

Chapter 1

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 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 known their 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 counterplan 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 laughingstock. 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 downfall 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 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 he was this man’s 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 a 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. Darkness rushed to her release.

A watery worm slipping 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!”

Alix tore at the dreadful tangle of strings wrapping her throat, yanking the absurd bonnet askew until it smothered her face.

“Do you mind? That bonnet is new!”

“Not any longer,” she wheezed, tearing the hateful thing off to fling it away.

“That’ll cost you! You’d do well to remember your place!”

She struggled to sit up while the maid scrambled after the bonnet. A painful attempt to swallow tore her throat as she looked around, feeling caught in a nightmare. “Where am I?”

“In London—where do you think?” the maid retorted tartly, with a flatly disapproving look, preening the unlucky goldfinch on Lily’s bonnet. “These,” she added, sweeping it in a grand gesture at the sitting room, “are Lady Griffon’s chambers.”

“Lily.” She choked on the hated name. It was not a dream that memory returned to her, but the deplorable act of the outrageous scheme that ensnared her.

“Yes, nothing but the finest for milady,” the maid sniffed. “She promised someone suitable would return in her place. My guess is that it’s supposed to be you.”

“Milady.” The entitlement curdled on her tongue. What kind of lady contrived hateful intrigue? Where was the decency of thrilling in manipulation, or the victory in deceit? The shock of being involved in such an egregious deception set her reeling. “Have you any brandy?” Her pitiful entreaty came painfully, as a croak.

“Brandy.” The maid met her request with a distasteful sneer. “Milady drinks nothing but sherry.”

“If it was sherry I wanted, I would have requested it,” Alix coughed, rubbing her bruised neck and disliking the tart maid at once. She added it to her displeasure at Lily’s tasteless furnishings. She rose from the white damask couch, displacing a crimson pillow. It plopped onto a Venetian red carpet; the shades were garish together. Alix’s love for color cringed, and cried for justice from the mismatched hues. She turned from the horror of the room to find the maid gaping at her, and her patience with Lily’s charade reached its end. “Why are you standing there?”

“You look just like her.”

It would be her misfortune to have an identical twin like Lily. The fortunate event was that they had not been raised together. Save Lily’s exploitation of their differences; Alix heretofore had managed to eke a life for herself. It may not have always been fortuitous, but, mercifully, she had forgotten most of it. What was important was here and now, and Alix did not like the way it looked.

If the past was history and one managed the present, the future might still take care of itself, but not with Lily flying widdershins over it like the proverbial fairy-tale witch. Perhaps

she was more of the wicked stepsister; Alix would have to think on it later, because the maid mercifully appeared with the entire brandy decanter.

“Here, be careful,” the maid complained when Alix grabbed the glass.

“Thank you,” she managed to rasp after the liquid’s welcome burn soothed the torture from her throat.

“Go easy,” the maid counseled with flat disapproval. “Percival Winston keeps track of his liquor cabinet.”

“Why? Do you have trouble with thieves?” Alix asked prosaically, snatching the bottle by its neck to take it to the fire. She drank down another glass and managed to land safely in a chair, when the pedestal heel broke on Lily’s shoe.

“You’re a souse!”

“Not yet, but give me a few more minutes in this place, and I will be.”

“Aye, and I knew it; who else would take on this lark?”

“Lark?” Alix’s laughter issued as a cackle. She would have to be careful, lest Lily’s spell transform her permanently into her sister’s evil part. “You must be Jenny.”

“And who else would I be?”

Alix shrugged with indifference and poured another drink. The brandy splashed carelessly, but at least the alcohol was quick to work. With luck, she might still make it home and be in the barn on time for morning feeding.

“Hand that over before you drink yourself sick.”

She evaded the maid’s grab by springing adroitly and dancing away, kicking off the cumbersome burden of Dear Lily’s ridiculous shoes.

Darkness waited at the window. Swirling mist haloed the streetlamp in gold on the curb. Across the street, a brougham hitched to a handsome four-in-hand of white horses waited by the sidewalk. The door of the house opened, spilling light on a couple sheltered by enormous umbrellas toted by accommodating servants. A footman hopped from his perch to open the carriage door, while the driver waited bareheaded in the rain.

“You’re already drunk,” the maid accused.

“Do you blame me?” Alix returned with numb lips and a thick tongue. Would that she were free of this obligation and could join the pair leaving as the coach rolled away from the curb.

A fleeting memory of her mission returned. There was a plethora of hiding places in the knickknacks and whatnots on the shelves. With a wink from one of the Fates’ wily sisters, she could find what she needed within the hour, but then the deceptive room shifted, tilting her into a nearby lamp.

“Fie, I knew it! You’re going to set the place afire!”

Maid Jenny did a fine job of catching the wobbling lamp. Considering her nimble retrieval of Lily’s bonnet earlier, Alix deduced the maid had grown up with boys. In Alix’s case, it was her uncle Quenton, but she could not reveal such, to good Jenny.

She sat on the couch a little more heavily than she intended and spilled fresh brandy into her glass.

“Fie, you’re not getting sick, are you?”

“Not yet.”

“Good—give me this before you do,” Jenny insisted, pulling the decanter from her unwilling grasp. “Let’s go to bed while you can still walk.”

“I don’t have time to go to bed; I won’t be here very long.”

“Now you’re rambling. Up you go,” she grunted, doing her best to heft Alix from the couch.

“Thank you for your assistance.” Alix regarded the uncertain approach of the bedchamber door warily. “I don’t suppose you know where Lily keeps everything, do you?”

The maid hesitated when a distant door closed, and then pulled her on with a look of warning. “Of course I know where you keep your things, milady.”

Alix grabbed the door frame to stop their progress. “I told you I’ll be here only a few minutes.”

“Before going to bed . . . yes, I remember.”

“No, I’ve got to find something.”

The maid tugged relentlessly. “It’ll be there in the morning.”

“No, you don’t understand . . .”

“Pish-posh. There’s time enough for everything . . . now come on,” Jenny grunted, pulling her loose.

Unbalanced, Alix stumbled and careened to the strategically placed bed. She groaned upon landing, thankful it saved her from the floor.

“Come on, climb up . . . I’ve done this plenty of times. Will you just lie here quietly while I find a nightdress?”

“I’m not making any promises.”

“Fie, now I’m a nursemaid for a tippler,” the maid muttered in retreat.

© Diane Shute

End of sample chapter

To Purchase After Midnight, please go to [Amazon](#)