

“*The Captivating Lady Charlotte*, Carolyn Miller’s second Regency novel, surprised me. I was expecting a sweet romance and adventure, but I got so much more. The hero’s story is touching, truly heartbreaking, and I loved seeing the heroine learn what true love really is. Well done! More please!”

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Regency Brides: A Legacy of Grace #1

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—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, starred review

“This romantic story is reminiscent of Jane Austen: finding love despite the societal norms of the day while adding the spiritual elements of extending God’s grace and forgiveness.”

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“*The Elusive Miss Ellison* will delight the hearts of Regency romance lovers with its poetic narrative, witty verbal swordplay, strict social constructs, and intriguing touch of mystery. Carolyn Miller is a bright new voice in the Regency genre.”

—LOUISE M. GOUGE, award-winning author

“Fans of historical romance will love Carolyn Miller’s debut novel. Nicholas’s journey from proud, self-centered man to caring and devoted

suitor will capture the reader's heart as it did Lavinia's. With just the right touch of inspiration and interesting historical detail, Carolyn transports you back to Regency England."

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"Lovers of Jane Austen will be enchanted by Carolyn Miller's debut novel. . . . This beautifully written book is definitely worth reading!"

—DAWN CRANDALL, award-winning author of *The Everstone Chronicles*

"*The Elusive Miss Ellison* is a delightful romp. Light and enjoyable, but also rich with the theme of forgiveness. A lovely read."

—ANGELA BREIDENBACH, Christian Authors Network president and best-selling historical romance author

"In *The Elusive Miss Ellison*, Carolyn Miller has created a heroine who will steal your heart and a hero who is as frustrating as he is charming. . . . Will capture the imagination of those who love the Regency period and win over those who are experiencing the era for the first time."

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"From the moment I cracked the pages I was transported to another era with a heroine as compelling as Lizzie Bennet and a Darcy-esque hero."

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"Carolyn Miller's writing style is reminiscent of Jane Austen, with a modern sense of wit and spunk. . . . You'll be swept into a story of God's amazing grace and the slow unfolding of a love that overcomes even the greatest opposition."

—AMBER STOCKTON, author of more than twenty novels, including the best-selling *Liberty's Promise*



The
CAPTIVATING
LADY
CHARLOTTE

REGENCY BRIDES
A LEGACY *of* GRACE

CAROLYN MILLER

 Kregel
Publications

The Captivating Lady Charlotte

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ISBN 978-0-8254-4451-7

Printed in the United States of America

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 / 5 4 3 2 1



*For my parents,
David & Kay Weaver.*



Thank you.

 CHAPTER ONE

St. James's Palace, London
April 1814

THE ROOM GLIMMERED with a thousand points of sparkling light, the bright glow from the enormous crystal-dropped chandelier glinting off heavily beaded gowns, ornate mirrors, and the desperation shining in dozens of pairs of eyes.

Lady Charlotte Featherington glanced at her mother and smiled. “Truly, Mama, there is no need to look anxious. We shall not disgrace you.”

Her mother drew herself up, as if the very idea of even appearing concerned was an affront. “I am not concerned about you, dear girl, but . . .” She made a helpless gesture with her hands and glanced at the young lady accompanying them.

“I assure you, Aunt Constance, I have no intention of disgracing you, either,” said Lavinia Stamford, Charlotte’s cousin and recent bride of the seventh Earl of Hawkesbury.

“You remember everything I told you?” Mama said worriedly.

“I cannot promise to have remembered everything, Aunt Constance, but I have no wish to embarrass you—or my husband.” This was said with a sidelong glance at the earl, Nicholas Stamford, that caused a pang in Charlotte’s chest. How lucky Lavinia was to have found such a perfect match.

Charlotte smiled as her mother bit her lip, no doubt torn between sharing her oft-stated opinion about the Stamfords and not wishing to offend Lavinia on such an important day.

She turned her attention to the front of the room, as the Lord Chamberlain called the name of the next young lady to make her presentation. Butterflies danced haphazardly in her stomach. Only two to go, then it was her turn. Pushing to her toes, she peered around the rather large pink-swathed matron in front, whose ridiculous confection of a headpiece held no less than eight—or was it nine?—ostrich feathers. She reached up a hand to pat her own far more modest hairstyle, with the obligatory five white ostrich feathers.

“Charlotte!”

“Yes, Mama.” Charlotte fought a sigh and assumed the more correct stance of a gently bred young lady.

“I will rejoin you shortly, my dear.” With a press of his lips to Lavinia’s cheek, and a bow and good wishes for Charlotte, the earl exited, doubtless to join the other new husbands and fathers waiting in the chamber next door.

Charlotte followed Lavinia’s gaze as she watched him leave. Such a handsome man, who wore so well the embroidered velvet coat and silk knee breeches demanded by court. She nodded to herself, heart dancing. She would marry a man who looked so well—perhaps even this year! For as Mama had said so often, after Charlotte’s presentation the doors of every noble house would be open to her, and the offers to her father for her hand would pour in. Drawing in a breath, she braced her shoulders. If only she could find love among the eligible—

“Lady Anne Pennicooke,” the Lord Chamberlain called, before gesturing forward the next young lady.

