

THE INCREDIBLE
CHARLOTTE
SYCAMORE

Kate Maddison



Holiday House / New York

Copyright © 2013 by Katherine Haupt

All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and bound in February 2013 at Berryville Graphics, Berryville, VA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Maddison, Kate.

The incredible Charlotte Sycamore / by Kate Maddison. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Preferring adventure to an arranged marriage, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Queen Victoria's royal surgeon sneaks out to sword fight with two friends when the three are mauled by what looks like rabid dogs.

ISBN 978-0-8234-2737-6 (hardcover)

[1. Rabies—Fiction. 2. Conspiracies—Fiction. 3. Victoria, Queen of Great Britain, 1819-1901—Fiction. 4. London (England)—History—19th century—Fiction. 5. Great Britain—History—Victoria, 1837-1901—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.M2557In 2013

[Fic]—dc23

*Dedicated with much love to my teenage daughter, Samantha,
who was the inspiration for Charlotte, and to my husband, Greg, for his
thoughtfulness and for always listening to my plot problems.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe many thanks to my wonderful agent, Erica Spellman Silverman, for encouraging me to write this book when I pitched it to her over a lovely lunch in New York. I feel very fortunate and honored to be represented by such a dedicated person, and appreciate all the hard work by the rest of my agency team at the Trident Media Group.

I would also like to thank my enthusiastic editors at Holiday House: Pamela Glauber for being a champion of the story and helping me to make it shine, and Julie Amper for her talented guidance and for taking such good care with the final details. I'd also like to thank my publisher, John Briggs, and editor-in-chief, Mary Cash, and the rest of the team at Holiday House for being so all-around amazing and devoted.

Thank you to illustrator Antonio Javier Caparo for helping Charlotte come to life in such an extraordinary way.

Thank you to author Kelley Armstrong who so graciously took the time to read the early manuscript, and gave me such a thrill with her generous quote.

None of my writing would ever be possible without the loving support of my husband, daughter, family, and friends. Hugs forever.

CHAPTER ONE

London, early June 1876



FATHERS don't need to know everything. Sometimes it's even necessary to tell them a fib or two, to keep them from worrying too much or jumping to the wrong conclusions. Especially my father, Dr. James Sycamore. He worried about every detail.

And there were exactly three details I omitted to tell him this evening:

I wasn't going straight to bed.

I snuck out of the Palace without permission.

I was sword fighting again.

If my father knew what I was doing at this moment, he would send me to my chambers for a month. He'd get that crushed look of disappointment on his handsome face, which the female servants keenly watched when he was unaware. He'd bow his head in shame and, without so much as requesting an explanation, give me a nod of dismissal.

That look. That nod.

In my defense, I was only being myself. Isn't that what he'd always taught me?

Charlotte, you must always be truthful to yourself and your beliefs.

But I wasn't allowed to be myself. Fathers are like that. They tell you to do one thing, but expect another.

So here I was, standing beneath the yellow haze of a gaslight well past midnight with my two closest friends, brother and sister Jillian and Peter Moreley. Twins, with the same friendly brown eyes. I brushed away my long black hair (at the Palace I was never allowed to wear it down) and adjusted the fencing mask to my forehead. I was testing one of my latest gadgets. Inventions were a hobby of mine, something else my father was only vaguely aware of. This invention, a lightweight sword whose blade tip rotated, ran on batteries that were charged by steam. It was meant for smaller persons who couldn't bear the weight of a larger blade but still wished for its power and might.

Me.

I buckled my leather padded vest and stepped into the deserted warehouse district of London. We stood somewhere between the flowing waters of the Thames and the slums where my friends lived. We were miles away from my embarrassingly luxurious residence in Westminster. (I mean, how many clocks can Buckingham Palace hold? Two hundred and twenty-three was surely enough, now wasn't it? They had two full-time servants who looked after the clocks alone.)

Dressed in a worn-out skirt and blouse loaned to me by Jillian, I faced Peter with my sword held high.

"On guard," I called beneath a cool sky about to burst with rain.

