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For anyone who has ever experienced the
horror/hilarity of dating in New York City.
Charlotte is our revenge.

For my mom, for sending me a steady
stream of romance novels in college.

Finally, for Rob, because you make me
feel like Maximum Rachel.

CHAPTER 1



June 1818

Lady Charlotte Louisa Aveton knew all the rules, and better yet, she knew how to break them. Which was why, in the inky depths of a London night, she wasn't cozied up under her covers but rather rolling men's silk stockings up her long legs.

"This is a terrible plan," said her maid, Ivy, not for the first time. But she handed Charlotte her breeches.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Charlotte. "I've been longing for a terrible plan."

"You've been longing for something," muttered Ivy, not quite under her breath.

Charlotte pretended not to hear. It was always a good trick to refuse to hear anything unpleasant, or to stare blankly at anyone who had the bad taste to repeat themselves.

She stepped into the breeches and shrugged on a lawn shirt, and she and Ivy spent a good half hour wrestling with her hair until the rioting black curls were powdered white and pinned in neat coils against her head, ready to be hidden by the hood of the black domino she'd stolen from her brother. Then came the most darling little black waistcoat and the task of tying her cravat into the perfect Mathematical—the gentlemen made such a fuss over the folds, and yet it wasn't at

all difficult—before topping the whole thing off with a man’s evening coat. The final touch was a black velvet demi-mask that dangled from her fingers on grosgrain ribbons.

At last, Charlotte was ready to assume a completely new identity.

“My lady, are you sure you must go?” said Ivy.

“Yes, Ivy, but you mustn’t worry. No one will know me dressed like *this*.”

Charlotte swished the domino over her shoulders and adjusted the hood so only the curve of her mouth showed. Tonight, she was sneaking out of her grandmother’s town house and heading to a masquerade. It was rash, ill-advised, and reckless—everything she adored.

Too bad it wasn’t thrills she was seeking.

Wolfgang Robert Latham, the Seventh Duke of Warrick, was ambling home in the darkest hours of the morning, enjoying the rare stillness of the Mayfair streets and the even more unusual stillness of his mind, when a slight figure crossed the street in front of him and looked up into the sky. The flickering light of a lamp reached out to tap the tip of her nose before lingering on a wide, generous mouth that tilted up at the corners, as if it belonged to a cat that had only tasted cream.

Charlotte.

He recognized her at once, even though she was dressed as a man. The powdered hair peeking out from beneath her hood couldn’t fool him, nor could the way she loped along with her domino billowing out behind her, revealing a perfectly cut evening jacket and showing off her long legs in breeches—

Wolfgang looked away sharply and growled to himself, but it was too late. *Christ*. Now her legs were etched on his brain forever.

He didn't need any more *Charlotte* in his head, smiling up at him with upturned eyes to match her upturned lips. He noticed too damn much of her already—how she held herself arrow straight when something captured her interest, how badly she slumped the second she was bored. Once he'd watched her sink deeper and deeper into the settee at a lecture at the Horticultural Society, until the upholstery swallowed her up and all he could see was the top of her despairing curls.

He even noticed her dresses, and that was especially irritating, because he cared nothing for clothes. But what Charlotte wore signaled her mood. Sugary pinks and lavenders or any effort to look sweet meant she was up to no good. The more excited she got, the brighter the colors she wore, and when she was angry, she either threw on a cape or buttoned herself into one of her many military jackets. And for some reason, he thought darkly, flounces always spelled trouble.

What the hell did she mean by dressing as a man?

Nothing good.

At the corner, Charlotte turned, and he muttered a curse and followed her.

What could she be up to, skulking over London's cobblestones in the pitch-black? Although—he narrowed his eyes—that lope of hers could hardly be called skulking. That was the thing about Charlotte. Everything about her was so damn brazen, as if half her pleasure was in doing exactly as she pleased, and the other half was in rubbing everyone's nose in it.

Didn't the bloody woman realize it was dangerous to be out alone so late at night? Wasn't she afraid of pickpockets, or footpads, or drunken idiots? Although knowing Charlotte, her walking stick concealed a sword. Knowing Charlotte, she knew how to use it.

