

Lie by Moonlight

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Extract

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LATE IN THE REIGN OF QUEEN VICTORIA . . .

Midnight in a fog-shrouded graveyard. There could be no darker place on the face of the earth, Annie Petrie thought.

She shivered and clutched her cloak more tightly at her throat. She had never been more frightened in her life. But the rumors regarding the man she was here to meet were very plain. An appointment with him was conducted at the time and place of his choosing or not at all.

She had changed her mind a thousand times that day about whether to come here tonight. Her nerves had nearly failed her altogether that morning when she had awakened to discover the note on her bedside table.

She had picked up the piece of paper with shaking fingers, stunned by the realization that he had entered her lodgings in the middle of the night. Somehow he had gotten past her locked doors and shuttered windows. She had never heard so much as a whisper of sound; never sensed his presence. It was as if she had been visited by a ghost.

When she finally calmed down enough to read the brief message, she

discovered that it contained a simple list of instructions. In the end, knowing that she would never be able to rest soundly again until she had some answers, she obeyed each item on the list with great care.

The directions had included turning down the lantern when she came through the gates of the cemetery. Now the lamp cast only a weak glare that reflected off the eerie fog. The dark shapes of the stones, crypts and monuments loomed in the vapor-laced shadows.

It took every ounce of will that she possessed to keep moving forward. She had come this far, she told herself. She would not give up now. It was the least she could do for poor Nellie.

“Good evening, Mrs. Petrie.”

The voice was as dark and ominous as the graveyard. It emanated from the doorway of a nearby crypt. She froze, too terrified to scream, let alone flee.

A gentleman’s voice, she thought. Somehow that knowledge only made her all the more anxious. She managed to turn slowly, straining to make him out in the shadows. But the limited light of the lantern did not spill into the cold darkness that marked the doorway of the old stone crypt.

“I did everything on the list,” she said, aware that her own voice was quivering uncontrollably.

“Excellent. Would it surprise you to know that some who make an appointment with me never keep it?”

“No, sir, it wouldn’t astonish me in the least to learn that.” She was startled to discover that she had a bit of nerve left, after all. “There’s not many who would fancy meeting a stranger with your reputation at this hour in a place like this and that’s a fact.”

"True." He sounded amused. "But I find that such odd times and locations help to eliminate those who are not entirely determined upon their course of action." He paused. "I only work for clients who are resolved to obtain answers, no matter what the cost, you see."

"I've made up my mind, sir."

"I believe you. Now then, why don't we get down to business? I assume this concerns your sister's death two days ago?"

That comment rattled her. "You know about Nellie?"

"When I got word that you wished to meet with me I was naturally curious about your purpose. I made a few inquiries and learned that you had recently lost your sister in a tragic accident."

"That's just it, sir, it weren't no accident," she rasped. "I know that's what the police said, but it's not true."

"Nellie Taylor was found floating facedown in a cold plunge in Doncaster Baths. All the evidence indicated that she slipped on the tiles at the edge of the pool, struck her head, fell into the water and drowned."

The cool, emotionless recitation of the facts ignited the anger and frustration that had been simmering in her since Nellie's death.

"I don't believe it, sir," she said stoutly. "My sister worked in those baths for over ten years, ever since she turned thirteen. Started back in the days when Dr. Doncaster was still giving folks the water cure there. She knew her way around and she was always careful about the wet tiles."

"Accidents do happen, Mrs. Petrie."

"Nellie didn't suffer an accident, I tell you." She clenched the handle of the lantern in her fist. "Someone killed her."

"What makes you so certain of that?"

He sounded politely curious.

"Like I said, sir, I don't have any evidence." She swallowed hard and braced her shoulders. "I want you to find the answers for me. Isn't that what you do?"

There was a long silence.

"Yes, Mrs. Petrie, that's what I do," he said. "Tell me more about your sister."

She took another steadying breath and reminded herself to be careful about what she said next. "Nellie worked on the women's side of the baths."

"Her body was found in the cold plunge on the men's side."