“Amelia has done well enough for the girl,” Mama said with a sniff. “Though I do think the size of those diamonds veers toward the vulgar. One should hint at one’s wealth, not trumpet it like the king’s herald.”

“Very poetic, Aunt Constance,” Lavinia said, a smile lurking in her eyes as she glanced at Charlotte.

Mama sniffed again. “I’m pleased to see you took my advice about wearing the coronet, Lavinia. Your grandmother would be pleased to know it was getting some use again. It’s such an elegant piece.”

“Oh, I agree. It is very elegant,” Lavinia said, touching the pearl- and diamond-encrusted band across her copper-blond waves. “But this is the Hawkesbury coronet.”

“Are you sure?” Mama said, brows lowered, peering with an expression of suspicion.

“It appears very similar, but yes, I am sure. Nicholas assures me this is the coronet each new countess has worn.”

“Last worn by your mother-in-law?” Charlotte murmured.

Something flickered in Lavinia’s eyes, but her tranquil expression did not change. “Yes.”

Charlotte inwardly applauded her cousin’s fortitude. Her marriage had come with a very high price—that of a meddling older woman whose love for her son had been soured by his insistence on marrying a woman she despised. It must be so hard, Charlotte thought, to be at the receiving end of constant sniping and bitterness, but Lavinia bore it well. She possessed a measure of grace that seemed to permit her to smile and turn the other cheek, even as she must surely writhe inside.

Charlotte smoothed down her elbow-length gloves, surreptitiously watching her cousin as she continued waiting patiently. Why the dowager countess felt entitled to be so rude was a mystery, especially when her eldest son had proved responsible for the death of Lavinia’s mother, the Aunt Grace whom Charlotte had never known. But fault seemed of little consequence. Probably it was the Duchess of Salisbury, Charlotte’s grandmother, and her frequent avowals of the Stamford family’s decidedly inferior connections—and cutting them in public—that had fed such bitterness.

Of course, Lavinia had never shared any of this, but it was there, evidenced by the dowager countess’s not-so-discreet comments and the flushed cheeks and angry-looking flash in her eyes whenever Lavinia entered the room. The fact Lavinia had to rely upon her aunt for sponsoring her presentation to the Queen, and not her mother-in-law as other new brides might expect, said enough. No, while Charlotte might envy her cousin’s good fortune in marrying such a handsome man, she did not envy her the cost. A family who could not esteem the son’s chosen bride would be anathema to her—and yet another thing of which to be aware as her father presented young men as potential suitors.

“Miss Emma Hammerson.”

The large lady in pink urged her sweet-faced charge forward, leaving Charlotte at the head of the line. Now she could see the royals, the Prince

Regent and his sisters standing either side of the elderly Queen. The butterflies grew tumultuous.

She turned to Lavinia. "Are you sure you do not want to go first?"

"And precede your mother's moment of triumph in her beautiful daughter?" Her cousin smiled. "I am happy to wait."

"She does look beautiful, doesn't she?"

Mama's rare compliment pricked warmth in Charlotte's eyes, the fond expression one she had not seen terribly often of late. Perhaps it was the pressure of organizing so many things for her court presentation and upcoming ball. She eyed Lavinia's gown, so similar to hers, save it was a pretty peach color, unlike Charlotte's white. But the hoops, the large bell sleeves, the requisite ostrich feathers were the same as those worn by the other ladies present. During their shopping expeditions to acquire such necessities, she'd often heard Lavinia's disapproval about the folly of hundreds of pounds spent for a gown worn only once. But then, Lavinia had grown up in rural Gloucestershire and had, until recently, little idea as to how things were done in society.

"I believe you the prettiest lady here today," her cousin continued.

"You exaggerate," Charlotte said, never too sure in her appearance.

"Not at all. You are quite in your best looks."

At Lavinia's comment, Mama assumed a look of complacency, nodding to the dark-haired Lord Chamberlain, as if expecting him to agree.

From the image greeting her in the mirrored door Charlotte thought she looked well, despite the ridiculous hooped petticoats doing nothing for anyone's figure. Her dark blond hair had been expertly styled by Ellen, Mama's lady's maid, whose skill in dressing hair far surpassed that of Sarah, Charlotte's own maid. The diamond drops in her ears, an early birthday present from Father, were of a beautiful cut and brilliancy; the pearl necklace everything expensive yet modest.

The dress itself, though of a style fashionable half a century ago, did suit her curves and tiny waist a *little* more than some others. Elegant silver embroidery embellished a petticoat of crêpe, trimmed with wreaths of white roses, with a double flounce at the bottom, fringed with silver. The train and body were of white crêpe and silver tissue, the short sleeves trimmed with blond lace and pearls, tied in two parts with a silver band. A laurel tippet,

silver girdle, and white kid shoes topped with tiny rosettes completed her *grande toilette*, although standing for so long had made the ensemble weigh far more than one expected. But everything was in order, and enough—she hoped—to make her acceptable to the Queen.

