



LAWANA BLACKWELL



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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*For Buddy,  
my sweetheart and best friend.*

# 1

If one would drown one's sorrows with music, the music must be loud.

On the seventeenth of February, 1880, if Charlotte's fingers had not pounded out Haydn's *Andante with Variations in F Minor* so forcefully, the score would not have slipped from its stand. She would not have heard hoofbeats.

They halted in the snow-frosted carriage drive instead of carrying on to the stables. Visitors were rare, thus curiosity led her from grand piano to window. She pushed aside a curtain and watched a coach sway to a stop behind a pair of horses. The driver hopped down from the seat and opened the door. His passenger stepped to the ground, looked up at the house.

She could almost read his expression. Her first sight of sixteenth-century Fosberry Hall had taken her breath away, with its four storeys of honeyed limestone, gables and projecting windows, and verandah with wide steps.

Charlotte crossed the Belgian carpet and eased open the parlor door.

Alerted by a bell in the kitchen, Mrs. Trinder moved soundlessly up the hall.

“Good morning.” The man’s voice resonated from the porch. “My name is Milton Perry, calling for Lady Fosberry. Here is my card.”

“I’m afraid Lord Fosberry is away.”

This was news to Charlotte, but Roger was not one to inform her of his comings and goings. Nor was she one to ask.

“That’s quite all right. As I said, my business is with *Lady Fosberry*.”

“Lady Fosberry is not available,” Mrs. Trinder said and began closing the door.

The male voice quickened from *andante* to *allegro*. “I have an urgent message, if you would but—”

“Here I am, Mrs. Trinder,” Charlotte sang, stepping into the hall.

Mrs. Trinder turned, cheeks as ashen as her hair, veined hand still grasping the knob. “Lord Fosberry insists upon receiving guests in person, Your Ladyship.”

“The gentleman appears to be *my* guest.”

“But—”

Charlotte stepped closer, touched her shoulder. “I’m still the lady of the house. Now, if you please?”

The housekeeper stared at her for a moment before moving aside.

The visitor at the threshold was well dressed in a black Chesterfield coat. From a high forehead flowed oiled salt-and-pepper hair, dented from the crown hat tucked inside his arm. Above a trim beard, his cheeks were ruddy from the cold. One gloved hand held a narrow leather satchel.

“What an honor, Lady Fosberry,” he said with a little bow.

“Thank you.” She took the proffered card from his gloved hand. *Milton Perry*, it stated. The urgency in his hazel eyes intrigued her, and after all, she had not had a caller in two or three years. “Come in, Mr. Perry.”

“Thank you.”

She stood to the side. “Will your driver care to wait in the kitchen?”

Stepping into the hall, he replied, “You’re very kind, but I shan’t be long, and he has rugs.”

Mrs. Trinder watched with an aggrieved expression, not offering to take his hat and coat. Charlotte did not have the heart to force the issue.

“Wait and remove your coat in the parlor, where it’s warmer.” She led him down the hall and opened the door.

Mrs. Trinder, lagging behind, cleared her throat and said when Charlotte turned, “His lordship will be displeased.”

“I’ll explain to him that I insisted . . . that I *bullied* you, Mrs. Trinder. Will that suffice? Now please, return to your duties.”

In the parlor, Mr. Perry stood before the fire in pinstripe suit, his coat, hat, and gloves draped across a sofa arm.

“I had forgotten how cold the north can get.”

She seated herself in one of the plush green Venetian chairs.

Mr. Perry came over to fold his limbs into the adjacent chair, resting his satchel upon his knees. “You managed that situation well, if I may say.”

Tempting, it was, to explain, “*Mrs. Trinder is pleasant on the whole, but as she has been in my husband’s employ for thirty years, she naturally defers to him.*” But this visitor was a stranger. Enough of Charlotte’s private life had been bandied about over the years.

“What brings you here, Mr. Perry?”

He nodded. “Mrs. Perry and I had the pleasure of seeing you in several productions. You had such presence onstage.”

That raised in her no small suspicion. Was he a reporter? If so, she would show him the door, then apologize to Mrs. Trinder. “You’re very kind. And once again, may I ask the purpose of your visit?”

“But of course.” He took an envelope from the satchel and left his chair to hand it over. “I own a courier service in London.”

Charlotte's breath caught at the sight of the return address. "The Lyceum."

"Mr. Irving sent two telegrams himself before contacting me," Mr. Perry said, seated again. "I dispatched a messenger here on Tuesday, but he was turned away."

Henry Irving took over management of the Lyceum two years ago, according to *The Times*. She had shared the stage with him on several occasions, most recently eight years ago as his mother, Gertrude, in *Hamlet*.

Charlotte worried the edge of the envelope with her thumb. Her hopes had been dashed so many times. Stalling, she said, "I received neither telegram nor message."

"So he assumed." Mr. Perry hesitated. "Is it possible your husband . . . ?"

She felt a sick chill. "It is not only possible but probable."

"I'm sorry to hear it. In any event, I'm not as easily intimidated as my staff, and as dependability accounts for the success of my business, I caught the very next train to Lincolnshire."

"Impressive. But what if my husband had been here?"

Mr. Perry smiled. "Over an hour ago, I hired a local courier to deliver a message from one Maxwell Simpson, Esquire, requesting an audience with Lord Fosberry over a matter of supreme importance at Three Horseshoes in Halton Hologate."

"I was playing the piano and did not hear. But pray, who is Maxwell Simpson?"

"My sister's husband in Yorkshire. I daresay he'll miss the meeting."

Charlotte smiled. How good it felt to do so!

