

Chapter 1

SOUR NOTES CHASED WINSTON from the parlor. The butler closed the doors at his back to mute the laborious attempt to play piano, but it did little for its discordance. As Nicholas peeled from his cloak in the hall, he hurried to his post. “I beg your pardon, milord—milady felt a pick-me-up in order.”

“So I gather.” The cacophony highlighted the reason for his early return. Nicholas carried the petition for release from his hellish marriage inside his jacket, ready for delivery to his feckless wife. This afternoon was destined to be his final test of endurance. Determined to make a rational appearance, he straightened his tie and braved the doors.

Lily smirked when he headed for a scotch without falling victim to her practiced pose. “Well, don’t just stand there like a clod, darling.” She abandoned the piano with an exasperated sigh. “You didn’t ask if I wanted anything.”

Nicholas sidestepped when she pressed against him. “You’ve always managed to pour your own well enough.” As she blinked in puzzlement, he escaped and ducked to the mantel to watch her splash sherry into her glass.

“My, didn’t we come home in a *fine* mood,” she said. “What happened—did you finally get tired of staring at an empty bottle?”

“My mood’s never been better, thanks for the asking. If I seem a bit devilish, it’s because a little chat is overdue.”

Prancing to the couch with a coy smile, Lily patted the cushion beside her as she settled. “I must say, it’s about time! Why not hurry over and join me, darling? You wouldn’t want me to catch a chill waiting for you.”

A triumphant quaff of her drink left an errant bead of sherry oozing at the edge of a petulant lip. As she chased it with her predatory tongue, Nicholas looked away from the repugnant show and noticed the black opal necklace clasped at her throat. He had given it as a gift to her sister, who had pretended to be his wife in a dangerous masquerade. Alix had escaped, but Lily would reveal where her sister could be found, while learning the price of their escapade.

Nicholas nearly stumbled on the question of whether his wife had demanded the opal from Alix or if the ancient necklace had been relinquished easily. Turning his gaze to the friendly fire in the hearth, he sipped his drink to still his thoughts. “Hasn’t it been a remarkable summer?”

“If you say so, darling.”

“How long were you at Alix’s house, or did you invade some other home? I ask only to cover your expenses. And while we’re on the subject, I have a question about the mechanics of timing: Isn’t this a little early for your comeback— or did you *lie* when naming Phillip as the father of your child?”

Her face aflame, Lily swept to her feet. “I might have guessed Alix would tell you everything!”

“Come now, Lily—you can’t really think you’re the first to hide the identity of the father of your illegitimate offspring by involving someone else. A simple count-back on a calendar suggests you conceived around the time we were married. Now, let’s see—I was the fool with the ring, but we both know what happened that night when I was drunk enough to fall into your bed—so, who does that leave from last summer? Ah, yes—dare we forget about *Johnny*?”

It rang true even as Nicholas voiced the accusation. Despite his relief that his brother, Phillip, had not fathered her ill-begotten child, it was small consolation when it had robbed him of his best friend. “Does it ever weigh on your conscience, or do you just *enjoy* destroying people?”

Wringing her empty glass, Lily stormed the liquor cabinet. “You think you know so much—I *lost* the baby! And while I writhed in complete agony, I suppose my *sister* was a great *comfort*!”

“If that was part of your plan, I’m sorry to disillusion you.”

“*Oho*, what’s this? You weren’t up to the task in her bed, any more than in mine? You must be in the wrong kind of business, darling—you should become a priest.”

“While on the subject of bed, why not admit how you dragged poor Phillip into your mess to cover up your involvement with John Wesley? When did Johnny Boy turn on you, Lily—when you revealed you had no place in *my* bed, or later, when he sought to shore up his reputation by marrying Sarah?”

“So what, when my sister’s been *pretending* to be your wife! She was only supposed to make a few public appearances! I should have known better than to count on her when she’s mad north-by-northwest!” Her tinkling laugh pealed as she sank to the couch. “Oh, don’t *worry*, darling—even if Mother kept her locked in the cellar, she’s perfectly harmless; in fact, she barely functions without prodding! All she ever wanted to do was hide from those *invisible* bad men. And to think I wanted to *play* with her!”

As she wiggled her butt on the couch with a mocking snort, Nicholas rinsed the rancor from his mouth with scotch. “She spared you a great deal of public humiliation.”