"Yes, sir, I know. That's one of the things that makes me suspicious, you see."

"Did she ever have occasion to work in the men's section?"

"Well, yes, once in a while." This was the uncomfortable part, she thought—the part she had hoped to avoid. "Some of the gentlemen will pay extra for a female attendant who will wash their hair or give them a rubdown in a private room."

"I'm aware that such services are available," he said neutrally.

Her stomach chilled with dread. If he believed that Nellie had been a prostitute, he would likely conclude the case was not worth his time.

"It wasn't what you're thinking, sir. Nellie was a respectable, hard-working woman. She was no whore."

"Forgive me. I did not mean to imply that she was."

So polite, she thought, bewildered now. He actually sounded sin-

cere. There weren't many men of his class who would bother to apologize to a shopkeeper such as herself.

"I'm not entirely certain what took place in those private rooms on the gentlemen's side of the baths," she admitted. "All I know is that Nellie worked there occasionally. She said some of the customers asked for her and tipped handsomely for her services."

The man in the doorway of the crypt was silent for so long she began to wonder if he was still there. An unnatural stillness gripped the graveyard.

The gossip that had come to her ears claimed that he could materialize and vanish at will. When she had first heard the stories, she dismissed them as the wildest sort of nonsense. Nevertheless, standing here in a fog-draped cemetery in the middle of the night, it was all too easy to wonder if she had been conversing with a spirit from the Other Side.

Perhaps by day he slept in a coffin inside that very crypt where he had been standing a moment ago.

A thrill of horror electrified her nerves at that thought.

"Do you think that one of Nellie's special gentlemen customers murdered her?" he asked.

"It is the only thing that makes sense to me, sir."

There was another dreadful silence. The fog seemed to be growing heavier, blotting up what little moonlight remained. She could no longer see the outline of the crypt.

"Very well, I will make inquiries for you," he said. "If you're truly certain that you want answers to your questions, that is."

"What do you mean, sir? Why wouldn't I want them?"

"It is not uncommon in affairs of this nature for clients to learn things that they would have preferred not to know about the deceased."

She hesitated. "I understand what you're saying, sir. But Nellie was my sister. Like the rest of us, she only did what she had to do to get by. In her heart, she was a good person. I will not be able to face myself in the mirror if I do not at least try to find out who did that terrible wrong to her."

"I understand, Mrs. Petrie. I will contact you when I have some answers."

"Thank you, sir. I am grateful to you." She cleared her throat. "I hear tell that you charge for your services."

"There is always a fee, Mrs. Petrie."

That sent another shudder through her but she held her ground. "Yes, well, I expect that we had best discuss what I will be expected to pay. I make a fair living selling my parasols, but I am not a wealthy woman."

"I do not charge money for my services, Mrs. Petrie. My fees are more in the nature of favors."

Dread lanced through her. "Begging your pardon, sir, I'm not sure I take your meaning."

"There may come a time when I will have need of a parasol or two. Should that occur, I will send word to you. Do you agree to those terms?"

"Yes, sir," she whispered, baffled. "But I cannot imagine that you'd ever find yourself needing a lady's parasol, sir."

"One never knows. The important thing is that our bargain has been struck. Tell no one that you met with me tonight."

"No, sir, I won't. I promise."

"Good night, Mrs. Petrie."

"Good night, sir." She was not sure what to do next. "Thank you."

She turned and went swiftly back toward the gates. When she reached the entrance of the cemetery, she turned up the lantern and hurried toward the familiar comfort of her snug rooms above the parasol shop.

She had done what she could. The whispers she had heard assured her that, whatever else might be true about the stranger back there in the cemetery, one thing was certain: He could be trusted to keep his word.

The second explosion reverberated through the ancient stone walls that enclosed the secret staircase. The lantern Concordia Glade clutched in one hand swung gently in response. The low, glary light splashed wildly into the chilling darkness that surrounded her and the four young women behind her on the stairs.

Everyone, including Concordia, flinched and caught their breaths.

