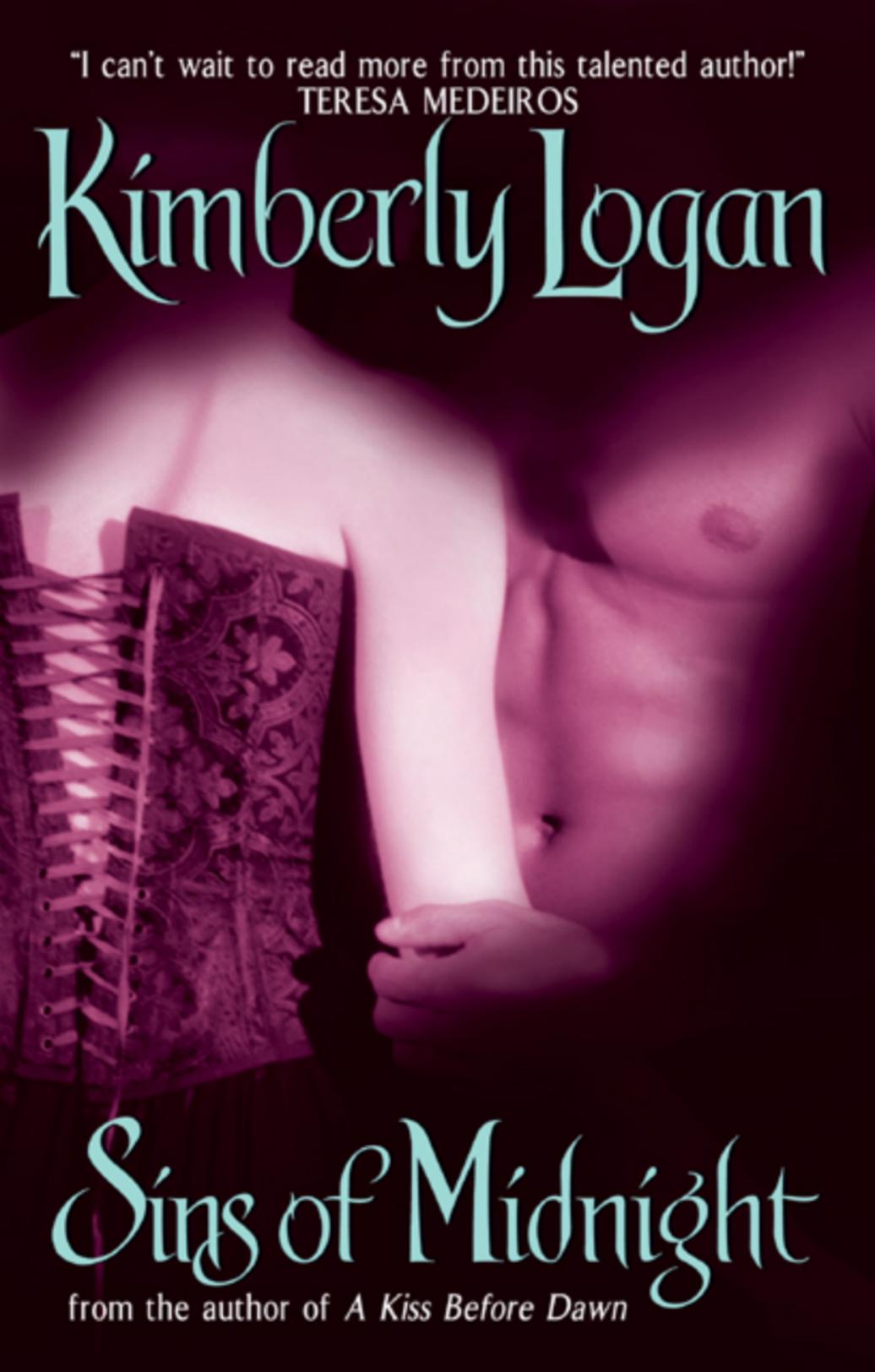


"I can't wait to read more from this talented author!"

TERESA MEDEIROS

Kimberly Logan



Sins of Midnight

from the author of *A Kiss Before Dawn*

Kimberly Logan

Sins of Midnight

To the Avon Ladies—both past and present—who have touched and inspired me through the years with your wonderful romance novels. I'm honored to finally be one of you.

And to my mother, for being the best brainstorming partner a gal could ask for, and for always being there when I need you. I love you, Mom!



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Prologue



Not everything is always as it seems, and a crime is never solved until the last clue is uncovered.

A Compendium of Basic Investigative Techniques
Lord Philip Daventry, 1807

London, 1813

S*omething bad is going to happen.*

The thought jolted seventeen-year-old Lady Jillian Daventry from a sound sleep with the force of a shout.