“Lady Charlotte Featherington,” the Lord Chamberlain called, unnecessarily loudly, considering they were standing so close.

Charlotte bit back a grin as Mama mumbled something about not being deaf, and returned the gentle pressure in Lavinia’s clasped hand before moving forward, careful not to step on the lacy flounces of her bulky petticoats.

“Come.”

Mama’s grasp held nothing of gentleness, rather a feeling of determination. Charlotte kept her smile fixed in place as she walked to where the elderly Queen Charlotte sat, surrounded by the prince and princesses, with various attendants standing just beyond. Moisture lined her hands. She wished she could wipe them; thank goodness she wore gloves. “Glide like a swan,” Lady Rosemond, the specialist on court etiquette, had cautioned. Since her lessons on gliding and curtsying appropriately, Charlotte had practiced studiously. Today would *not* be the day for any form of inelegance.

As she drew closer, she saw the lines marking the Queen’s face, which elicited a pang of sympathy. She appeared very weary, which was not a surprise considering how many young ladies had been presented already today. Plus, the burden of her son’s antics, which filled so many a hushed conversation, must prove a trial. Heart soft, she drew close, stopped at the marked spot, and inclined her head.

“My daughter, Lady Charlotte Featherington,” Mama intoned.

Now was her moment. Lifting her gaze, she met the pale blue eyes gazing steadily in her direction. She smiled wider, and then bent her right leg behind her left before slowly, carefully, bending her left leg as far as she could, until her right knee almost touched the floor. Holding her upper body as straight as possible, she then forced herself to slowly rise, before finally, finally, she was fully upright again.

“Exeter’s daughter?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The Queen nodded before shifting in her seat slightly. “Come here, child.”

Charlotte moved closer and knelt. Lady Rosemond had instructed her for this next stage, too. Leaning forward, she bent her head, and felt the cool lips of the Queen press her forehead.

A kiss on the forehead for the daughters of nobility; an outstretched hand to be kissed by anyone else.

After what she judged a sufficient amount of time had passed, Charlotte pulled back, and resumed the posture Lady Rosemond had insisted upon. Straight back, chest out, chin up, but not looking like a soldier standing on parade.

“Charlotte.” The Queen’s gaze connected with hers, her stilted voice betraying her Germanic ancestry. “Such a pretty name, do you not agree?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Stiff cheeks relaxed at the twinkle she saw in the blue eyes.

“Your namesake, your majesty,” Mama asserted.

“I rather believe I am hers.”

Charlotte swallowed the giggle at the chagrined look on Mama’s face.

“Only daughter of the marquess?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Very pretty.”

Charlotte could almost feel Mama’s relief at such queenly approval. The tightness encasing her chest eased a fraction. She hadn’t failed. She hadn’t disappointed—

Oh, but wait. Now to exit according to tradition.

Taking the tiny nod to be the sign of dismissal, Charlotte executed another heart-pounding deep curtsy, then backed away from the throne. One tiny careful step after another, praying desperately that she’d not step on the ridiculously long train the dress contained. She could not look behind her; to turn one’s back on the Queen was an act of such rudeness one might never live it down.

Another step, then another, and finally a page gestured to the door on the right. With an inner sigh of relief, Charlotte exited the drawing room to find herself facing another door. This one opened to a room filled with men.

Her heart thumped, and she smiled, imagining the prospective candidates.

Now that she was presented, it would only be a matter of time before she

found her husband. Perhaps she might even find him at the ball tomorrow night!

And with a quick prayer—*let him be someone young and exciting, handsome and brave*—she stepped across the threshold.



Bisboplea Common, London

The evening air held a thousand tiny water droplets, a dankness that filled his lungs and beaded across his skin. The starkness of the barren field stretched before him, echoing the cold emptiness inside. He shouldn't be here. He knew better. Taking vengeance like this was wrong. The only solace was that the remote location meant discovery was unlikely. *Lord, keep us from discovery . . .*

"Gentlemen? Are we ready?"

"Yes," William Hartwell, ninth Duke of Hartington, muttered, though he felt far from prepared. Pride bade him stand straight, to remain expressionless, to not show fear, but already he could not but regret the folly that had led him here.

The madness of his vows four years ago rose again in all its ugly glory. Why hadn't he followed his head instead of his heart, instead of seeking approval from the dead? Such depths of stupidity, stupidity he now recognized as having been engendered by a heart made vulnerable by pain, when he'd exchanged the dignity of his parents for the sweet nothings of a jade. How could he have ever believed his wife's lies? His finger twitched on the trigger.

"One. Two . . ."

Jerked from his contemplation, William forced his legs to move, to pace accordingly.

"Four. Five . . ."

Fear churned inside. Peripheral vision found Lord Ware, his brother-in-law and reluctant second, looking anxiously on.

"Seven. Eight . . ."