“I did it as much for *your* benefit as for my own!” Lily crossed her knees and bounced a slippered foot in a show of annoyance. “Just *imagine* the fuss around town with the announcement of a child!”

“Don’t you mean the *repudiation* when it became clear I was the unwitting cuckold?”

“If you were a gentleman, what would it matter? After all, we’ve been married a year! It would’ve proven your virility!”

“It’s not my virility in question.”

“But you’ve *never* cared if I’ve needed you! If you wanted a nun for a wife, you picked the wrong girl! Why don’t you just go ahead and admit you *tricked* me into marriage?”

“Wasn’t it the other way around?”

Lily assumed an absurdly innocent pose. “I don’t know *what* you’re talking about! You’ve looked down your long nose at me ever since our wedding night, and I come home to find out you’ve been seen all over town with my sister and even taken her on holiday!”

“Let’s not forget that Alix was *supposed* to be you.” Her predictable feint to avoid responsibility frayed his fraught patience. Nicholas folded his arms as he propped a shoulder against the mantel. “I couldn’t let her wander the streets alone, so why not just skip ahead to the terms of your agreement. What did you promise her?”

“Oh, *she* had the better end of it, even with *you* here. *Anything’s* preferable to getting stuck on some horse farm out in the Country! Oh, *what’s* the matter, darling—she kissed but didn’t tell all? Don’t worry, it doesn’t take much for her to talk to the wall—just pretend you’re a priest, and she’ll think it’s a confessional.”

Her cruel reference to Alix’s artlessness glimmered with sudden insight. “You blackmailed her, didn’t you?” He spotted the truth in her surprise, but she dismissed the ugly implication with a wave of her glass.

“Not really. *Years* ago, that dotty old Sir Gordon gave up the grant to his farm as warranty he’d keep his mouth shut when he took Alix away to live in the Country. After all, Mother needed some sort of assurance they wouldn’t just dump her on the street—imagine the damage to our family, should anyone suspect a lunatic relation! Now that Mother’s gone to her grave, the farm has fallen to me. Oh, don’t frown so, darling—I didn’t do anything wrong! I was in a tight spot, no thanks to you.” She stared blankly at the packet when he pulled it from his jacket to drop in her lap. “What’s *this*?”

“It’s your copy of the divorce petition I filed this morning.”

Lily erupted to her feet. “*Divorce!* You wouldn’t dare! I’ll slander your name until no one with any decency will ever even *look* at you!”

“Extortion is against the law, so you might wish to refrain. I don’t know how you feel about spending the next twenty years in prison, but I wouldn’t rush into it hastily.” As she dashed the papers to the floor, he retrieved the opal necklace by snapping its chain. “Since this doesn’t belong to you, let’s not add thievery to your list of transgressions. There’s an end to everything, including my charity. You’ll have a week to move—I won’t tolerate repeat performances.”

As Nicholas turned for the door, she hurled her drink after him, screaming as the delicate flute smashed in a golden spray and ruined the wallpaper. “You’re delusional!”

“God knows I must’ve been something once, to have married you.” He headed upstairs to pack a quick valise.

“LASS!” ROBBIE HURRIED FROM the far end of the stable just as Alix landed in the saddle. As she had feared, her stalwart knight and faithful guardian appeared to foil her swift exit. She should have known better than to try to escape his quick eye, but the day grew short. “It’s nearly teatime! Where are you going with Mercury?”

“There’s time yet for a turn in the practice ring.”

Robbie clamped a square hand on the colt’s bridle, pulling off his cap in exasperation. “You can’t make up for months in a matter of days, lass. Someone’s going to get hurt.”

Mercury snorted, shifting uneasily and bashing her game knee against the wall. Robbie had never known of her injury from riding in the botched steeplechase at Oxley Commons, and Alix was not about to mention it now. “Don’t worry, Robbie—Mercury hasn’t been out today, and we’re only off for a few rounds.”

As he released the colt, his frosty displeasure softened. “Molly will worry if you’re late for tea. She’s already wondering why you haven’t sat down for a heart-to-heart since you’ve been home from London. You know how she feels about Lily—she won’t rest without knowing why you got mixed up in her mess.”

Unable to resolve her bewilderment about the summer, she found the idea of explaining it too overwhelming. Instead, Alix turned Mercury toward the breezeway. “It’s not worth the fuss,” she claimed over her shoulder. “Who can predict what Lily does? I’d better push off, if I’m to finish by tea.”