Her eyes flew open in alarm, just as a clap of thunder shook the town house, sending her heart flying into her throat. A few seconds later, a flash of lightning illuminated her bedchamber with an unearthly radiance.

Something bad is going to happen.

It was a persistent whisper in the corner of her mind, insidious and undeniable. She had no idea where the feeling of dread had come from or why it was so strong, but she couldn't ignore the sharp stab of fear it brought with it, causing her breath to seize in her lungs and her hands to bunch into white-knuckled fists in the bedclothes. The very air around her seemed weighted down by an aura of impending doom.

Quickly sitting up against the pillows, Jillian clutched the silk coverlet to her chest as her gaze traveled over her surroundings, struggling to penetrate the shadows, to search out the source of the threat. But nothing moved. All was still except for the quiet patter of rain as it pelted her window.

Perhaps she had been dreaming, she mused, making an effort to steady her wildly racing pulse. Having some sort of nightmare. It would certainly be understandable in the circumstances. After the events that had transpired at Lord and Lady Briarwood's annual ball earlier that evening, she was surprised she had managed to sleep at all. The last thing she could remember before she must have drifted off was the sound of Mama and Papa arguing in their room just down the hallway, their angry words hushed, but distinct.

"Damn it, Elise! Must you create a scene wherever you go? Flirting with Lanscombe and Bedford in such a brazen manner. Throwing yourself at Hawksley, and right in front of the man's poor wife. You are the

Marchioness of Albright, yet you carry on like some dockside strumpet!"

"I don't know why you're so angry, Philip. It's not as if you're jealous. I could parade about naked in front of every man in London and the only thing you would care about is the gossip it would stir."

"That's not true."

"It is true. You never kiss or touch me anymore. You don't even look at me unless you're berating me about something. How else am I to get your attention?"

"That's no excuse for the way you behaved tonight. This was to have been the last event of Jillian's first Season, and you ruined it with your outrageous conduct. I'm certain that Shipton's heir was prepared to make an offer for her hand, but now—"

"That silly boy? Come now, Philip, do you truly believe he could ever hope to make her happy? She's far too independent and strong-willed for the likes of him."

"By damn, this is not one of your Covent Garden dramas! Need I remind you—"

"You need remind me of nothing. Lady Olivia takes great delight in pointing out to me on a frequent basis just how unsuitable a former stage actress is for the role of marchioness."

"My sister cares about the welfare of this family. If you will not think of our daughters, someone must."

"How dare you accuse me of not thinking of our daughters? Are you thinking of them when you close yourself away in the library with your books and papers and spend all of your time conferring with that Bow Street Runner? And what about Jillian? You profess

your concern for her well-being, yet you encourage her unseemly interest in your research. I somehow doubt that society would approve."

"My work with Bow Street does not encourage the speculation of the ton. Your behavior, however, does."

"You knew what I was when you married me, and you said you loved me anyway. Has that changed?"

"Dear God, Elise, but I am so tired of these endless battles. Tell me what's happened to us . . . ?"

With her father's agonized query still echoing in her head, Jillian sighed and reached up to tuck a stray strand of ebony hair back behind her ear. Sometimes she wondered if she would ever understand either of her parents. She could remember a time, before her grandfather had died, when the two of them had loved each other passionately. But since Papa had taken over the title of Marquis of Albright four years before, their relationship had grown more and more volatile, and their verbal skirmishes had become an almost daily occurrence.

"Jilly?"

The voice that pulled her from her musings was soft and hesitant, barely audible even in the stillness, and at first Jillian was certain she must be imagining it. But at that moment, another convenient flare of lightning revealed the shivering, white-clad figure huddled in the doorway, tousled black curls covered by a lace-edged nightcap. A figure Jillian recognized as her fourteen-year-old sister, Maura.

"Maura? What is it? What's wrong?"

Arms wrapped about her thin frame in a defensive posture, the younger girl took a step into the chamber. Her blue eyes were wide with fright. "I d-don't know. I—I think I heard something. Something strange. And I can't find Aimee."

Jillian was instantly concerned. It wasn't like their timid, nine-year-old sibling to wander about the house alone at night, especially during a thunderstorm. Her apprehension returned with a vengeance.

Something bad is going to happen.

Tossing aside the blankets, she rose from the bed and slipped into her dressing gown before moving to light the candle on her nightstand with swift efficiency. Then, holding it aloft, she joined Maura.

"I'll come with you to look for her," she said in a soothing tone, praying that her expression betrayed none of her disquiet. "She more than likely just couldn't sleep and went down to the library to look for something to read. I'm sure we'll find her curled up in Papa's favorite chair with her nose buried in a book."

Please, God, let that be the case!