“What if this stairwell collapses before we reach the bottom?” Hannah Radburn’s voice edged precariously toward hysteria. “We’ll be buried alive in here.”

“The walls will not collapse,” Concordia said with a good deal more conviction than she felt. She steadied the lantern and pushed her eyeglasses more firmly into place on her nose. “You will recall that we studied the history of the construction of Aldwick Castle quite thoroughly before we decided where we would place the incendiary devices. This section has stood for several hundred years. It is the oldest and strongest part of the structure, built to withstand catapults. It will not fall apart tonight.”

At least, I pray that it won't, she added silently.

The truth of the matter was that the force of the two muffled explosions had greatly exceeded her expectations, to say the least. The first one had taken out the windows in the new wing close to the chamber in which the two men from London had been enjoying their cigars and port after dinner. From her vantage point in the schoolroom in the old section she had seen flames spring up with startling speed and violence.

The second device, timed to burst into flames a few minutes after the first, sounded as if it had done even greater damage.

"That last one was quite loud, wasn't it, Miss Glade?" Phoebe Leyland said uneasily. "I wonder if there was some mistake in the formula we found in that old book."

"The instructions for the mixing of the chemicals were quite clear," Concordia said. "We followed them precisely. It is just that the devices were never meant to be ignited inside a closed room. Naturally they are creating a startling effect. That is precisely what we hoped to achieve."

She kept her tone firm and reassuring. It could be fatal for all of them if she revealed even a hint of the fear that was pounding through her. The lives of the four girls behind her on the staircase were in her hands. If they were to survive and make good their escape, they must remain calm and follow her orders. Hysteria and panic would give rise to certain disaster.

She could hear muffled shouts of alarm from the courtyard. The castle's small staff was responding to the fire. With luck the flames would keep everyone busy long enough for her and the girls to get to the stables.

They had to get out tonight or all was lost. The conversation she had

overheard when she eavesdropped on the two men from London this evening had convinced her of that. But secrecy was paramount. She did not doubt for a moment that the coarse, sinister-looking guards who masqueraded as gardeners and workmen on the castle grounds wouldn't hesitate to slit a throat or shoot an innocent at the command of either of the two well-dressed villains from the city.

"It is very dark in here," Hannah said in a small, thin whisper.

Concordia held the lamp a little higher. The stairwell was not only dark, it was narrow and cramped. The descent had not been easy for any of them, but Hannah had a special dread of close, dark spaces.

"We are almost at the bottom of the steps, Hannah," she said reassuringly.

"I smell smoke," sixteen-year-old Theodora Cooper announced.

Her twin sister, Edwina, gasped. "Maybe this wing is on fire, too."

The faint but unmistakable scent drifted ominously up the staircase. Another jolt of fear rattled Concordia's nerves, but she made herself speak with what she thought of as her classroom voice.

"This section of the castle is quite safe," she said. "The only reason we can smell the smoke is because the wind is blowing in this direction tonight. Some of the vapors are seeping in under the door."

"Perhaps we should go back, Miss Glade," Edwina whimpered.

"Don't be silly, Edwina," Phoebe said flatly. "You know very well that there's no going back now. Not unless you want to be taken away by those dreadful men."

Edwina fell silent. So did the others.

Concordia glanced back over her shoulder and smiled at Phoebe.

Like her, the girl wore a pair of spectacles. Behind the lenses of the eyeglasses, her remarkably intelligent blue eyes were filled with a resolve that seemed far too mature for her fifteen years.

During the month that she had been at Aldwick Castle, Concordia had seen similar flashes of a disturbingly adult comprehension of the realities of the world in her students. One moment a girl would be caught up in the innocent pleasures and enthusiasms appropriate to a young lady hovering on the brink of womanhood. In the next instant a flicker of fear or melancholia would settle on her, stealing the glow of youth and anticipation from her eyes.

The deep, abiding anxieties that afflicted her students were well founded, Concordia thought. All had been orphaned at some point in the past few months, cast adrift into the merciless seas of life without the support of family or financial resources. Their experience with devastating loss and the fear of an uncertain future gnawed ceaselessly at their valiant young spirits.