He gritted his teeth. Honor demanded justice. His pride demanded the truth. But—

THE CAPTIVATING LADY CHARLOTTE

“Ten.”

He stopped.

But what if he had made a mistake, after all?

Shaking off the disquieting thought, he turned and faced his foe.

Nausea slid through his belly. Tall, blond, blue-eyed Lord Wrotham owned a handsome mien *she* had preferred. Disgust mingled with outrage, swelling hotly within until his chest banded and he could barely see.

Slowly he lifted the gleaming pistol, a relic from his father’s day, something he’d thought he’d never need. But then, he had a bad habit of being wrong about things. Wrong about others. Wrong about himself.

Regrets churned inside. He studied the other man’s face. Too handsome, but now holding a trace of fear in the puckered, glistening brow. Too handsome, but forever filled with lies. He *still* denied things. But William had seen him, had seen his figure depart from his wife’s bedroom at an hour that could only mean one thing.

The last of his hesitations fled.

And at the word, he fired.

CHAPTER TWO

*Exeter House
Grosvenor Square, London*

“LADY CHARLOTTE, MAY I request the honor of dancing with—”

“Lady Charlotte, you look enchanting—”

“So beautiful tonight, my lady!”

“Lady Charlotte! Please leave me the quadrille!”

Charlotte laughed as the men standing two—no, three!—deep clamored and jostled for attention. Her heart filled with the delightful sensation of being sought and admired. With so many guests, the receiving line had taken over an hour before Mama had finally propelled her toward the ballroom. “For you know they cannot begin until you commence the first dance.”

Papa had the opening dance, and Henry was obliged for one, too. And while Mama said those of higher rank must be accepted when they offered an invitation, so far she had not had to consent to dance with anyone monstrously ugly or old.

Viscount Carmichael stepped adroitly between two gentlemen who were glaring at each other. “I believe the cotillion is mine, my lady?”

She met his laughing hazel eyes and curtsied. “Of course.”

He bowed before shooting a grin at the two men whose squabbling had rendered them unable to offer an invitation, as if to say, “There, that’s how it should be done.” She smiled to herself. To have one of London’s most eligible bachelors request her hand; surely Mama would be pleased!

The strains of violin grew louder, and her father drew near, parting her suitors as if Moses himself walked through the Red Sea.

“My dear.” He offered a hand, which she accepted, then drew her to the center of the room. What felt like a million eyes watched as he drew her to the top of the set for the first dance of her come-out ball.

“It would seem you are quite the success,” Father said, when they finally had a moment to speak.

“Mama has not been backward in her issuing of invitations.”

“Nor should she. Not when it is *my* daughter who is making her come out.”

Her smile stiffened, as the long ago questions panged again. Why was it so hard for Father to show his affection? How simple would it be to say something of how pretty she looked, or how proud he was of her, especially tonight of all nights? But . . . no. In keeping with usual, her mother’s call to admire her was met with his half glance and a dismissive “very nice,” an indifference that echoed in the hollow spaces of her heart. She blinked, looked down. Perhaps Henry was right, and she wanted too much, yearning for affection from such a busy man. But ever since Lavinia’s wedding, when she had seen the love with which Mr. Ellison treated her cousin, she had realized not every father was as distant as hers. She lifted her gaze as resolve firmed within. Another point to add to her list for eligible candidates. The man she married would need to be willing to show his affection and emotions as freely as she showed her own.

The opening dance gave way to a country dance, which was followed by the cotillion. Lord Carmichael, the heir to the Earl of Bevington, had her laughing almost as much as her feet danced, with his smooth patter of compliments and commentary on the other guests.

“Don’t look now, but I see a dragon.”

“A dragon, my lord?”

The muddy green eyes smiled. “While this one does not have a long tail, she’s still well able to scorch with her tongue.”

“And why should she scorch you, sir?”

“Oh, no. It isn’t me she wishes at the bottom of the sea. It is every young lady I dance with tonight. She labors under the misapprehension that I will offer for her daughter, but that will never do.”

“No?”

“Can you imagine such a dragon as a mother-in-law? I have no wish to.” He smiled. “I much prefer dancing with the loveliest creature here tonight, even if her father warns me away.”

“Has he?”

“Not yet, but I’m sure as soon as we finish he is about to. Heaven forbid you are seen to enjoy *my* company, my lady.”

The whirl of flattery and praise kept her spirits high, until it was time for the supper dance. Lord Wilmington, a baron from Bedfordshire, whose flattering admiration of her looks soon gave way to dull detailings of his vast holdings and wealth, escorted her into the dining room, where she encountered a vast array of treats. Monsieur Robard had certainly outdone himself tonight.

Without waiting to learn her preference, Lord Wilmington hurried to load up two plates, then offered her one, before inveigling Mama’s permission for him to join them at the table.

Henry caught Charlotte’s unspoken plea, rolled his eyes, and drew the baron into conversation about Ascot and whether Pranks stood a chance this year, a circumstance that allowed Charlotte to quietly shift places and move closer to the far more handsome young men at that end of the table. After a satisfying amount of admiration and laughter, there was another exchange of seats, and Lavinia and Lord Hawkesbury joined them.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Charlotte?” her cousin asked.