Taking a deep breath, Jillian led the way out into the quiet, dimly lit corridor and started toward the staircase at the far end, Maura's cold, trembling hand clasped in hers. The silence that closed in around them was fraught with a tension that was unnerving in its intensity, and Jillian's worry only increased when she noted in passing

that the door to her parents' room stood ajar, exposing the empty chamber within. The big, four-poster bed looked untouched, as if the marquis and marchioness had never retired for the night.

What on earth was going on? Where were Mama and Papa?

They had just reached the landing when a sudden banging from the ground floor froze both girls in their tracks.

"W-what was that?" Maura hissed, her grip tightening on Jillian's hand until it was almost painful.

She shook her head in answer, peering over the railing into the inky blackness below. "I don't know."

For what seemed like a small eternity, they remained unmoving, ears pricked, as they tried to discern the source of the noise. And when an abrupt burst of rain-scented air swept up the stairs, ruffling the hem of Jillian's dressing gown, realization dawned.

The front door.

Without any further hesitation, she tugged Maura with her down the steps to the foyer.

Sure enough, the heavy oak entrance portal was flung wide to the elements, the gusting wind sending it slamming against the wall with loud, intermittent thumps. Rain slashed in through the opening, wetting the parquet floor.

Maura gasped. "Jilly, you don't think Aimee is sleepwalking again, do you?"

Jillian didn't reply, lifting the flickering flame

of her candle high to stare through the gloom. It was much darker here than it had been upstairs, for the sconces that were usually left lit in the entryway had obviously been extinguished by the damp air.

But a thin strip of light seeped out from underneath the closed door of the library.

A strange sense of foreboding crept over Jillian, and for a moment she was tempted to run for help, to awaken the servants in a panic. But she reined herself in and started forward with determined strides.

You're being ridiculous, she tried to tell herself firmly. Aimee was simply frightened by the storm and woke Mama and Papa. They'll all be in the library, safe and sound. Everything is fine.

But even before she pushed open the door and stepped into the room, she knew everything was not fine.

A lamp had been left burning on one of the sideboards, and it cast its muted gleam over the chamber, bathing the masculine furniture and the mahogany bookshelves that lined the paneled walls in a pale glow.

And illuminating the lean, broad-shouldered form that lay stretched out on the floor, face-down, a few feet away.

The Marquis of Albright.

"Papa!"

Setting her candle on a nearby table, Jillian rushed to her father and dropped to her knees next to him, exerting every bit of strength she

possessed to roll him onto his side. He was still dressed in the elegant, dark evening clothes he had worn to the Briarwood ball. His eyes were closed, his breathing ragged and shallow, his thick, golden-brown hair matted to his skull with something that gleamed dark and wet in the dimness.

Blood.

Frantic, Jillian loosened his cravat, feeling for a pulse. Faint, but steady. Thank God.

It was as she breathed a sigh of relief that she noticed the fingers of his right hand were closed almost convulsively about a crumpled piece of paper. Prying it from his grasp, she unfolded it, struggling to decipher the spidery handwriting scrawled across the expensive stationery.

My dearest Elise,

I can no longer bear to be apart from you, love. If you feel the same way, I'll have a coach waiting after midnight.

Hawksley

A great wave of despair washed over Jillian and she pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle a sob. *Oh, Mama, what have you done?*

She glanced back over her shoulder to find her sister hovering in the doorway. "Maura, wake Iverson! We must fetch a physician at once!"

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Jilly?"

"Maura, we don't have time for this. Father needs a doctor and—"

"But Jilly, look!"

There was an urgency in her sister's voice that Jillian couldn't ignore, and she suddenly became aware of another sound in the room. A sound she hadn't noticed before over the pounding of her own heart.

A muffled whimpering.

She looked up, her eyes following Maura's pointing finger toward the far corner of the room, where the darkest shadows lurked. There, huddled on the floor against their father's massive desk, was their youngest sister, Aimee. She was rocking back and forth, her elfin countenance bleached of color, tears streaming down her cheeks and arms wrapped about her head as if protecting herself from a blow.

With a cry of distress, Jillian pushed herself to her feet and managed a few swift steps toward her little sister. But as she drew near, her gaze fell upon the tableau the bulk of the desk had previously hidden from her view, and she stumbled to a disbelieving halt.

It was the lifeless body of the Marchioness of Albright.

Jillian's stomach lurched, her mouth going dry with horror as the world spun around her.

"Mama . . . ?"

But even as the word escaped her constricted

throat, she knew her mother wouldn't answer. The marchioness's amber eyes were wide open and glazed over, staring blankly up at the ceiling. A growing pool of crimson spread out from her head like a halo, staining the Oriental rug beneath her.

Mama would never answer her again.