

# MURDER AT MIDNIGHT

## by Katharine Schellman

### EXCERPT

Lily sat bolt upright. Where had the sound come from? It hadn't been loud . . . another part of the house? For a moment, in the pressing silence, she wondered if she had drifted back to sleep without realizing it and imagined the whole thing.

But a moment later, the sounds of a commotion rose just outside her window. Lily dashed to the window, throwing it open with some effort and peering out into the swirl of snow and early-morning light.

The guest room she had been given was one of the smaller ones—the better to quickly heat rooms that hadn't been prepared in advance—and as was typical for such rooms, it lacked a pretty view. Hers looked over what she realized after a moment must be the poultry yard. Darkly clad figures who she could guess were servants stumbled through the thick layer of snow that had fallen, trying to reach the two people in the middle of the yard.

One Lily could see from her vantage only as a still, upright figure, hand outstretched and pointing toward the second person, who lay sprawled on the ground. The one on the ground was half covered by the ice and snow, unmoving.

Lily grabbed the dressing gown from the chair, pulled on her shoes, and ran from the room. In the hallway, a few guests were poking their heads out of their doors, hair tousled and faces creased with sleep, inquiring grumpily if anyone had heard an odd noise.

Lily didn't stop to consider propriety or worry about what anyone else might think before she yelled "Jack!" as loudly as she could. She didn't know which room he had been given, but a moment later, a door past the stairs was flung open and the navy captain's head appeared.

"What is it?" he demanded. He was already dressed and wearing his driving coat over his clothing. That was odd at such an early hour, but Lily didn't have time to be surprised.

"Downstairs." In spite of the months they had spent apart, Lily knew she could depend on him to understand and act quickly. "Something happened. We have to help."

And in spite of those months apart, he didn't stop to ask questions. More guests were emerging, summoned by Lily's shout, and questions were beginning to fly back and forth as she dashed down the stairs, Jack on her heels.

They didn't need to wonder where to go; on the floor below, Mrs. Grantham was following a stately-looking woman who might have been the housekeeper or another upper servant. Their pace was just barely too dignified to be a run, but they couldn't hide their worry as they disappeared down the steps to the kitchen. Lily and Jack hurried after them.

The servants' staircase was narrow and cold. At the bottom, servants clustered in the kitchen, talking in shrill, anxious voices as the cook tried to keep some order. The underservants

glanced uneasily at Lily and Jack as they came into the kitchen, but no one seemed to know what to do or say. The door to the yard had been left wide open, and the wind blew in gusts of snow and icy morning light. Outside, more servants were gathered, though they parted like a wave as the housekeeper led Mrs. Grantham out to see what had happened.

As Lily and Jack tried to follow, they were stopped by the frail but determined body of the butler, who interposed himself between them and the open door. "Madam, sir, perhaps you would care to return to your rooms? Breakfast will be ready shortly."

Jack drew himself up, clearly prepared to use his rank to push his way past the aging servant. Before he could say anything, though, and before Lily could think how to reply, Mrs. Grantham turned sharply.

"What is . . ." She trailed off, eyeing Lily and Jack with trepidation. She looked ready to send them on their way with some commonplace assurance. But half a dozen emotions chased their way across her face in that moment, and she instead asked, "Mrs. Adler, how many of the rumors about you are true?"

"That depends on the rumors," Lily replied calmly, though her heart was pounding. Behind Mrs. Grantham, she could see the limbs of the eerie, still figure sticking out of the snowbank. "Though if you refer only to the ones that are most relevant at this moment . . ." She turned her gaze pointedly toward the body in the snow. "There is indeed some truth to them."

Mrs. Grantham hesitated, then seemed to make up her mind in a rush. She stepped aside, pulling the confused housekeeper with her. There were boots for the servants lined up next to the door, crusted with mud from repeated use. Lily pulled off her delicate evening slippers, slid her bare feet into the pair that looked closest to her size, and followed as she and Jack were ushered into the yard, their eyes fixed on what awaited them there.

A man dressed in borrowed clothes, his skin white with cold, his hair thick with clumps of ice and snow. He could have fallen, hit his head, been caught in the storm and frozen. He could still be alive, in need of help. He could have had an innocent reason for being out in the storm.

He could have. But this close, Lily could see the snow that had been kicked aside and trampled by half a dozen feet in the servants' frantic attempts to clear it away. The icy powder was too thick on the ground for her to see the mud of the yard. But it was still stained with red and brown from where the man's life had leaked away in the night.

The once-snowy linen of his shirt was stained the same color, jagged and torn from the bullet that had ended his life. The gun that had fired it had been unearthed beside him, as snow-logged as his own body. The man's frozen eyes and mouth were wide open, as though he had not believed until the last moment that whoever had faced him in that yard could be capable of the shot that had ended his life.