You do not know Charlotte, he reminded himself grimly. He'd thought he had once, after a summer full of letters, both of them writing back and forth until—

Wolfgang squashed the thought under his boot, grinding his heel for good measure. It was an unfortunate fact of life that Charlotte's half brother happened to be Julian Alaric William Aveton, the Earl Ramsay and Wolfgang's closest friend. Even more unfortunate, Ramsay was out of the country for several months and had left Charlotte in Wolfgang's care.

Ramsay had ambushed him one afternoon, lying in wait in Wolfgang's study and sipping a glass of his finest port. "Excellent stuff, my friend," Ramsay had said, putting his long nose in the snifter and inhaling deeply. "I'll pour you one, shall I?"

"How generous of you." Wolfgang accepted a glass of his own liquor and settled into his chair, propping his boots up on the ever-growing piles of paper strewn across his desk. "Why have you come?"

Ramsay raised an eyebrow. "Can't a friend stop by anymore?"

"Not since you've been married. I can't recall the last time you left your countess's side."

"In fact, it's on Anna's account that I'm here. She's decided that we must go on a tour of North Africa to look for promising horses."

Prickles of foreboding climbed up Wolfgang's spine, but he ignored them and raised his glass. "Good health to you both."

"Thank you. I'll be gone for several months, and I've come to ask a favor of you."

"A favor? The estate's keeping me bloody busy these days. How the hell John managed to—"

"It's about my sister. Gran's her chaperone, of course, but she's getting old to keep up with Charlotte. I wonder if you might keep an eye on—"

“No!” Wolfgang’s boots slid off the desk and hit the floor with a crash, toppling one of his stacks.

Ramsay stared.

“No.” Wolfgang said it again, to make it very clear. “I will not keep an eye on your sister.”

“I see. May I ask why?”

“Because she’s a menace!”

“Then you understand why I require your help.”

“You require a bloody army,” Wolfgang muttered.

Ramsay caught his gaze and held it. “I know it hasn’t been easy lately, Wolfgang, but there’s no one else. I’m asking you.”

Wolfgang made a series of strangled, gargling sounds. No, it hadn’t been easy, but “lately” was a bit of a stretch. It was nearly three years since he’d returned home from Waterloo only to lose an older brother he loved and gain a dukedom he didn’t.

Ramsay hid a smile behind his port snifter. “I assume your fit of choking means you’ll do it?”

Wolfgang grabbed his glass again, and only when he’d drained it completely did he feel able to reply. “I suppose, if I must. But only if you stop that damned smirking.”

“What smirking?”

“There’s a smirk plastered across your face. You look like a damned Frenchman.”

“I’m relieved.” Ramsay hesitated. “My stepmother returned from Prussia early—”

“Good God, you don’t need me if Charlotte’s *mother’s* in London. Let her live with Lady Margot.”

But Ramsay shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m never quite easy when Lady Margot’s in town. It’s better all around if Charlotte remains with Gran and you check in on them from time to time. Agreed?”

What could Wolfgang do but pour another glass, fortify himself with a long sip, and nod curtly?

“What?” he said, catching Ramsay’s eye on him. “Christ, don’t tell me there’s more?”

A hint of a smile tugged at Ramsay’s mouth. “There’s nothing more. I was simply wondering why you go strange any time I mention my sister.”

Wolfgang said nothing. He could have protested, but it would only have given the bastard something new to smirk about. It was true that Lady Charlotte bothered him, but it was only because . . .

She bothered him because . . .

Blast it. The truth was that before John died, there was a time Wolfgang had liked Charlotte very much. He should have pushed that time into the dusty, distant recesses of his mind, but he found it still smarted. Not a big pain, nothing like the others that made him want to howl, but like a small round pebble he could never quite remove from his boot.

A gust of cold night air slapped Wolfgang and brought him back to himself. His head cleared, his heart filled with wrath, he stomped down the darkened London street, hot on Charlotte’s trail.

Was she *whistling*, the scoundrel, as she strode along?

But his eyes narrowed, because something about her gait was off. It wasn’t quite her usual saunter, but something sharper, more purposeful, as if—

A thought came to Wolfgang, slowly at first but screeching through the air faster and faster until it hit with the force of a twenty-four-pound cannonball. Was Charlotte sneaking out to meet a *man*? A man too low and sniveling to walk through the front door, who would instead encourage a young woman to meet him secretly at night and—

It's none of your business.

Except Julian had made it his business, and certainly Wolfgang's fist agreed, or at least it was already curling toward the military cutlass he no longer carried by his side.

