthorpe was casually conversing with his sister about her visit. Nathaniel couldn't help but wonder why she was so eager to come to London that she'd travel without the comfort of her family.

"I assume that you will be at your sister's coming-out ball tomorrow evening, Pensington?" Gowthorpe's question brought him back from his pondering.

"It's not as if I have a choice," Nathaniel said with a look of mock disgust. "I never thought to have sisters of marriageable age would be so much work."

Gowthorpe chuckled. "Be glad that only one of them is."

"Aunt Jane already has plans for the younger ones, I'm sure," Nathaniel muttered, not even wanting to think about the fact that he would have to go through it all two more times in the future.

"Angel, did you bring a ball gown?" Gowthorpe gave his sister a questioning look. "Or are they all coming down with our aunt?"

"I believe my maid packed one or two," she replied, setting down her cup of tea.

"Splendid!" Gowthorpe smiled. "You've already been presented at court, and I will be with you, so you have a chaperone. Tomorrow you can accompany me to the ball."

"I would love to come to the ball," Angel said, then fell silent as she seemed to think of something. "I only hope that Joan will not be upset about me attending a social event before her."

"Our cousin gets upset about anything that doesn't go exactly as she wants. Don't let it bother you. We will enjoy ourselves tomorrow," her brother promised. "Pensington's family are a lot nicer than he lets on. Tomorrow is his sister Jessica's ball, her London debut."

Nathaniel groaned at the reminder.

"His aunt is hoping to marry Jessica off this season," Gowthorpe explained to Angel with a grin. "She's quite adamant about it. I believe that she is hoping that Pensington will find a wife while he's escorting his sister to all the balls and events this season. Two birds with one stone and all that."

"Undoubtedly," Nathaniel agreed dryly.

A footman entered the dining room, handing him a note on a silver tray. "My lord, this

was just delivered for you.”

“Thank you.” He took the note off the tray and unfolded it. After quickly skimming the words on the paper he stood up. “My aunt is requesting my presence. I should return home before she sends over a few henchmen to fetch me.”

Gowthorpe nodded and stood as well. “Very well, I have some business to attend to today myself. We’ll see you tomorrow evening then?”

“Yes.” Nathaniel bowed before Angel and followed the footman out to the hallway.

Angel waited for a minute for her brother to take his leave and then she hurried after the Marquess. The butler was just helping him into his greatcoat. When he was fully dressed and the butler had gone to the door, Angel walked up to him and looked up to meet his gaze. He really was quite a handsome man with the dark hair and those dark eyes.

“Thank you,” she said simply, not sure what else to say.

“For what?”

“For not telling my brother all the embarrassing details about our meeting this morning.”

Angel cast a nervous glance towards the butler by the door, but he didn’t appear to be listening.

“I don’t want to create a scandal on my first day in London.”

The Marquess chuckled. “You won’t. But don’t thank me, I would be in trouble as well if Gowthorpe was to find out.”

“So, you won’t tell him?” she asked hopefully.

“I didn’t say that,” he said and winked at her. Before she could react, he turned around and went through the door which the butler held open for him.

As the door closed behind him Angel stared at it for a moment, dumbfounded. What was that supposed to mean? After another moment of looking at the door, she realized that the butler was staring at her, most likely wondering what she was doing. Turning on her heel she quickly went upstairs to her bedroom. The bed was still unmade, but the curtains had been opened to pour an abundance of light into the room. Her valise and trunk had been brought up, and she started rummaging through the luggage until she found the leather-bound journal she was looking for.

With her diary under her arm, she went over to the bay window overlooking the garden below. Curling into the corner of the window seat she opened the diary. For as long as she could remember, she’d kept a journal, the blank pages were where she could write down her thoughts. No one in her home was interested in talking to her much, so she sought solace in her writing. She smiled ruefully as she wondered what James would think if he knew that she’d just dedicated an entire diary entry to one of his friends. Something told her he would not be too pleased. But the Marquess of Pensington fascinated her, and she had to admit that she looked forward to seeing him again the next night at the ball. Frowning, she put the diary down as she remembered what he had said before leaving. He wasn’t going to tell James about that morning, was he?