“How can I not?” She waved a hand at the room. “Everything is perfect.”

The dining room, like the ballroom, was filled with laughter and roses. Her favorite flower adorned every available surface; tastefully so, her mother insisted.

“It appears a veritable garden,” Lavinia said. “You’re very blessed.”

“Much more appealing than the Egyptian-themed ball we went to last week,” the earl said, with a glance at his wife. “Remember the scimitars?” He grinned. “Not precisely Egyptian to my way of thinking.”

Her cousin laughed. “Nor was it appropriate for a young lady marking her come out.”

The tender look she shared with her husband prickled envy in Charlotte. Oh, to be so adored . . .

Lavinia dragged her gaze back to Charlotte. “Nicholas and I were saying earlier we’d love for you to stay with us sometime soon.”

“That would be wonderful! I’ve never been to Gloucestershire.”

There was another exchange of glances. Then the earl shifted forward. “We were rather thinking Hawkesbury House in Lincolnshire.”

“Oh! Well, that would be lovely, too. As long as Mama agrees,” she added doubtfully.

Lavinia patted her hand. “I’ll talk with Aunt Constance soon.”

“Thank you.”

A dark-haired young lady captured Lavinia’s attention, and Charlotte turned her attention to her food, the ice confection garnered by Lord Wilmington now melted, puddling on her plate. She scooped a mouthful in. Nearly moaned. Still tasted as it ought.

She savored the moment, a bubble of quiet in the midst of so much noise. Lavinia’s words had elicited more than just excitement at the promised visit. She *was* blessed, immeasurably so, with family, friends, her father’s finances such as to be able to afford almost anything her heart desired. And now, with so many opportunities available to her . . .

“I lay you a pony it’s a girl brat.”

“Fifty pounds.”

“One hundred pounds!”

Charlotte studied her plate, ears straining as the conversation continued at the table behind her. Who was laying bets here? She didn’t recognize the voices. Such foolishness, gambling over the birth of a child. Did Papa know? He’d never minded a flutter.

“Hartington needs an heir.”

Hartington? Did they refer to the Duke of Hartington?

“If indeed he claims it.”

She frowned. Why would a father not claim his own child?

Apparently this was also a question from one of the unseen party as there was a laugh. “Haven’t you heard?” There was a hush of voices followed by a chorus of sniggers.

For some reason the mean-spirited gossip threaded sadness through her chest. The poor duke. How horrid to be gossiped over, to have the truth about such intimate family matters be fought over like dogs scrapping over a

tasty bone. She was half inclined to interrupt, even though she knew Mama would not approve—

“Lottie?”

She glanced up, met her brother’s amused gaze.

“I did not think the delicacies warranted such rapt attention, but it appears you do.”

“Forgive me. I was woolgathering.”

“Really? Why does that not surprise me?”

She held her retort, still appreciative of his having drawn away the attention of her previous dance partner. “Thank you for . . . before.”

“I suppose I should get used to it, now you’re out.” His eyes glinted. “I confess I had little idea how popular I’d suddenly become with so many gentlemen wanting introductions to my sister.”

“Perhaps some of these gentlemen have sisters as well.”

He grinned. “I certainly hope so.”

She laughed, drawing the attention of several passing prospects, one of whom was bold enough to ask what she found so amusing. After successfully parrying him, she turned back to her brother, now eyeing her curiously.

“What is it, Henry?”

“It’s funny to see my little sister so flirtatious.”

“Flirtatious?”

“Careful.” He inclined his head to their mother, seated a few chairs away. “I’m just not sure I’m ready to see the girl who used to play with her dolls toying so confidently with the hearts of so many young men.”

“I’m *not* toying.”

“Be careful tonight does not mark your come out as a flirt.”

Her jaw dropped.

“Charlotte!”

She closed it hurriedly at her mother’s urgent whisper and met her brother’s laughter.

“Admit it. Tonight would not be complete without that familiar refrain.”

A smile tugged at her lips. “Neither of us would know what to do.”

“But you have enjoyed the evening?”

“You mean apart from my brother’s insinuations?”

“Apart from those.”

“Of course I have. Tonight has been a dream!” A giddy, wonderful, delightful dream.

“Mama seems to think so, too.”

Charlotte followed his gaze to where Mama sat, loudly exulting over Charlotte’s success yesterday at the Queen’s drawing rooms. “Two minutes! I’m sure that is far longer than any other young lady presented this year.”

Mama’s expression looked remarkably smug as she continued on her theme to a group of dowagers who were hiding their boredom moderately well.

“Two minutes.” Henry gave a low whistle. “I can’t imagine what the old girl would want with you for that amount of time.”

“Can’t you?” Charlotte reached across and pinched his arm. “You shouldn’t call her an old girl. That is disrespectful.”