A high note of laughter floated out into the night, and beneath it, Wolfgang heard the low buzz of conversation, the long notes of a violin. His fist unclenched, his guts settled themselves, and the red mist removed itself from before his eyes. Charlotte was headed for a party, that was all.

He squinted up at the imposing white limestone facade of the town house she'd strolled into.

She was going to the Viscountess Hervey's infamous masquerade. At least she *thought* she was.

He stalked up the stone steps after her.

CHAPTER 2



Charlotte stood at the entrance to Viscountess Hervey's ballroom and surveyed the masquerade crowd, or at least she tried to. She'd attended any number of the viscountess's tamer events over the years—several balls, a charitable fair or two, and once even a deeply regretted evening of poetry—but she'd never seen the room so *dim* before. With only a scattering of candelabras here and there and the great chandeliers overhead completely dark, Charlotte could barely make out the room's shadowy corners, let alone the figures kissing in them.

It was the ideal lighting, she noted absently, for terrible behavior. For finding someone, the darkness was no help at all.

“Still hiding your face, are you, lad? We unmasked at midnight.” A red-faced man lumbered out of the gloom toward her, dressed as a Harlequin in pink satin with shiny black buttons down the front. He crashed into her and his hot hand tightened on her hip, squeezing first in surprise and then with rather sweaty ownership.

“What do we have here?” he murmured, and yanked her closer, swamping her with an acrid, stale smell that was partly booze and partly his own unfortunate odor.

Charlotte flicked an impatient glance at the man's face. “Really, Major Dumbarton, it's bad enough that you dress like a pig. Must you act like one?”

She jammed her heel hard onto his foot but didn't wait around to hear him squeal. Instead, she whirled away into the press of people, her senses on high alert. She'd reached her majority, been out five Seasons and was the toast of the town, and yet it wouldn't do to be discovered out alone at Viscountess Hervey's rather notorious annual masquerade.

So don't get caught, Charlotte told herself, and walked on.

Most of the guests were unmasked now, and the room was a sea of black dominos and oh!—Charlotte lit with pleasure—one woman wearing a domino in bright jonquil, with the rich luster of what she could identify from fifteen feet away as really fine Italian silk. Other partygoers were in fancy dress, with all sorts of vicars, dukes dressed as duchesses, and quite a number of animals, including peacocks, tigers, butterflies, unicorns, and even a rather mournful giraffe, who had to keep one hand up to support his long neck. Several women simply wore less and considered that a costume. Charlotte gave a low, admiring whistle when she caught sight of the Comtesse D'Artois, whose gown was practically transparent and whose figure alone was enough to cause a carriage accident.

A young man in a black frock coat and a wide-brimmed black hat trotted toward the comtesse, his tongue hanging out like a puppy's. Charlotte hooked him neatly by the arm.

"Dressing as a priest? Really, Marby, is that all you could come up with?"

"I say!" The Honorable James Marby spun toward her with a face like a thundercloud, replaced in an instant by a startled grin. Their family estates lay side by side in Sussex, and they'd grown up practically as twins. "Charlotte? Is that you? What the *devil* are you doing here?"

"Shh! You mustn't say my name. I'm incognito tonight."

“Yes, quite! Your secret’s safe with me, Char—I mean, *good sir*.” He frowned down at himself. “What’s wrong with my costume? I think it’s dashed clever! I’m *dressed* as a priest, but you see, in real life I’m *nothing like*—”

“Yes, my friend, in real life you’re a complete degenerate. Now, have you seen my—”

“Not half as degenerate as you. Are you here alone? Good God, and in breeches? Your grandmother will string you up by your thumbs.” The thought seemed to fill him with glee, until another thought struck and his cherub face paled. “Egad, what if she strings me up, too? I must get you home.”

“Don’t be tiresome, Marby. The rules for young ladies are ridiculous enough without you spouting them at me. Now, I need you to help me look for—”

“No. I refuse to be lured into your schemes tonight.” He must have been drunk on virtue for once in his life, or perhaps it was Lady Hervey’s rum-and-brandied punch. “But I tell you what, the Lord Mayor’s here dressed as a shepherdess. If you like, we can nick his bonnet before we go?”

Charlotte shook her head. “How you tempt me, but I haven’t the time. I’m sorry, dear Marby.”

“Sorry? What for?”

“For this.”