She was careful to aim for the practice ring clattering from the stable but soon changed course across the field. “All right, Mercury, me boy-o, why not give it a go while we’re here?” Bach’s Bourrée in E Minor played in her mind as the horse cantered across uneven turf and jumped a downed tree with a splintered root.

When she had last passed this way, wildflowers had brightened the shadowy glades. Now, damselflies darted between hovering gnats and mosquitoes swirled in the shade. Her old routine seemed off-kilter since she had been forced to live in London. Going for a ride as Lily meant sitting sidesaddle with demure companions worried overmuch about the shape of their bonnets. Alix would have shattered many a delicate sensibility if anyone had spotted her dressed as a stableman astride her unschooled horse plunging along a deer trail.

Mercury slid downslope into a watery ravine, and a sense of dislocation followed up the other side. Despite Robbie’s veritable caution, the summer with Nicholas Griffon had proven far more than an improvident disruption in her life. Embedded in Sterling Wood Stable and her horses, Alix found her passion for competition unchanged, but her chafing frustration while she had been stuck in London seemed to have raised an awful specter. Robbie had always urged her to forget the past and focus on the future, where each day shaped new chances and fresh choices. It had been easy to accept his counsel as an orphan without memory of anyone except her

darling uncle, until Lily had materialized like a long-lost witch to resurrect old forgotten nightmares.

A dark line of duck dangled above the yellow smear of distant trees when they slowed near Neighbor MacGregor's windmill. Mercury huffed as they reached the road, and Alix stood in the stirrups, rubbing his lathered neck. With luck, the colt would be ready to join Dark Star and secure Sterling

Wood's reputation next season. "Smashing run, lad!"

The apple tree lane to the stable transformed into a charge-way for barking dogs. "Quiet, you!" The ragtag bunch fell to order, forming a gay parade of swashbuckling tails to escort Mercury home. Alix laughed as the white-and-sable terrier bounded from their midst, scrambling to sit on the saddle in front of her. She flattened his fox ears gently. "*Et tu*, Snap? I should have guessed you'd learn to ride."

SOME RECALL WAS TANGIBLE: the rain down his back and frustration with slippery reins. Not enough time could separate Quenton from the coachmen clogged in traffic on the rain-drenched mall. He was glad to be inside the cab as his driver managed to wheel past a cloud of umbrellas and turn at the abbey. Collecting his parcel from Limoges as the driver announced his destination, he had his hand on the door before the horse clattered to a stop.

Quenton landed on the curb and fixed the narrow brim of his hat against the slanted rain. Odd, how the street retained its familiarity, when so much else had changed. When he had been employed in the stable around back, the front walkway had been forbidden his use. Now he jogged up the steps to the house and rang the bell.

The sangfroid butler in the hall surprised him with a bow. "Good afternoon, sir. May I assist you?"

He knew he was unexpected, but not that he had changed beyond recognition. "*Bonjour, mon ami!* I've been forgotten so soon?"

With a laugh of dazed recognition, Percival Winston pulled him inside. "Quincy, by George! Where in the dickens have you been?"

Quenton had not been dry since the rain had blown his ship past Dover, but he had not taken time to change when checking into the club. After handing off his things to Percival's son, he followed the butler to the parlor and settled beside the fire, grateful to be warm.

Percival beamed, chafing his hands with delight and sinking in the chair opposite. "I say, how are you, old chum? You look absolutely splendid! Now, tell me everything!"

The early ferry and dreary channel crossing had left him little desire for idle chatter, but Quenton deemed it unavoidable when Percival did not send immediate announcement of his arrival. He tugged off his wet gloves amid bubbling questions, and chose to answer carefully.

“My plans are uncertain, you understand. I don’t expect to be in town long—I came seeking word of my niece.”

“There’s much to tell . . . but first, why not a spot of tea to warm your bones? Mary’s just made a fresh batch of orange loaf.” Percival bounded to his feet as young Percy rattled through the door with a teacart holding a welcome stack of sandwiches, reminding Quenton that his morning coffee and doughnut in Calais were very far away.

