

# SILENCE IN THE LIBRARY

by Katharine Schellman

## EXCERPT

Given the way she hadn't hesitated to interfere in the Wyatt family's affairs, Lily expected Lady Wyatt to politely rescind her invitation to ride the next morning. But she had insisted, saying her arm was sure to be better by morning. So after breakfast, Lily instructed Anna to lay out her riding habit.

Though she had forgone her usual routine of breakfasting in her own room and instructed Mrs. Carstairs to lay breakfast in the parlor, Lily hadn't seen any sign of her father. She didn't mind. If she couldn't be cozy while she dined, she was at least happy to be alone. And it gave her the opportunity to go over the week's menus with her housekeeper and offer several suggestions for managing her father's requests while he was with them.

"And do you know how long might that be, Mrs. Adler?" Mrs. Carstairs asked carefully. "Mr. Branson was unable to say when I spoke to him last night."

Lily pursed her lips. "For as long as he needs, Mrs. Carstairs. Or as long as I can bear his company. My record on that score is fifteen years, however, so let us hope it will not come to that."

The housekeeper wisely didn't say anything else.

Lily's pleasant solitude lasted until she was making her way back upstairs to change, when she found her path blocked by her father's belligerent frame. Unwell he might be, but George Pierce was still a solid, imposing man, and Lily had to remind herself to square her shoulders and meet his scowl with a smile as he did his best to tower over her from the step above.

"Good morning, Father."

He didn't return the greeting. "I am going to breakfast," he announced, eyebrows raised.

Lily waited for a moment and then, when no more information was forthcoming, nodded. "I hope you enjoy it. Mrs. Carstairs is an excellent cook."

He sniffed. "And I assume your excessively early rising is an attempt to avoid my company?"

"It is past nine o'clock, father," Lily said. "Hardly excessive. And I have an appointment this morning, so if you will excuse me—"

"What is your appointment?"

He couldn't curtail or dictate what she did with her time, Lily reminded herself. Even if having him in her home left her feeling as if her independence were being slowly stripped away once more, in practical terms he had no say in her life anymore. Answering his question was only polite. "An engagement with a friend—"

"That sailor again, I assume?"

Lily took a deep breath. "Captain Hartley was also invited, but no, the engagement is to ride with Lady Wyatt this morning. Which I assume you would approve of?" Seeing that she had momentarily surprised him into silence, she took the opportunity to push past her father. "You would like her, I think. She is charming and elegant."

"And her husband's a fool for marrying again," Mr. Pierce grumbled, but Lily was already heading down the hall and didn't answer.

Jack was coming just before ten to escort her to the Wyatts' house, and Lily was in a hurry to dress and escape her father once again. Her room was empty when she walked in, but Anna had laid out her riding habit on the bed, pressed and ready, its military-style buttons glinting in the morning light amid folds of emerald-green fabric.

Lily stared at it without moving. She had forgotten that her habit wasn't suitable to wear when she was in mourning.

She was still staring when Anna returned, the freshly brushed riding hat in her hands. When she saw Lily's posture, Anna paused.

"You don't have another, I'm afraid," she said gently.

Lily nodded, unable to speak. One hand reached out to brush the heavy fabric of the habit; the other clenched a fold of the gray dress she wore. She had stopped wearing colors even before Freddy died—in those last months of his illness, she had traded all her pretty dresses for drab gowns more suited to nursing an invalid who would never recover. And even after full mourning was complete, she had lingered in the muted shades of half mourning long past when anyone would have required it of her, even Freddy's own family. Laying aside the visual reminders of her grief felt too much like leaving behind her marriage.

But that had meant more than two years of sorrow. And in the last few months, since she had come to London and taken control of her life once more, something had shifted inside her.

"Yes, thank you, Anna," Lily said quietly, her voice catching a little. She cleared her throat and said, more firmly, "I will wear this one."

\*\*\*

She managed to leave the house without encountering her father again. When her butler, Carstairs, sent word that Captain Hartley was waiting in the front hall, Lily felt a pang of anxiety. Jack had loved Freddy like a brother. And he had never given any indication that he thought her mourning had gone on long enough.