She gave him a hard shove and Marby went teetering backward into the crowd and—oh dear! Charlotte winced—into the glorious backside of the Comtesse D’Artois. The comtesse shrieked, Marby spluttered, and Charlotte plunged deeper into the ballroom with her black domino a swirl of shadow behind her.

Was it her, or was there a certain desperation in the air as she pressed through the crowd? It wasn’t the ladies in the arms of other

people's lords, or even the couple sneaking up the stairs toward the wing with the bedchambers—after all, Charlotte could hardly find *that* shocking, when her parents' marriage had been a famous cautionary tale. But something about the overbright eyes and the grating quality to everyone's laughter struck her as unhappy. It brought her back to the feel of her mother's long fingernails scraping rhythmically up and down her scalp on the long-ago nights after her father died. *Never love a man, darling. Never give him that kind of power.*

Charlotte snagged a bottle of champagne from a passing servant and took a long swig as she approached the smaller chamber at the back of the ballroom. She could feel her pulse beat harder and alarm bells clanging in her head. This chamber was kitted out with a series of small tables, and brighter, with candles glowing in the sconces and the chandelier lit overhead.

The players, after all, needed to see their cards.

People crowded the gambling tables, the men sweating in their coats, the women's diamonds winking and the plumes in their hair quivering with the excitement of hopes held too high. Only one woman sat almost unmoving, her face so implacably beautiful that it seemed to draw the candlelight. In the midst of the black dominos, she stood out in a gown of deep rose silk with full skirts that crested over the side of her chair in wide, perfect waves, so that even at the crowded table there was a circle of stillness around her. Her expression didn't change as she leaned forward to snap her card down.

The alarm bells in Charlotte's head let out a shriek and went deathly silent.

She'd caught her mother red-handed.

CHAPTER 3



“What bad luck you’ve had tonight, Lady Margot,” crowed the Duque de Cardona at the end of the hand. “I’ll gladly accept another voucher from you, should you wish to play again?”

But the stack of Lady Margot’s vouchers in front of the duque already teetered high, each slip of paper whispering, *Catastrophe! Catastrophe!* How much money had she lost? How long had she been playing for such high stakes? Worst of all, how much did she *owe*?

The questions made Charlotte queasy, but she was determined to pull the answers out of her mother tonight.

“I’m afraid she must decline.” Charlotte stepped into the circle of candlelight. “Lady Margot, I believe this is our dance?”

Lady Margot’s eyes—so like Charlotte’s own—snapped to her daughter’s face and blazed once in recognition. “How could I forget?” She wrote one last voucher for the duque and rose, placing her hand lightly in Charlotte’s.

Only Charlotte could feel the tightness of her mother’s grip.

“We’re just in time for the waltz,” Charlotte said with forced cheer as they approached the dance floor, but her mother pulled her into a darkened hollow.

“We will not be *waltzing*. You’ll be heading home before you’re recognized! Does your grandmother know you’re out? Or is this her idea of what it means to chaperone you?”

Very few people made Charlotte quail, but then again, very few people looked so much like her that she might as well have been staring into a mirror. Lady Margot had sleek hair instead of Charlotte's dark bramble of curls, but they had the same slanting green eyes and the same finely wrought features, although Lady Margot was somehow more striking. She was in her mid-forties and yet time tiptoed by, not nearly brave enough to tug at her jawline or get out its tiny blade and carve wrinkles around her deep-set eyes. Instead, the only change over the years was a deepening of the hollows beneath her cheeks, which served to highlight that even her bones were staggering.

"Gran doesn't know I'm here and I certainly don't want to tell her. But all I hear lately is rumors of your gambling losses, and you won't answer any of my questions. What choice did I have but to try to see for myself?"

Lady Margot did not believe in wasting expressions, but she allowed a faint incredulity to drift into her tone. "You snuck out at night to Lady Hervey's masquerade to *watch me play cards*?"

"No, I came because you've been acting odd ever since you returned from Prussia and I'm worried. How much do you owe, Mother?"

Lady Margot laughed softly, but with no amusement. "I may have been playing cards of late, but I've won. Even with my losses tonight I'm up nearly two hundred and fifty pounds. *Go home*, Charlotte."