It wasn't truly fun sneaking out of the household unless I could share the adventure with someone. I'd missed Peter for the year he'd been gone, fighting pirates in the Royal Navy. Much had changed in him. His shoulders now filled his shirts and there was a new awareness about him, as though he looked at the world through a different lens. I wanted to stare at him longer to note these fascinating changes, but I didn't want to give him the wrong impression.

"On guard yourself. What in the name of God is that skinny thing?" Peter tilted his head and peered at my slender blade. His dark brown hair fell against his fencing mask—in a very attractive way, I might add. He looked at the clumsy metal hilt where the batteries were stored.

"Never mind," I said. "You'll be surprised what it can do."

He smacked my sword with his own. The strength of his blow vibrated up to my shoulder. The game was on.

"Nab him, Charlotte!" Jillian shouted with delight.

“Do your worst,” he added with a laugh.

Jillian darted among the deserted buildings, a blur of reddish-brown hair and swirling skirts. My hems brushed the cobblestone street, sunken from centuries of footsteps and rolling wagons. My nostrils flared at the sharp smell of burning coal, horses, and sewage in the Thames.

Yet I loved my freedom away from Buckingham Palace. I snuck out once or twice a month, whenever my father was busy with his scientific meetings and we weren’t traveling with the Queen to her other castles. Jillian was able to keep a secret better than anyone I had ever known. She’d never breathe a word to her mother, a carriage cleaner in the Queen’s stables, that I was hiding in their wagon, leaving the Palace gates for the evening beneath a pile of horse blankets and straw.

“Still as dangerous as always, I see,” Peter said with humor. He swung around a light post and lunged with his weapon.

I jumped out of reach and bounded onto a row of wooden boxes. “Did you catch any pirates while you were away?”

“Three. But none female.”

“Pity. We make the most interesting prisoners.”

“Charlotte!” Jillian scolded, but Peter only laughed.

We continued clanging and banging. A light rain misted my face.

Jillian shouted, “Did you know Peter is staying home for good?”

My sword stopped in midair. “He is?”

Peter leaped at me. His blade came within an inch of my mask. I squealed in good fun, ducked, and rushed him with my weapon. I pushed the metal button near my thumb, hoping it would work this time. In response, the tip of my sword rotated and shredded a patch of his vest. He looked wonderfully shocked.

“What kind of weapon . . .”

“Yes, for good,” Jillian continued. “Now that he—*we*—are seventeen, Mother says he’s old enough to start training for a position with the Metropolitan Police. They hire as young as eighteen, you know.”

Scotland Yard? How remarkable. I backed away to allow him to regroup, then wondered what it might be like to have a mother. The only thing I had to remember my mother by was the blue sapphire ring I wore. She was wearing it on the fatal night of labor and hemorrhage,

when we'd met for a brief five hours and thirty-two minutes, according to my father.

"A bobby?" I smiled at Peter, calling him by the police nickname. "You'll have to better your game, then."

"Huh-ho. Really?"

We weaved round the corner, testing each other's blades in the dim light of a courtyard. We dodged bare wagons and empty barrels. A minute passed, perhaps two. All was quiet beyond the clicking of metal.

Too quiet.

"Jillian?" Trying to keep one eye on the game, I nervously glanced at the path from which we'd come. "Jillian?"

I lowered my sword. Peter followed with his. A faint growling noise echoed against the far stone walls. My pulse thumped against my windpipe. Something was wrong.

"Jillian!" Peter raced toward the foggy street and we sprang past the warehouse into another empty courtyard.

I careened to a stop beside him, my shoes slipping on wet cobblestones. We spotted Jillian, as frozen as a statue in Hyde Park, surrounded by a pack of six dogs. Teeth bared, they snarled at her. Black flesh rippled on their jaws. Their mouths frothed as though spitting dirty water, their demented eyes riveted on their prey. They looked diseased. There was a quiet whimpering. I realized with a gut-twisting wrench that it was coming from Jillian.