“I’m sure she’s been called worse,” her brother said, rubbing his arm before rising. “Are you ready to return? I believe the dancing has recommenced.”

She nodded, pushing to her feet, and they moved to the balustrade overlooking the ballroom. Henry’s gaze roved the masses. “Why’d you have to invite so many old biddies, Lottie?”

“Mama issued the invitations, as you well know.”

“I feel as though I’ve invited my friends here tonight under false pretenses.”

“What pretenses were they? You mean to say they did not involve dancing with your sister? How shocking!”

“I confess I didn’t overly advertise such possibilities.” He coughed. “Some of my friends are not the sort of fellows I wish to dance attendance upon my sister.”

“Which makes one wonder why they are your friends.” She raised her brows.

He flushed. “Perhaps Mama is right, and you do spend too much time with our fair cousin.” He jerked a nod at Lavinia, whirling in her husband’s arms in the ballroom below. “You seem to have a way of making a fellow uncomfortable. It won’t do, you know. Not if you mean to snare a husband.”

“Snare a husband? You don’t really think I need to resort to entrapment, do you?”

He turned, looked her over, before a reluctant-looking tilt to his lips suggested his approval once more. “You’ll do.”

She chuckled, looping her arm through his as they walked down the grand staircase. "I do hope when you meet a young lady you wish to charm that you'll refrain from being *quite* so economical in your praise."

"And I hope the man you wish to charm will realize just how much of his life will be spent in flattery and cajolery in order for you to be happy."

"I don't *require* flattery, Henry," she murmured as the elegantly dressed Lord Fanshawe drew near. Tall, handsome, impeccably attired in a dark dress coat and white neckcloth with a diamond winking in its folds, he was worth seven thousand a year, and known to be on the lookout for a bride, or so Mama said.

He bowed. "Lady Charlotte, are you ready now for our dance?"

"I am, thank you." She released her brother's arm and grasped the viscount's outstretched hand.

"May I say you appear the epitome of springtime loveliness tonight?"

"You may." She smiled, before staying her brother with a white-gloved hand, and saying in an undertone, "I don't require compliments, but I certainly can appreciate them."

"Careful, else you'll be known as the biggest flirt this side of Paris."

He chuckled, bowing, as the viscount drew her into the dance.

Such a whirl, such a heady delight these past hours had been. Round she twirled, as the ballroom echoed with the thud of skipping feet, and the musicians played a merry song. Her heart lifted as jewels glistened and candlelight flickered from three enormous candelabrum overhead. How joyous she felt, almost like flying—

"And that is why I believe the pumpkin flavor is the best."

She blinked, slanting a glance at her partner, who smiled.

"I'm ashamed to discover my conversation about Gunter's ices lacks the power to engage my fair companion's attention."

"Oh, forgive me! My head is awl with so much tonight, I can scarcely take it all in."

"Then I shall not be so ashamed, and shall venture to say something more to your liking."

"You tease me."

"No." Blue-gray eyes sparkled. "I simply wish to say how beautiful you appear tonight."

She smiled, even as the cynical part of her, the part recently fostered by Lavinia, paused to wonder if he would say the same to a young lady who was not titled, nor known to have a dowry in excess of fifty thousand pounds. How would she know whether he was being genuine or not? How would she know if any man was being genuine or not? She bit her lip.

“Pardon me, my dear lady, but you seem displeased. I trust it is not your partner that concerns you?”

“No.” She smiled widely. “I simply wonder if your conversation extends to anything beyond compliments.”

He mock-gasped. “Such wounds from one so young!”

She raised her brows.

“Now I have offended you. A thousand apologies.”

She dipped her head, and his smile stretched, causing a little jolt to her heart, before the dancing led him away, and his place was claimed by another young man, somewhat more rotund; a marquess, so thus more titled—and more acceptable to her mother, whose loudly voiced desire that Charlotte dance with him had been met with a swift request she’d been unable to refuse.

The nature of the dance meant there was far less opportunity for conversation, which she did not mind, as the marquess was not quite as adept as her previous dancing partners. A crony of her father’s, he had little to offer in the way of conversation either, save more compliments, which, while nice to hear, offered little in the way of ingenuity.

She fought a wince as he stepped on her toe for the third time.

“So sorry.”

“So am I,” she muttered, as the music led him away, leaving her at the bottom of the set.

“Lady Charlotte?”

She glanced up.

Her breath caught. *Here* was the man of her dreams. Dark-haired, chiseled features, blue eyes piercing from under brows so smooth they looked painted on. So angelically lovely, so impossibly handsome—yet *not* so impossible, for he stood before her now.

“I . . . sir, we have not been introduced.”

“I know Henry from university. Lord Markham at your service.” He

bowed, and her heart fluttered anew. "I have come to save you from your partner."

She glanced at the red-faced marquess, lumbering toward them. "Oh, but I cannot—"

"Cannot permit your toes to be crushed by such a bore as he, yes, you are right." He picked up her gloved hand. "Shall we?"