But Charlotte refused to be put off any longer. Her mother had waved off her questions for weeks now, but she couldn't wave off the trail of bills she'd left, or the tradespeople who'd somehow managed to track Charlotte down and beg for payment. Their claims weren't for scarves, slippers, or the fripperies that might suggest that Lady Margot had overspent her allowance again. Instead, they were asking

about coal, carriage fees, candles—expenses Lady Margot had never failed to pay in the past. Even her butler had come to the back door, coughing delicately and asking when the servants might expect their wages. Charlotte's own allowance was more than generous and she was happy to pay up—and quickly, so Gran didn't find out—but the bills kept coming.

“If it's not gambling, what is it? I can't help if you won't tell me the problem.”

Lady Margot's eyes blazed again. “You? Help? Why would you want to? You choose everyone else over me.”

The barb was old, but so sharply pointed that it pierced deep. It wasn't Charlotte's fault that her grandmother had taken charge of her when she was only six, and yet over the years, Margot's sense of betrayal had grown. That Charlotte lived with her grandmother was one thing, but that Charlotte loved her grandmother was something Margot could never forgive. It was an argument no one could win, so Charlotte stepped neatly around it.

“Please don't tell me I'm wearing a waistcoat for nothing, Mother. How much do you owe?”

Lady Margot said nothing, but Charlotte could see her mother's feelings gather around her like a storm—fear, love, pride, and desperation all rising up behind her in a billowing black tower. Something electric cracked across Lady Margot's face and at last she spoke.

“I made a bad investment with borrowed money and I owe fifteen thousand pounds. Go *home*, Charlotte. I'm beyond help now.”

CHAPTER 4



Charlotte didn't mean to gasp like a fish, but she lost the ability to breathe at her mother's announcement. For a good ten minutes, all she could do was lean against the ballroom's lavender-and-gilt walls and open and close her mouth, until Lady Margot threw up her hands, told Charlotte once more to go home, and fled the party herself.

Fifteen thousand pounds!

It was a sum to make even barons and viscounts go cross-eyed. Dash it, Charlotte could *buy* a lesser baron for that amount and still have a fortune left over.

Charlotte was an heiress, but her allowance would make no dent in a problem so big. It was well beyond her means, beyond even what she'd generated with the horse-racing ring she'd run with her best friend, who'd married Charlotte's brother. And, of course, now Anna and Julian were both off in North Africa where Charlotte couldn't reach them for help.

There's always the silk, Charlotte thought, rather desperately. She'd used her share of the gambling money on a long-held ambition to open a silk mill, but it was only just getting started. She couldn't sell it, because that would be a complete betrayal of her partner and also, damn it, it wasn't worth anything yet.

She had to get home and think.

But first she might vomit.

What the *hell* was she going to—

The thought was interrupted by a stir from the nearest corner of the ballroom, conversations stuttering to a halt and guests scurrying out of the way. Charlotte looked over and gasped like a fish again.

Good God! Could the night possibly get any worse?

Because stalking toward her was the most infernal man in all of England.

Candlelight from a nearby torchère flickered across the planes of the Duke of Warrick's face, leaving half his features dark and the other half molten. His hair looked bronzed, not quite brown, blond, or red, but some gleaming, burnished version of all three, as if it were living metal. Even with no costume at all and dressed in his customary badly cut dinner jacket, he commanded attention.

I doubt he's looking for me? It was an optimistic thought, given that his eyes were locked on her and his expression thunder.

Charlotte tossed the duke her sunniest smile. *You don't scare me!* she said, with the curve of her lips.

I damned well should, he replied with his scowl.

She spun away into the crush. Of all the people her brother could have selected to “keep an eye on her,” whatever that meant, did he have to choose such a mountain of a man? It was one thing to avoid someone like Marby—all she had to do was find a portly old alderman and duck down behind him. But there was no potted palm Warrick couldn't see over, no chorus of *pardons* and *excuse mes!* and *oh, dash it, was that your foot?* to let her know when he drew near. Poor Marby had to fight for every inch of progress, but Warrick was a duke and a war hero. The crowd melted away at his smallest frown.

Charlotte eyed her options. She'd intended to leave the party, but Warrick was blocking the main exit. Should she sneak out

through one of the other rooms, or blend in with the cluster of black dominos near the refreshment table, or—an idea sparkled at her, a little gem of mischief.

Should she turn around and confront him?

There had been so much drama that evening, and none of it the amusing kind. Perhaps what she needed was a good, rousing fight?

Charlotte stopped abruptly and leaned back against the nearest column, crossing her arms loosely over her chest in order to annoy Warrick with her perfect indifference.

