

AFTER
MIDNIGHT

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DIANE SHUTE



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*This is written for my mother, Irene Ruth Lasserot,
whose name is in the book.*

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CHAPTER I

TROUBLE IN LONDON



Alix knew she was in trouble. She dared another peek through the curtain, but the crowded street and towering buildings remained. Defeated, she stared into the shadowed corners of the carriage, searching for a key to the chaos surrounding her.

Her sister's ermine muff rolled to the floor. Alix retrieved it, mourning the beautiful animal. She pushed it to the far corner of the red, diamond-tucked leather seat so she would not have to hold it. Did her dear sister Lily customarily forget things in the carriage? How could Alix guess, when she knew nothing about Lily? It was another hallmark of how this shocking scheme was doomed to fail, since it was impossible to impersonate someone completely unknown.

The continued clatter of carriage over cobblestone frayed her unsteady nerves. Though her uncle Quenton was driving, he showed no sign of stopping. Certainly he had recognized that it had been she getting in to take Lily's place when they had left the farm. Even though they were twins, Quenton would have noticed the difference at once. No matter how

much he needed his job as Lily's driver, he was sufficiently immune to any threats to have contacted Alix first. He must have a counter plan in place if he brought Lily to the farm. Along the road to London, Alix had expected him to pull over and share it, but her heart sank when they turned onto smooth pavement. Another chance peek through the curtain made her cringe. Greensward and tall houses rolled past the coach, signaling arrival in Westminster.

If Quenton planned to shed a little light on his intentions, he was fast running short of time. Alix lost all hope of any last-minute chat when her uncle called to his horses.

"Look lively now, lads!" The carriage lurched in response and suddenly clattered to a halt at the curb.

Resolutely, she straightened her position, for there would be no last-minute reprieve. Alix smoothed her sister's skirt and adjusted her sister's bonnet strings, waiting for the door to open. As her uncle jumped down from the box, she drew a deep breath and assumed Lily's vacant expression.

Quenton opened the door without regard for her. He did not know she had been riding inside Lily's coach, dressed in Lily's clothes, and knew nothing about Lily's plan to exchange places. It was too late to tell him, because now the cost of his outrage at the detestable scheme would be his employment. Determinedly, Alix mustered the will to step down from the carriage.

NICHOLAS MEASURED SILENT PACES against the pendulum of the Bavarian floor clock. Only the snap of the fire, the pelting rain, and the redundant tick marked his trek down the length of the library. Upon reaching his desk, he turned to start his journey again.

"I beg your pardon, milord."

It was the butler, Percival Winston. Nicholas avoided the man's sympathetic gaze, but he hovered in the doorway, awaiting permission to enter. Finally discarding the need, the butler came in regardless. His presence made no difference to Nicholas, as long as his visit was brief.

"I thought you might like a lamp or two."

"If you must," Nicholas responded, unwilling to concede a reminder of the waning day.

"Thank you, milord; I'll just be a minute."

The strike of the tinderbox invaded his seclusion and sparked thought. The clock chimed, igniting the parody of his most recent afternoon. When he had rolled out of bed that morning, he had scarcely imagined this finish to his day. His schedule had started as routinely as usual, save he had been fortunate enough to have missed Lily going up to bed as he went down to breakfast. He made no pretense of avoiding his wife; he could scarcely stand the sight of her, let alone stomach the caliber of people she entertained.

Once Lily Radcliffe had set her sights on the Griffon fortune, there had been no chance for a reprieve from his reckless marriage. He loathed acknowledging he was a fool for the fortnight that had ended his delusion on their wedding night. Now, while Lily lived the high life as his entitled wife, Nicholas was left with the price of folly. It did not matter what she did, so long as she did it outside his knowledge. Until recently, she had seemed so clever, coming off scot-free from every escapade, that he had mistakenly come to rely on it. He should have anticipated the proverbial hens coming home to roost. Her error might have granted him a hearty laugh, except he was the unwitting cuckold.

Not that it mattered what others thought, beyond the mockery she made of his name. He had no desire to see the

Griffon reputation sullied or to gain notoriety as a laughing-stock. To date, the worst he had managed was his marriage to Lily Radcliffe. Little had he thought it would lead to scandal, but it had not taken her long; barely had the ring been on her finger when he had discovered his blunder. It had taken the better part of a year to emerge from a bout of self-loathing, and now this.