She barely heard her answer, barely heard the marquess's words of protest as she floated off into this new lord's arms. Was barely aware of anything save the way his dark blue eyes captured her, caressed her, made her feel like she was dancing on air.

"Who *are* you?"

"Besides a knight in shining armor?"

A chuckle escaped. "Besides that."

"Besides a man who wishes himself a poet to do justice to your eyes?"

She blinked.

"Would you permit I should steal words from a poet? 'Around her shone the nameless charms unmarked by her alone—the light of Love, the purity of Grace, the mind, the Music breathing from her face . . .'"

"Who wrote that?"

"Byron."

Her gaze lowered, her cheeks heating. "Mama does not permit me to read his work."

"I hope she won't mind you *hearing* his work."

"Why do you say that?"

"You will have to wait to find out, won't you?"

She glanced up. He smiled, blue eyes lighting, and her heart began beating rapidly. And as they danced, and chatted, and laughed—and he did not once step on her toes—she began to wonder if perhaps *this* was the man who would prove husband material. Markham. Why had that name not leapt from the pages of the copy of Debrett's *Peerage* Mama had forced her to memorize?

As the music swelled, she caught a glimpse of her father standing next to an indignant marquess, and felt a moment's regret.

Her companion leaned down and murmured, "The marquess will look a little more sharply the next time he chooses to dance with such a beauty, I'll wager."

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Though she smiled, his words drew her mind back to what she'd overheard earlier—wagers over the new child of the Duke of Hartington. The violins seemed to play a sadder strain, and in the middle of the ballroom, in the middle of her glorious debut into society, she found a prayer rising from her heart that all would be well.

CHAPTER THREE

*Hartwell House
Hanover Square, London*

THE SCREAM RENT the night.

William, Duke of Hartington, pushed his head into his hands and slumped over his desk. A prayer half formed on his lips before the darkness took it away. He'd be hanged before he prayed for her. Hanged before he let his heart be touched again. Hadn't he prayed enough?

Heat banded his chest, constricting his lungs until he grew desperate for air. He drew in a deep gulp and, for a few minutes, forced himself to concentrate on breathing: inhale, long exhale. Inhale, long exhale.

The room was unlit, the only light coming from the crackling fireplace. Red light danced behind his closed eyelids, echoing the fire threatening to consume his soul. His fingers clenched. With a great force of effort, he managed to release them, to straighten them, only to clasp his hair like a madman.

A madman. Laughter sputtered, died. How ironic. Had the board at Bethlem Royal Hospital and Asylum known the absurdity of offering a trustee position to one such as he? Mad? The heat within grew. Surely an understatement. How long would it be until he did not feel this insane rage?

Lord . . .

He couldn't pray the rest, wasn't even sure if God was real anymore. He certainly hadn't made His presence felt the past few months.

A scratching came at the door. He lifted his head but said nothing, waiting for the door to open as it always did, regardless of whether he'd issued instructions about his wishes to be disturbed or not.

"Your Grace?"

Jensen's voice.

"Your Grace, please come."

His valet knew everything, yet still made this request? "Go away."

"But—"

"No."

"Your wife is calling for you. She needs—"

"My wife?" He almost spat the word. "She made it clear long ago she needs me for nothing."

Not his love, not his seed. Only his name.

"If you do not, you will live to regret—"

"Do you truly dare to presume to tell me what I shall feel?" He eyed the man silhouetted in the doorway. "You have *no* idea what I go through!"

His valet said nothing, light from the hall lamp revealing his steady gaze.

A pang struck. Actually, Jensen did know. He was the one person William had taken into his confidence, the one person who knew the devastation caused by the discovery of the affair. The one member of his household who knew about last night's affair of honor. Paid almost a king's ransom to keep his lips sealed, the only man he could trust.

That maniacal laugh came again. How had he come to this, where his only friend was a paid servant?

"Your Grace?"

At the worried note in his valet's voice he forced his whirling thoughts to slow, to focus; forced himself to take a deep breath. "Yes?"

"The doctor . . . the doctor thinks it won't be long now."

A spike of resentment shafted his heart. "Until the brat is born?"

"Until your—the duchess is no more."

"What?" He spun in his chair to fully face his valet.

"Dr. Metcalfe says it is a hard case, that she has lost a great deal of blood. He believes it only a matter of hours."

For once the usually expressionless features held a measure of emotion,

something that looked like pity. Hardening his heart, William said roughly, “Why should I care?”

“Because, if I may say so—”

“Never stopped you before, has it?” he muttered.

“If you don’t, there may always be a measure of regret that things were left unresolved.”

Like with his parents. William’s hands clenched. He did not want that again, did he?

No. He didn’t.

He grunted, pushing to his feet to follow Jensen. The great hall’s lights made him squint and gave him pause, as the faces of his footmen smoothed from ambivalence to something approximating their usual impassivity.

No doubt they all knew, would be busy gossiping about his misfortunes, if they hadn’t been so already. Hypocritical gossips—as bad as any matron from society’s scandal-breathing *ton*.

He trudged up the stairs, heart hammering as another cry of desperation sliced the air.