Mr. Perry's brows drew together. "Which leads me to ask if our high jinks will cause you any harm. Is Lord Fosberry a violent man?"

"He is not." Roger's wit was his weapon of choice.

She gave that a second thought. Roger would connect Mr. Perry with the fool's errand. He owned guns for hunting. Surely

he would not use them against a person, but then, his behavior had surprised her before.

“Still,” she went on, “you mustn’t tarry. I’ll read this after . . .”

“Will you read it now? Mr. Irving awaits your reply.”

Pulling in a deep breath, she opened the envelope.

*Dear Charlotte,*

*I pray this finds you in excellent health. And I dare to hope . . . would you care to take a break from country life to play Gertrude again? An unfortunate attack of palsy has forced Mrs. Rathbone to quit midstream, and while Mrs. Overton is a competent understudy, she has not the audience loyalty you commanded. A prompt and favorable reply would put me forever in your debt and bring joy again to London audiences!*

Her nausea gave way to light-headedness. She had read in *The Times* weeks ago of the revival of *Hamlet* at the Lyceum, never daring even to dream she would be associated with it. “He offers me a part.”

Mr. Perry smiled and withdrew more papers from the leather case. “He sends the script so that you may refresh your memory.”

She took it from him and pressed it between her hands. She could almost smell the gaslights.

“I’m authorized to purchase a railway ticket and would consider it a privilege to escort you to London.”

London!

How wonderful would it be, Charlotte thought, to have a reason to wake in the morning! To go through the day free of self-recrimination for having blundered yet again into the biggest of mistakes!

To be with people!

And yes, to see *Charlotte Ward* upon the marquee!

The dream faded like stage fog. While her face was free of

wrinkles but for the corners of her eyes, and her ash-brown hair only enhanced by the few strands of gray, there was another issue. She pressed her elbows into her sides and felt the flesh yield. “I’ve gained two stone, at least. They’re unaware.”

“You’re still beautiful, Lady Fosberry.”

“Not enough.” Audiences would not fault her for her fifty years. *Fifty-one in August!* After all, the part was for a grown man’s mother. Yet they would expect someone attractive and regal.

Mr. Perry was a stranger. But there was no one else in whom to confide her angst. “I’ve let myself go. Terribly. I’m . . . fat.”

“I must disagree.”

“Yes, you *must*,” she said with frown. “Because a gentleman is constrained to say otherwise.”

“On the contrary, I’m unfailingly honest.” He winced. “My brother-in-law’s fictitious message notwithstanding. If I may be so bold, you’re, well, Rubenesque.”

“Rubenesque.” What every woman wanted to hear. With knees creaking, she heaved her Rubenesque body to its feet. “Please convey my deepest regrets to Mr. Irving. If you will see yourself out . . .”

She, who could produce copious onstage tears, wanted no witness to those now prickling the backs of her eyes.

He rose slowly. “Should you not *speak* with him, at least?”

Attempting to say a word would unleash the flood. She pressed her lips and nodded toward the door.

“I’m sorry to have distressed you.” Mr. Perry collected coat, gloves, and hat, and backed across the room. Just before the doorway, he paused. “Lady Fosberry, my dear wife is a stout woman. I daresay she weighs much more than do you.”

Charlotte could pull in only shallow breaths.

“She purchases certain undergarments at ladies’ shops. To make herself appear smaller.”

That was the icing on the cake. Of course she knew of cor-

sets, but she had never needed one. A hundred years ago, that life seemed.

*Why will you not leave!*

Mr. Perry was the epitome of male discomfort: eyes not quite meeting hers, fingers plucking at coat buttons. “Forgive my delicacy. But it would be a tragedy if you gave up without a try.”

The tears eased, though the back of her throat ached.

A fireplace log collapsed with a hiss into the bed of ashes.

“How can it hurt?” he asked.

How could it hurt? In so many ways! She had only to picture Henry Irving rejecting her. The return train ride. Roger’s smug look.

“I’m afraid that I’ll fail.”

He nodded. “I understand. I do. For years, I kept books for Harrods, chained by fear to a job that I despised. One day, I realized it was far better to fail than to spend the rest of my life wondering what would have happened *if*.”

*If.*

She imagined herself in the years ahead, browbeaten into a shadow of the woman she once was, sick with longing for paths she had not chosen.

Drawing in a deep breath, she said, “When does the first train leave tomorrow?”

His brows rose. “Why, at eight. Shall I come for you?”

“I will meet you. My husband will not welcome you back onto his property.”

“That’s sooner than I could have hoped. Will you not need more time?”

The thought of *more time* was not appealing, considering that it would be spent beneath the cloud of Roger’s anger. Besides, more time would give footholds to fresh doubts.

She shook her head.

“Very well, Lady Fosberry. I’m staying at Red Lion Inn, should you need to contact me.”

She glanced toward the window. “You must go now.”

He thanked her and left.

As hoofbeats sounded again, Charlotte sank to her knees, rested her head against a sofa cushion, and wept. The spiritual numbness that had gripped her for so long loosened its hold. God had not forgotten her after all.

*Dearest Father . . .*

How good it felt to pray!

She had been a believer since age fourteen. A common assumption was that actors and actresses led immoral lives. Many did, which was the reason her circle of friends in the profession had always been small. But her parents were faithful churchgoers, no matter how late a Saturday show ended, and no matter where the tour had them temporarily planted. Over her mother’s constant but pragmatic Anglican objections, her father chose whichever congregation was near enough to the theatre to allow them to be in costume for the Sunday matinee.

*Thank you for your kindness, in spite of my wallowing in my own misery. Now please give me the strength to do this.*