Indifference. A voice inside snorted. *Is that what you call it?*

She frowned as Warrick stalked closer.

It was true she'd once had fonder feelings for the man, had even thought of him as *hers* for the whole of one summer before he dropped her flat on her face. Even now, it bothered her that she noticed the wide set of his shoulders, and how his long sable eyelashes went red at the tips, as if they'd been kissed by a fox. Worse, she was still rather charmed by the fact that she knew he'd have peppermints hidden on him, wrapped up in little paper twists.

Perhaps you should pat him down and find them? offered the voice. *You should pat all up and down his chest, with extra patting on those massive arms of his.*

She frowned even harder as he drew alongside her.

“Good evening, Your Grace. Shall I guess your costume?” Charlotte cocked her head. “I know! You're dressed as a man whose tailor doesn't like him.”

His jaw ticked but he didn't respond. Instead, he propped himself against the pillar next to her, so close that his flank pressed into her and she could feel his heat.

“Here's what happens next,” Warrick growled softly. “You'll turn to leave and I'll follow close behind you.”

“Oh?” Charlotte arched an eyebrow at him. “Very close?”

Warrick’s jaw ticked again, the muscle at the corner flicking on and off like a little warning. “Do you take nothing seriously?”

Her mother’s debt flashed immediately to mind, but she smiled. “Do I take things seriously at a party? Not often. I leave the misery to you.”

“Damn it, you must know you can’t be here.”

“Oh yes! What a scandal for a young woman to be alone in a room full of people. Do you know how tired I am of being tied down by these petty rules? I often wonder what good we might do in the world if we forgot all about them and concentrated on *real* problems.”

Warrick flicked a derisive glance down at her dinner jacket. “I see. You’re out at a masquerade and dressed as a man for the benefit of mankind?”

Oh dear. She’d rather walked into that one, but Charlotte knew how to recover.

“It does feel odd to wear breeches.” She kicked out a leg to bring his attention to it. “They cling so, you see.”

Warrick flicked his eyes down briefly and up again, his cheeks suspiciously dark. “Christ, you have so much and *this* is what you do with it? Are you here trying to ruin your reputation, or are you so damned frivolous that you simply don’t care?”

Charlotte’s face flamed. She knew what her detractors said about her—too rich, too spoiled, altogether too pleased with herself. Normally when confronted with these opinions, she found it best to nod in sympathy and say, “Too true!”

But Warrick had a way of crumbling the mortar in her castle wall defenses. A strange bolt of longing shot through her, and Charlotte found herself wondering how it would feel to stop fighting him, or to count him as a friend, as she once had.

What an impossible idea.

He shifted uncomfortably beside her. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean . . . That was uncalled for."

Charlotte managed a laugh. "Please. We'll be here for hours if you intend to apologize *every* time you say something rude. In any case, I was much too distracted by the sultana's necklace to pay you much attention. Pink diamonds! Wouldn't they look well on me?"

Warrick pushed himself off the pillar. "That's it. You're heading home immediately."

Charlotte considered.

She'd already intended to leave, and Warrick was more than capable of frog-marching her out or even tossing her over his shoulder, and yet it galled her too badly to obey such a man. Was there a third option?

The crowd provided one, parting behind Warrick to reveal a pair of flaring nostrils and cherub cheeks. *You're dead!* Marby mouthed at Charlotte as he struggled to push his way past a pair of chatty Hungarians.

Sparks lit in Charlotte's head.

Yes! That's it. Come get me, Marby.

"You have three seconds to start walking," said Warrick.

"A countdown!" said Charlotte. "What a waste you were in the military, when you were born to be a governess. Shall we tick off the numbers together?"

Warrick's eyes darkened, as she knew they would.

"One," Charlotte said, to make sure Warrick's attention was on her and not on Marby, who had cleared the Hungarians and was now trying to make his way around a drunken baroness.

"Two."

Marby executed a rather clumsy twirl, but he edged closer.

“Three!” said Charlotte, and she stepped neatly to the side.

Warrick reached for her at the same time Marby lunged, and the two men collided, with Marby barking out a series of startled yips.

A perfect exit.

Charlotte smiled sweetly and melted into the crowd. It was past time to head home. Outside the wide French doors, the sky was fading from black to smudgy gray, and—

A hand closed around her wrist, heavy as a manacle.