“Your Grace?” Maria, his wife’s dresser, hurried toward him, eyes reddened. “Oh, sir, Madam needs you. She—”

He waved an impatient hand, cutting off her words as he strode to the main bedchamber. Bracing internally, he entered.

Something akin to a collective sigh filled the room. A half dozen people scurried around on the room’s periphery, but his vision focused only on the figure writhing on the giant bed. Horror suffused his chest, chasing away all previous emotions.

The brunette gnashed her teeth as a violent trembling shook her distended belly, almost like an invisible giant shook her. Beside her, a gray-haired man held one arm, while a couple of housemaids prevented the other from flailing. Blood stained the nightdress, stained the bed linens; too much blood it seemed from one small person.

Another low moaning sound swelled into a scream, piercing his soul.

He yanked his gaze away to focus anywhere but her face, her once adored, once so beautiful face. He focused instead on the carved bedposts twisting upward to a labyrinth of intricate cavorting gargoyle-type creatures. He’d always hated this bed.

“Is he here?” The voice, a hoarse whimper, drew his attention again, stealing past his internal barricades.

“I’m here, Pamela.”

“William?” Blue eyes he’d once described as moonlit turned to him, focused on him.

For a moment he was transported back in time, back to last summer, when she’d last looked at him with something approaching kindness in her eyes. That single night when he’d tried to convince her of his love, show her his love, had tried to put aside his wretchedness in a final desperate attempt for an heir. Back before she’d taken up with Lord Wrotham again.

His heart hardened. “What is it?”

She whimpered, her face tensing, squinting, lines of pain furrowing her forehead as her back arched once more. “Oh, dear God!”

Her desperation seized him, stirring long-depleted compassion. From somewhere deep within he found the rest of the prayer. *Lord, help her, heal her.*

She gasped, eyes closed, the pains finally releasing their hold, as the accoucheur looked up at him, beetling gray brows pushed together.

“The child?”

“We . . . cannot get it out,” Dr. Metcalfe said in a low voice.

“But surely . . .” He gestured helplessly to the bloodstained medical instruments. “Perhaps someone else?”

“There’s no time, sir.” Maria gazed up from her mistress, eyes filled with accusation.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.”

The finality of those words pummeled within. No. *Lord, no!* If only his resentment had not precluded his appearance sooner. If only he—if only she . . .

“William, please.” Pamela’s hand strained toward him. “Please believe I am sor—” Her words ended in a scream, before she slumped back motionless.

He staggered back from the bed, out of the way of the rush of women.

No! It couldn’t end like this. *God!*

Horror crawled across his soul as the limbs refused motion, as Metcalfe received no response to his frantic pleas.

Lord God!

"She's gone."

"No!" A terrible wailing sound emanated from the far side of the bed.
"Not my lovely!"

The screams, the sobbing, the frantic ministrations of the doctor seemed to fade as weight clanged against his chest like Westminster's bells. Nausea heaved within. Emotion lined his eyes, clamped his throat. No . . .

"You! You did this to her!" Maria staggered to her feet, finger outstretched in accusation. "I will never forgive you for what you have done!" She spat.

He dodged, though not quickly enough, as some of her spittle landed on his coat. She lifted a hand as if to strike him, so he grabbed her arm, twisting her around until she faced away from him, panting foul curses as the room's inhabitants watched in horrified fascination.

"And I will never forgive your role in all this." Swallowing the shakiness, he murmured in her ear, "You let your mistress play the whore, then have the nerve to blame me? How dare you?"

"Your Grace—"

William ignored the doctor, thrusting the Frenchwoman to the door.
"Get out. Leave my home immediately. Jensen!"

"Here, Your Grace."

"Please ensure this person never darkens our doors again."

"Of course, sir."

"Your Grace—"

"You'll be sorry, Duke of Hartington!" She spat another vile obscenity.
"I'll make you sorry that you breathe!"

"I doubt it." How could she, when he already felt that way?

Jensen, now assisted by some of the footmen, dragged the screaming maid away, her curses mixed with vulgar French he had little desire to understand.

"Your Grace!"

He spun to face the doctor. "What?"

The elderly man held a small bundle in his hands. "It's a girl."

"What?"

Dr. Metcalfe moved closer, holding the child toward him.

The tiny face seemed too tiny, too red, too still. "Is she—?"

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“Alive, yes. For how long, I can’t say.”

His throat clamped, as for a moment, something melted in his heart. He reached to touch the tiny fingers. “How? I thought—”

“Sometimes when a body relaxes . . .”

He shuddered. His wife was now but a body?

“And we can pull them more freely . . .”

Ignoring the gory details, he focused on the silent child, before the reason for her existence rose again. His wife. Wrotham. That night. He shuddered. “Take her away.”

“But—”

“I said take her away!”

And before any of them could see the moisture leaking from his eyes, he strode away, slamming the door to his bedchamber, where he could weep in solitude.

For of course the babe would be a girl.

Not an heir.

Not even a child he could call his own.