My thighs shook with terror. Jillian was fifty feet away, well beyond our reach.

"Easy," whispered Peter to the closest dog, "easy, boy, easy." He inched closer, sword poised. The other dogs swiveled their black eyes, as though in some machine-like unison, to settle on Peter.

Then the canine leader howled as if giving a signal and they swung back at Jillian. With a grotesque leap, the big beast sank its tainted teeth into her shoulder. It whipped her about like an onion by its stalk.

"No!" Peter shrieked, and lunged forward. He cut off the head of one that tried to attack him, then a second as he rushed to his bleeding sister, held unconscious by the beast.

“Stop!” I raced toward the dogs, pushing the button of my blade over and over in outrage, but it jammed.

Two of the dogs noticed my weakness. I watched in horror as they slowly circled. I followed the crazed eyeballs of one as it paced to my right. I was well aware that another was pacing to my left, looking for an opening. When the delirious eyes flashed, I made my move. I thrust my blade through the heart of the leaping giant, at the same time kicking out my left foot at the other dog.

My blade did its work. The giant fell.

However, the other dog had sunk its teeth into the top of my leather boot. I kicked my foot repeatedly, but it held on. I tried to scrunch my toes inside my boot to protect myself, hoping the little stab of pain was coming from the twisted leather and not the gruesome teeth.

There was no cure for rabies, once the symptoms appeared in a victim. I'd heard my father say it. Rabid dogs plagued London and all of Europe. When a person was bitten, the disease made its way to the brain and spinal cord, causing swelling and infection. Then came swollen jaws, frothy saliva, incredible pain, a lunatic madness, and death.

I gripped my blade, holding steady. I maintained eye contact with the sickly beast in the rainy darkness while it twisted my foot as though calculating the best angle to lunge at my throat. My inner thigh muscles stretched and burned as I tried to keep my balance, swiveling on one leg.

In the background, Peter bravely continued to hack limbs and fur and frothing jaws, and scream curses at the monsters.

The dog on my foot finally let go and leaped at my head. I screamed, lifted my sword and allowed it to impale itself. With a shudder, I withdrew my weapon and looked up at the wreckage.

The growling had stopped, all six dogs dead. But I was horrified to see that Peter lay crumpled, unconscious, by Jillian's side. He'd managed to cut off the head of the dog that had attacked her. Leaping forward to reach my friends, I slid through pools of black blood draining from the animals. Jillian lay pale and motionless—barely breathing. Part of her shoulder was gone. Her bleeding was massive.

My heart pumped madly. I clawed off the petticoat Queen Victoria had given me for my sixteenth birthday last week. She and I shared the

same birthday, the twenty-fourth of May, but no one ever fired any cannons for me. I bunched up the cloth and put pressure on Jillian's wound. I tried to remember the medical things I'd seen my father do in the numerous cities we'd lived in over the years while he tended patients and I worked as his scrubbing girl, cleaning his equipment. I couldn't think of anything useful here.

Jillian's blood seeped into the fabric, then stopped as I tied it around her shoulder joint. I prayed for her life as I glanced quickly about.

My sword and padded vest were splattered with the dark blood of the dogs, but there was nothing on my hands. I removed my mask and pivoted on the balls of my feet.

"Peter? Peter, can you hear me?"

He lay still. I shook.

He'd just come back from a year away, and now this? I'd spent hardly any time with him. *No*, I refused to imagine such a loss.

My eyes blurred with tears, but I checked his injuries. Had he broken something? I ran my hands up and down his pant legs, as I'd once seen my father do for a fellow who'd fallen off a horse. I checked his shirtsleeves. All the bones seemed solid. The hem of his pant leg was shredded where a dog had chewed it, but Peter didn't appear to have any bites. I noticed a trickle of blood on his temple, and slid off his fencing mask. The skin was scuffed and bleeding. Had he fallen and knocked his head? Or was it a dog scratch?

What about my foot? Were all three of us tainted with rabies? Were we all doomed to die in madness?

How I wished my father were near.

"Help!" I shouted into the night rain.