Jack was in the middle of removing his hat, and his hand stilled at the brim as he caught sight of her. Even Carstairs fell still as they watched her come down the stairs, the heavy folds of her green skirts buttoned up on one side to allow her to walk freely and a single dyed- green feather curling over the brim of her hat and flirting with her brown curls.

Lily felt exposed as she descended the final few steps, though she was bolstered by the approval that softened Carstairs's smile. She had never considered herself a shy person, but she could barely meet Jack's eyes as she crossed the hall to give him her hand.

For a moment neither of them spoke, and when she raised her gaze at last, Lily thought she saw the captain blinking something from the corner of his eye. "That was Freddy's favorite color," he said at last, his voice catching.

Lily nodded. "I know."

Jack's jaw tightened for a moment as he swallowed. But he smiled. "Well done, Lily," he said quietly. "Good for you."

\*\*\*

There was a lightness between them as they made the quick journey to Wimpole Street. As Jack waved down a hack carriage and handed her in, Lily found herself laughing at all of his quips or droll pieces of gossip, even the ones she normally would have chastised him for repeating. And Jack kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Do I look that dreadful?" Lily asked at last as he handed her down from the carriage in front of the Wyatts' home.

"Quite the opposite," he said, rubbing the back of his neck as he released her hand. "Did you know, you are actually quite pretty?"

"You mean you did not find me pretty before?"

"I think I had forgotten to consider it one way or another," Jack admitted, grinning. "What a shame everyone has left London already; you would cause quite a sensation."

Lily shook her head. "I know full well I am not handsome enough for *that*."

"Surprise can cause as much of a sensation as admiration," Jack pointed out

"Captain!" Lily exclaimed in mock indignation. "You were supposed to argue with me!"

They continued bantering as they mounted the steps to Sir Charles's townhouse, only to fall silent and exchange a puzzled glance as they realized that the door was half-open, the sounds of raised voices echoing from within.

Lily glanced at Jack, an uneasy sensation beginning to curl in the pit of her stomach. "Should we knock?"

He shrugged and did so, rapping firmly on the wood of the door. There was no response, but it swung open a little more. After hesitating a moment, Lily bit her lip and said, "Well, we ought to at least make sure Lady Wyatt knows we've come. If it is no longer convenient to ride, she can certainly tell us to leave."

"And you were already happy to interfere yesterday," Jack pointed out, though she could hear the unease lurking beneath his playful tone. "We might as well do it again."

"Very true." Lily pushed the door the rest of the way open and strode in, Jack following close behind.

The front hall was empty, but they could still hear voices not far away, now low and urgent, and the sound of quiet crying from somewhere just out of sight. The uneasy feeling began to spread through Lily's chest and arms, and she reached out her hand in blind anxiety. She was relieved to feel Jack take it and press it reassuringly into the crook of his arm.

She had just decided that they should leave after all when quick steps echoed down the stairs. A moment later Frank Wyatt came rushing down, checking himself at the bottom as he stared at them in surprise.

His face was pale and his eyes red as he gaped at them, his easy manner vanished. "Lily? And Captain . . . I've quite forgot your name. You must excuse . . . what are you doing here?"

"The door was open, and no one answered our knock," Lily said, feeling a little ashamed of their hastiness in entering. "I apologize, Frank; we did not mean to intrude, but we had an appointment to ride with Lady Wyatt this morning. Is everyone well?"

"Is everyone . . . No. No." Frank gripped the banister with one hand, his knuckles white. "I am afraid that Lady Wyatt will not be able to ride today. My father . . ." He swallowed. "My father has died."

Lily stared at him, unable to make sense of his words. They had seen Sir Charles just the day before. If he had seemed a little older and weaker than she remembered, he had still been utterly vital and alive. “Died? But . . . how?”

“In point of fact,” a new voice said quietly from behind them. “It seems Sir Charles Wyatt has been killed.”