Percival acted as host, pouring while waiting for his son to go, and settled back, careful to lower his voice. “As you must’ve guessed, your niece is gone—milady has returned, but who knows for how long? This place is in an uproar that’s not bound to die anytime soon. Milord was home earlier, and Lady Lily’s gone out for the evening now, too.” He wagged his head, digging for his handkerchief to mop his brow. “Thank God—I’ve never seen anything like it.” Percival cast a meaningful glance at the stain spreading on the wallpaper by the door. “To my understanding, milady threw a glass of sherry at Lord Nicholas—he has nerves of steel, just like his father.”

“She must not have appreciated what he had to say.”

“It’s my belief milord confronted her. The last we saw of your niece, she was simply resplendent on milord’s arm, going out for the masquerade. You know the one—out at St. Albans. Of course, no one saw the exact exchange, but sometime during the evening, your niece disappeared and her sister—ahem, Lady Lily—squeezed into her costume.”

With Lily back to claim her title as Lady Griffon, Quenton’s quick round trip to London to bring Alix home had abruptly lengthened into a journey north. Instead of boarding a ship in London Harbor in the morning, he would need a fast horse for the road to Gordon’s farm near the King’s Forest. He swigged his tea, ready to be on his way.

“Lord Nicholas could not help but realize the difference, and hurried home in case she returned for her things. Exactly how she vanished is all quite a mystery, but the plot unraveled when milord discovered you’d forgotten your family bible. Don’t worry—the secret of Quincy Hill is secure. No one knows the truth, save for milord, Albert Frisk, and me.” Quenton was not of a mind to reveal the differences in his life since his pardon from the king. His employment as Quincy Hill the coachman was over, and the butler was no longer his superior, but he had not abandoned his old vestry bible simply to placate Nicholas Griffon’s curiosity. Had the British fool cared to look for answers earlier, the connection between his wife and her twin sister would have protected Alix from impropriety.

Perhaps belated realization of their changed circumstances drove his old supervisor to his feet. “It’s all the hum that milady was left a laughingstock by milord’s quick departure, and she couldn’t even go out the next day, because nothing in her wardrobe fit her. When she blamed the maid and boxed her ears, milord gave poor Jenny two weeks’ holiday for her trouble.”

Quenton would not be surprised if Alix sabotaged Lily as retribution for the idiotic involvement in her reckless affairs. He rose, plucking a card from his inner lapel. “For Lord Griffon, if you don’t mind.” Anxious to leave, he added the box containing his gift from Limoges. “This is for you and Mrs. Winston—a token for your kindness while Alix was here.”

Color stained Percival’s cheekbones as he protested, accepting the package with ginger astonishment. “I say, is this from Fontenot Porcelain?”

“It’s just a little something—not much, really.”

“Even though it was our pleasure . . . Mary *does* love a good gift! Have you a minute so I might ring for her?”

Quenton turned his backside to the fire to warm up, before necessity forced him into the chilling day. “As you wish.”

Percival pounced on his wife as she appeared in the doorway. “Mary, come in and meet an old family acquaintance, just over from France!” When Quenton clicked his heels to bow over her work-roughened hand, she flushed three shades of red. As she teetered on the edge of collapse, young Percy rushed to fan her with a tea towel while Percival guided her to a chair. “His Lordship’s only stopped by for a moment, Mary—but look, he’s brought us something from Limoges.”

Ogling the Fontenot box as she patted her hair into place, the cook peeled off the lid while Percival dug into the cotton swaddling. “By George, what a capital surprise! Look, Mary! ’Tis a lovely set of salt and peppers—thank you, but this is too much!” He exchanged a cautious look with his wife as she gingerly collected them from his hands. “But they’re exceedingly fine—shouldn’t they be for milord?”

Quenton laughed, retrieving his coat from young Percy. “I doubt Nicholas Griffon has much interest in salt and peppers . . . and now I must say adieu. Madame, it’s been a pleasure.” He bowed to the cook a final time and left young Percy to fan his mother with the towel. Pausing at the door to fix his hat, he offered his hand in parting. “Once again, *merci*.”

“Please give our regards to your niece when you see her! It’s been a rare pleasure, Quincy—I beg your pardon, *milord*. I hope you’ll stop in before you leave.”

As the door opened, the blustery chill billowed through Quenton’s cloak. “I can’t say . . . but *au revoir*.” Percival waved from the steps while his cab pulled from the curb, and Quenton tipped his hat in return.