He would have been wiser petitioning for immediate annulment, but he was too busy drowning in one hell of a bender. To be precise, it was not a bender inasmuch as it was a drunken row night after bloody night in the saloons along the river. When he could not drink anymore and his legs gave out, some passerby would take sufficient pity to pour him into a bunk on one of his frigates lining the docks. If not, he would remain where he fell until morning patrol, when a bobby woke him sufficiently to stagger to a berth on his own.

It was a shameful pastime for a man of his position, but he would do anything to keep from returning home to the disgrace of his marriage. By the time he scraped himself together sufficiently to look in the mirror, his wife constructed a new pratfall.

“Would you care for a scotch, milord?” Winston suggested, smoothly pouring without regard for a reply. “In my opinion, a drink goes down nicely on a day like this.”

Nicholas did not like living with the intimation that he was fast becoming a wastrel. “Are you suggesting there’s a reason I should be drinking?”

“Not at all, milord.”

“In that case, I might like one.”

“Will you dine in tonight?”

“God, no.” He grimaced at the unwarranted suggestion and tasted his whiskey. “I’ll be at the club, as usual.”

“Very well, milord. May I be of further assistance?”

“No, man. Go along.”

“Thank you, milord.” Winston capped his performance with a bow and disappeared through the door.

Nicholas waited until the butler was gone to take a decent drink of scotch. Winston was right: It cut the bitterness of learning about the D’Arcys’ European tour, right after he had received the message that Lily had spent the night at their country estate.

It was the reason he had stormed home to meet her when she surfaced. If Lily’s cohort, Beth D’Arcy, was out of the country, then how in the devil could Lily have been visiting her? The short answer was the obvious lie, but it did not furnish anything about where she had actually been.

After watching her having a go with his brother, Phillip, all winter, he was sick to death of her flagrancy. He was not so much worried about her as he was concerned her rendezvous would become public fodder. He wished not to see her but to hear the lie straight from her lips. Then he would take his complaint to a judge and end the sham of their marriage in divorce, without exposing her disgraceful affair with his brother.

Divorce was ugly and would cast aspersion on his reputation, but with unassailable proof and without involving Phillip, it would not be as painful as it could be otherwise. Someday his worthless brother might even thank him, but for now, Phillip would learn of the dissolution in a letter. By the time Phillip’s ship returned from Calcutta, the public disgrace would be forgotten. Nicholas would prefer for his brother’s indiscretion never to emerge in court; the disgrace of marital incest would be sufficient to oust his seat in Parliament. To save the tattered remnants of a once-reputable name, they

might need to sell their London properties and move Lion Shipping Company up the coast to continue the family business in relative obscurity.

Lily. She could not be content with the ruin of one Griffon male; she had to have both. Nicholas's gaffe in marrying her jeopardized both brothers' reputations. She was worse than a siren, simply devouring any man foolish enough to look at her. How many others had she enticed to their downfall? There was no need to count any of them, when by marrying her he was the king of them all.

Now it would end. He was finished living in a self-destructive prison. He might be guilty of falling for her angelic image of soft blue eyes and lustrous hair. Her sweet facade hid one of hell's most heartless demons, and he had paid full price for his blunder. Tonight, he would watch her squirm; tomorrow, he would enlist a petition for absolution.

He sipped his scotch, reveling in the anticipation of victory, while a carriage clamored to a stop on the street below. He did not need to part the curtains to recognize his black landau pulled to the curb. Nicholas turned to the liquor cabinet to refresh his drink. His wife was home, and now the final act could begin.

LORD NICHOLAS GRIFFON did not rise when she entered. Alix knew he was waiting for his wife, when his sharp gaze pinned her with a challenge to falter as momentum brought her through the door.

"Milady is home, milord," the butler announced. With a solemn bow, he turned to her next. "Might I be of further service, milady?"

While she struggled to summon her poorly practiced approximation of her sister's voice, Nicholas dismissed him

curtly. "That will be all, Winston."

"Yes, milord."