Concordia understood. She had lost her parents, and the unconventional community that had been her entire world, the year she turned sixteen. That had been a decade ago. The grief and the fear returned frequently to haunt her dreams.

"What if the stable is also on fire?" Edwina asked.

"It is on the opposite side of the courtyard," Concordia reminded her. "It will be a long time, if ever, before the fire gets that far."

"Miss Glade is right." Theodora's voice rang with renewed enthusiasm. "You will recall that we took great care in the placement of the devices so that the stables would not be immediately affected."

"The die has been cast," Hannah declared. "We are in the hands of fate."

When she was not obsessed with a seemingly endless list of anxieties, Hannah showed a remarkable gift for drama. She was the youngest of the group, having turned fifteen quite recently, but she often surprised Concordia with her intuitive ability to slip into a role or mimic a person's mannerisms.

"No, we are not in the hands of fate," Concordia said briskly. She looked back over her shoulder. "Do not forget that we have a plan. The only thing that is necessary is to stick to it, and that is precisely what we are going to do."

Theodora, Edwina, Hannah and Phoebe took visible strength from her show of confidence. She had been drilling the importance of The Plan into them for days. It was their talisman in this hour of crisis, just as she had intended. She had learned long ago that as long as one had a plan, one could keep going against great obstacles.

"Yes, Miss Glade." Hannah appeared decidedly more optimistic. Her expressive dark eyes were still very wide but her voice had steadied. "We have all studied The Plan."

"Rest assured, it will work." She reached the bottom of the stairwell and turned to face them once more. "Step One has already been accomplished successfully. We are now ready for Step Two. I will open the door and make certain that the way is clear. Does everyone remember what to do next?"

"We will proceed together to the stables, keeping to the shadows of the old storage sheds along the south wall," Phoebe recited dutifully.

The others nodded in agreement. The hoods of their cloaks were thrown back, revealing the heart-wrenching mix of anxiety and determination in their solemn young faces.

"Does everyone have her bundle?" Concordia asked.

"Yes, Miss Glade," Phoebe said. She clutched her small canvas bag in both hands. It bulged suspiciously in one or two odd places, betraying the scientific instruments stuffed inside.

The apparatus had been part of the collection of books and supplies that Concordia had brought with her to the castle last month.

Earlier that afternoon she had tried one last time to impress upon each girl that only absolute necessities should be packed for this venture. But she was well aware that when one was dealing with young persons, notions of what constituted a *necessity* varied widely.

Hannah Radburn's sack appeared heavier than it should have. Concordia suspected that she had disobeyed instructions and packed one of her precious novels inside.

Theodora's bag was bloated with some of the art supplies she had been told to leave behind.

Edwina's bundle was stuffed with one of the fashionable new gowns that had arrived from London earlier that week.

It was the gift of the expensive dresses that had alerted Concordia to the fact that the situation had become critical.

"Remember," she said gently, "if anything goes wrong, I will give the emergency signal. If that occurs, you must all promise me that you will drop your sacks and run as fast as you can to the stables. Is that quite clear?"

All four immediately tightened their grips protectively around the canvas bundles.

There was a dutiful chorus of "Yes, Miss Glade" but Concordia got a sinking feeling. If disaster befell them, it was going to be difficult to persuade the girls to abandon their possessions. When one was alone in the world, there was a tendency to cling very tightly to whatever had personal meaning.

She could hardly fault her students. She had certainly not set an exemplary example of emergency packing. She would confront the devil himself before she dropped her own canvas sack. It contained a mourning locket with a photograph of her dead parents and the book of philosophy that her father had written and published shortly before his death.

She turned down the lantern. Hannah made a soft, frantic little sound when the stairwell was plunged into deep darkness.

"Calm yourself, dear," Concordia murmured. "We will be outside in a matter of seconds."