Nothing but the distant sound of trains at the nearest rail station, the bray of a mule somewhere, the rustling of rain on spring trees. Then I heard the slow hum of voices very far away. Perhaps a tavern somewhere. There would be people there to help.

First I had to get my friends to safety. I turned toward the courtyard and spotted a barn. I dragged Jillian first, silently pleading that no more dogs were coming to attack. I laid her inside on a pile of clean straw and headed for Peter. That's when I noticed that the narrow street wasn't covered in blood.

It was covered in slippery black oil.

These weren't dogs. Their hacked steel limbs glistened in the rain, silhouetted by the glow of the gaslights. I'd never seen or heard of anything like them. They weren't made of bones and muscles and natural fur. They were made of metal bolts, screws, and artificial fur. These were some sort of mechanical monsters.



"Sir, wake up. There's an emergency! Wake up, sir! The Queen has a toothache!"

The heavy knocking on the doctor's wing of Buckingham Palace roused Dr. James Sycamore, Royal Surgeon to Queen Victoria. He was one of several on the team of royal physicians, but as their prominent head, and trained as both a physician and a surgeon, he was the one who currently lived and traveled with her.

"Thank you, Russett," James called through the door. He sprang to attention. His bare feet hit the cool wooden boards.

"Do you need assistance dressing, sir?" Panic rattled the man's voice.

"I'm fine."

The Queen favored protocol and would expect James to look proper, even at this hour. He slid into waiting clothes he always had ready—pressed shirt, cravat, and jacket.

The servants invariably reacted to the slightest ailment of the royal family as though it were a life-threatening event. However, an infected molar—which James had been watching for weeks—could never be as harrowing as some of their other medical conditions he'd treated in the past two years. A scalded wrist from too-hot tea. Foot surgery. Several high fevers in visiting grandchildren. An unexpected inverted birth. A miscarriage. Mental illness that still no one would acknowledge. Near-fatal malaria from a tour in India. An infected bladder because of which the Queen had to cancel all appointments until her discomfort had left. James, who always took great care not to breach the privacy of these situations, never explained the details to the servants.

He ran a comb through his black hair and turned toward the golden clock on the fireplace. Twenty minutes past two.

Grabbing his general medical bag off the desk beside the velvet drapes, he opened the door to his private sitting room. The manservant

stood waiting to help, looking up at James. Russett, in his sixties, was the shape of an apple. The vest buttons of his dark uniform strained over his girth.

They dashed to the restricted medical rooms across the hall. Russett was breathing like a bear. His lantern lit up the walls of the great medical library, then row upon row of cupboards overflowing with medicines, tools, splints, and the best surgical equipment that money and power could provide.

How much should James take for a toothache?

Too much, as always.

He passed Russett his surgical bag, plus a bag of dental instruments. He added a drug and opium bag. Including the medical bag he'd taken from his bedside, that made four bags in total. Yet they were leaving behind so many—the pediatric ones, the obstetrical, and the traveling satchels he took to Windsor Castle and the summer castle in Balmoral, Scotland. He would toss those over his horse whenever he accompanied the Royals on a hunt, in case of falls or accidental shootings.

At this moment, James and Russett were so overloaded they had to leave the lantern behind.

By God, wouldn't it be easier if the Queen came to him?

But it wasn't his place to say. James strode down the hall at a good clip, the sound of his footsteps dampened by the Persian carpet. Russett waddled behind under the weight of equipment. Wall candelabras lit their way.

Something glittered on the burgundy damask wallpaper.

A Golden Butterfly.

James smiled as he rushed by, always amused to see an invention created by the Royal Gadget Engineer. This one was a large mechanical butterfly whose fluttering wings were painted with twenty-four-karat gold. It collected mosquitoes, spiders, flies, and bugs from the Palace walls and floors and delivered their carcasses to hidden trays emptied by the maids every morning. Two dozen Golden Butterflies roamed the Palace this time of year. In the winter months, when the bugs were fewer, the engineers released half as many.