At least the butler was well trained. Did he sound pleased to be released? Alix could not blame him. She pasted on a Lily smile and, tugging on the tips of Lily's white gloves, carried her performance to the fire. The library hearth was polished black granite veined with white. Under ordinary circumstances, she would have remarked on its beauty, but now her back prickled while the earl's gaze burned through her.

"Lily, where have you been?"

Lily's husband asked the question quietly, but dread pooled in her stomach. Why had she not suspected her sister of deceit when Lily had described her husband? Dear Lily had maintained him to be as foolish as any coxcomb, a complete wastrel, and both as distant and as conceited as a fop.

The man sitting at his desk did not appear to be any of those things, but she dared to sweep him with the mocking gaze dear Lily prescribed for challenging situations. What she glimpsed chased her eyes away, because he deliberately planted his hands on his desktop and pushed to his feet.

Nicholas Griffon was taller than she expected when he moved from his chair. The square of his shoulders and imperious lift of his chin made for an imposing figure. Bright coals flickered in the darkness of eyes burning beneath the formidable frown of intelligent-looking brows. Dark hair framed his angular face with unruly curls, despite the ribbon holding it, and his chin bore witness to neglect of a razor.

It might have been a trick of uneven light, but his tan moleskin breeches evidenced the same weather staining as his black riding boots. His unbuttoned forest-green coat and burgundy brocade waistcoat were a rich, pleasing combination but wrinkled from wear. His starched collar was open, leaving a

well-matched ascot trailing ribbons down his shirt. He was far from any popinjay she had ever seen, and leonine smoothness as he moved around the desk lent him a dangerous impression.

Her heart quivered, but she willed her fright into submission by studying the deceptive flames of the fire. “Don’t tell me you didn’t get my message about being round to D’Arcy’s,” she managed in Lily’s snide snicker.

“If you insist.”

Loud silence followed his determination, filled by the clock’s ponderous metronome. Scrambling to rally a defense against this inexplicable change of character from the man her dear sister Lily had claimed she would meet, Alix found she was woefully short. Lily had offered no advice for direct confrontation; she had maintained she acted without constraint and that a simple claim about spending the night with a friend would suffice as explanation.

“It’s a lie, isn’t it?” It was not an accusation, and the gentleness of his tone belied his conviction. It fanned her spark of fear into a flame of desperation, for her unintentional crime was indefensible.

“This is unlike you,” she replied cautiously, although she realized she had not a clue as to whether it was like him or not, since dear Lily was clearly unreliable. Was he gentleman or beast? How could she possibly guess? She knew nothing about the man towering over her. Even her uncle had never mentioned anything about him, beyond that this man was his employer.

“Did you think no one would learn about the D’Arcys’ European tour?”

Mayhap if Alix had had time to recover her wits from the stunning revelation of Lily’s having set her up as a ninny for the fall, her sister’s winsome bonnet strings might not have encircled her throat when his heavy hand fell on her shoulder.

He may have intended only to stop her instantaneous flight, but instead of a run for freedom, the ribbons created an instantaneous chokehold.

His curt exasperation terrified her. “What the devil are you doing?” he snapped, interfering with her desperate fight with the strangling ribbons tangling on his sleeve.

“I’m not who you think,” she tried to claim, but lack of air throttled her assertion. “Please, release me.” She gagged on the stinging gash of unyielding ribbon.

“Hold still,” he demanded in disgust, grappling with ribbons while she twisted frantically. “You’re going to bleeding well garrote yourself!”

“Stop pulling,” she begged, staving off his hold as darkness began to crowd her vision with a weird delusion she had died this way before.

“Damn it, stop this!”

“I can’t breathe!” She collapsed helplessly at his feet.

“Bloody hell, you’re killing yourself! By God, Lily, if this is a joke . . .”

Lily. The name meant nothing to her. Darkness rushed to her release.

A WATERY WORM slipping tenderly across her temple woke her. Muttering mingled with a noisy trickle, and a sponge mopping her forehead dripped afresh. Thought followed sensation with suspicion she had fallen, haplessly thrown from an unruly horse. Opening her eyes brought odd distortion instead of clarity, and a frightening woman peered into her face.

“Glory!” The word gagged her. She struggled to rise, pushing the unwanted sponge away.

“Fie, what is the meaning of this? Have a care, you ungrateful child!”

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