She slid the old bolt aside and tugged on the iron handle. It took more effort than she had anticipated to open the ancient oak door. A crack of fire-tinged light appeared. Cold air laced with smoke swept into the stairwell. The shouts of the alarmed men fighting to contain the fire grew much louder.

She could see no one between the door and the first of the old sheds.

"The way is clear," she announced. "Let us be off."

She picked up the darkened lantern and led the way outside. The girls crowded behind her like so many goslings.

The scene that confronted them was lit by a hellish yellow glow. Chaos reigned in the large courtyard. Concordia could see a number of darkly silhouetted figures rushing madly about, calling orders that no one appeared to be obeying. Two men were occupied hauling buckets of water from the well, but it was clear that the small staff of the castle was unprepared to deal with an emergency of this magnitude.

Concordia was stunned to see how much devastation had already been wrought. Only a few minutes ago the flames had been long, searing tongues licking from the gaping mouths of a few shattered windows. In the short span of time it had taken her and the girls to descend the ancient staircase, the fire had grown into an inferno that was rapidly consuming the entire new wing.

"Oh my," Theodora whispered. "They will never be able to quench those flames. I wouldn't be surprised if the entire castle burns to the ground before dawn."

"I never thought the formula would create a fire of that size," Phoebe said, awed.

"We have got just the distraction we require," Concordia said. "Hurry, everyone. We do not have a moment to spare."

She went forward quickly, conscious of the weight of her cloak and gown. It was not just the long skirts and heavy material that made running difficult tonight. Over the course of the past few weeks she had sewn a number of small items that looked as if they could be pawned into hidden, makeshift pockets. The idea was that the stolen goods would eventually be used to sustain them when she took the girls into hiding. But at the moment each item felt like a block of lead.

The girls stayed close behind her, moving easily in skirts that had been stitched together to form wide-legged trousers.

They fled in a tight cluster past the row of sagging, boarded-up out-buildings that had once housed grain and supplies for the castle.

A short time later they rounded the corner of the old smithy. The stables loomed ahead in the shadows.

Concordia was concentrating on the next phase of The Plan when a large man moved out of the shadow of the remains of the ancient wind-mill and planted himself squarely in her path.

There was enough light from the glare of fire and moon to make out his thick features. She recognized Rimpton, one of the two men who had arrived from London earlier in the day. His coat was tattered and singed.

He held a gun in one hand.

She froze. The girls did the same, perhaps instinctively imitating her in the face of danger.

"Well, now, if it isn't the teacher and all her pretty little students," Rimpton said. "And just where d'ya think you're going?"

Concordia tightened her fingers into a death grip around the handle of the lantern. "We're escaping the flames, you dolt. Kindly get out of our way."

He peered at her more closely. "You're heading for the stables, ain't ye?"

"It would appear to be the building that is farthest away from the fire," Concordia said, putting every ounce of disdain she felt for the brute into the words.

She had disliked Rimpton on sight. There had been no mistaking the lecherous manner in which he had looked at the girls.

"You're up to some trick," Rimpton said.

"Hannah?" Concordia said, not taking her eyes off Rimpton.

"Y-yes, Miss Glade?"

"Kindly demonstrate Araminta's response to Lockheart's surprising revelation in *Sherwood Crossing*."

Rimpton's heavy face screwed into a confused knot. "What the bloody hell—?"

But Hannah had already taken the invisible stage. She launched herself wholeheartedly into the role of Araminta, the heroine of the sensation novel she had finished reading the week before.

Uttering a choked cry of anguish and despair, she crumpled to the ground in a perfectly executed swoon that would have done credit to the most talented actress.

Startled, Rimpton swung his big head around to peer at the fallen girl. "What's that silly little bitch think she's about? I've had enough of this nonsense."

"Not quite," Concordia muttered.

She swung the unlit lantern with all her might. The heavy base crashed violently against the back of Rimpton's skull. Glass crackled and splintered.

Stunned, Rimpton sagged to his knees. Incredibly, he still gripped the revolver.

He was only dazed, Concordia realized, not unconscious. She watched in horror as he tried to regain his feet.