“For God’s sake, Warrick! I’m leaving al—”

But the words died on her lips, because the sweaty face leering down at her made her heart kick with fear.

Major Dumbarton pulled her tight against his paunch. “There you are, bitch. You broke my toe.”

Charlotte smiled again, this time showing teeth. “Only one? I’m sure I can do better if I only try.”

She lifted her boot, but the night was all wrong or she was simply too angry to be accurate. Instead of crunching down on the major’s foot, she caught her heel in the swishy folds of her own domino. When she stumbled, the major clutched her close and wormed his hand under her jacket, ripping open her waistcoat and fine lawn shirt to grab for her—

Damn it, no!

She bit him hard, and the major yowled and staggered backward, but the damned domino tripped him up, too, and together they crashed to the floor.

I can still sneak away, thought Charlotte rather desperately, and perhaps she could have if the musicians hadn’t heard the ruckus and brought their violins to a screeching halt.

If her black mask hadn’t come off in the fall.

If Marby hadn’t chosen just that minute to roll up and shout, “Dash it, Charlotte, I’ve got you now!”

But unfortunately, her famous luck deserted her, and a ballroom's worth of revelers turned around to stare.

Whispers of *Is that . . . ? Could that be . . . ?* climbed the walls and swirled across the ceiling, rumbles of her name building into a roar. Charlotte's face flamed and her brain howled as she shoved Major Dumbarton away to reveal her ripped shirt and his hands inside it.

There was only one course of action left.

Charlotte pushed herself to her feet, plastered on her widest smile, and curtsied to the crowd.

CHAPTER 5



Boom, boom, boom.

The bronze door knocker was shaped like an orchid, but it made a sound like thunder.

It was still early morning in Mayfair, the sky the faintest pink, so it was several minutes before the butler, bleary-eyed and still in his nightclothes, pulled the door open. “Yes, yes!” he said testily. “What could anyone want at this hour?”

“Morning, Levy.” Charlotte smiled brightly even as her hands shook and her stomach quaked with a quivery sort of fury. “Good God, is that a nightcap? I wasn’t aware people still wore those.”

Levy blinked awake. “Lady Charlotte? My goodness! You’re meant to be upstairs in bed.” He took in Warrick, standing on her flank like a constable. “Your Grace. Come in at once.”

Charlotte tilted her head. “Do you wear a nightcap, Your Grace? I can picture you in one. Candy stripes, with a little pom-pom at the end?”

Warrick ignored her, as he had ever since he’d wrapped her domino tight around her and bundled her into a hansom cab. She could feel fury sitting heavy on his shoulders, like a mantle of stone.

“Wake the dowager,” Warrick said to Levy.

“I’m afraid—” Levy began.

“Wake her now.”

The butler swallowed. "At once, Your Grace."

"Do *not* wake Gran, Levy." Charlotte shot Warrick a cross look. "The doctor said she needs her sleep, and I refuse to bother her with something that can wait until morning."

Levy glanced nervously at the duke, but all he said was, "Very good, my lady."

Warrick stopped her as she turned for the stairs. "Lady Charlotte, a word?"

She paused on the first step and cocked an inquiring eyebrow.

"In the salon, if you please," he said through gritted teeth.

She didn't please, but she crossed into the salon anyway. "Yes, my lord duke? I take it you have a lecture to deliver? I can't promise to stay awake for it, but I shall try."

It was an attack, and Charlotte regretted it immediately. The trick to confronting an angry man was to remain calm. The calmer the better, with perhaps a concerned furrow of the brow thrown in, as if one was trying very hard to be helpful. Charlotte had flummoxed any number of lords, leaders of industry, politicians, and even members of the royal family in just this way, but with Warrick she lost all finesse.

"I'm not your brother," said Warrick. "I've no obligation to lecture you, but I do have an obligation to say—"

"You've no obligations whatsoever." Charlotte crossed her arms and huffed away a powdered curl that had worked loose and fallen in front of her eye. "I deeply regret any inconvenience Julian caused by involving you in my affairs, and I release you entirely."

"Ramsay caused me no inconvenience. He's your brother, and it's only fitting that he should see to your care."

"Oh?" A thought occurred to Charlotte, and much to her horror, her eyes went hot. "Don't tell me you're planning to stand in my own drawing room with that awful look on your face and tell me you think me ruined."