They passed the hallway that led to Charlotte's chambers. James tilted his head instinctively to listen for signs of trouble, as any parent

would; hearing only silence, he exhaled, content that his daughter was warm and safe.

Royal Surgeon to the Queen, yet you couldn't save your own wife in childbirth.

James tried to shake the thought out of his head. But along with the pleasure and pride he took in his esteemed position in the Queen's court, and in the culture and luxury he was able to provide for his young daughter, the guilt was always there.

His marriage to Beatrice had been arranged by his father. James had liked his wife on the day of their wedding, but on the day of her death he had loved her. What was all that sentiment good for, then? Marriage was for having children, and at thirty-eight he was no longer interested in marriage.

He was, however, interested in arranging Charlotte's.

Two more steps and they were there. His wing of rooms was positioned near the Queen's, for obvious reasons. He passed two whispering royal advisors, three servants milling about the Queen's doors, and finally two guards who surveyed him and his bags. All relaxed at the sight of James.

"How long?" he asked Russett.

The footman slid out his pocket watch. "Only three minutes this time, sir."

"Better than my last."

"Quickest surgeon we've ever had."

In a true emergency, such as an assassination attempt, he would've been here within seconds. There had been several attempts on her life so far, scattered throughout the years before he'd taken this post.

One of the guards gave a light rap on the door and announced, "Dr. Sycamore."

James entered the plush chambers. Thirty feet away, beside a massive four-poster canopied bed, the Queen's personal maids and one of her confidantes, a lady-in-waiting, hovered over her. Two magnificent black-and-white greyhounds lay quietly beside the roaring fireplace. Another dog, a sandy Pekingese, nestled in the bed against a royal leg.

"James," the Queen mumbled through a swollen jaw.

Dressed in a billowing black cotton nightshift buttoned high to the collar, she sank her rounded shoulders into the pillows behind her.

Her gray braid, usually pinned up, fell across her ample bosom. Furrowed lines of pain marred her forehead. One fussing attendant held a cloth to her left lower jaw. The Queen took it from her and shooed the woman to the foot of the bed.

He bowed his head toward the Queen in the proper protocol. Now that she'd spoken to him first, he was allowed to address her.

"Your Majesty. I'm sorry to hear you're in pain."

She spoke as if cotton wadding were stuck in her jowls. "You'd think we were giving birth, from how many attendants we have."

In her public duties, and if she wanted to maintain a distance between herself and others in the room, the Queen often referred to herself as "we" and not "I." She was speaking on behalf of a nation—some even believed she was speaking on behalf of herself and God, as in her God-given right to rule. When she was speaking privately with her family or friends, and usually with James, she used the singular "I."

In any case, given that the Queen was fifty-seven years old and widowed for fourteen years from her beloved Prince Albert, her comment was rather humorous. Indeed, what would the world think if she were again with child? James was the only one in the room, though, who dared to chuckle at her joke.

He placed his bags on her nightstand, motioned for Russett to do the same, then carried on with the Queen. "They say, Ma'am, that dental pain is worse than childbirth."

"That was probably said by a man with a toothache."

She was again making light of the situation. He always enjoyed her quick wit, but having been through nine deliveries herself, the woman was an expert on pain. He bowed his head to acknowledge her suffering, then walked backward to the basin in the corner to wash his hands. This ensured his back was never turned toward the Queen, giving proper respect to the woman who ruled one-quarter of the world's population.

He returned to her side, lowered himself into a brocaded chair, and gently removed the damp silk cloth from her jaw to have a look.

"Anyone not expressly needed here may leave," he said.

There was a shuffling around him as staff and servants curtsied and bowed while they backed out of the room. Soon only he, Russett, and one personal maid—Henrietta with the thick blond plait and gentle hands—remained.

“Russett, please remove the dogs.” James turned to his patient. “Ma’am, I can best control the situation without the animals.” *And some animals spread disease*, he thought, but saying this aloud might insult Her Majesty.

“As you wish,” she murmured.

While Russett took care of the pets, James was very much aware that the door behind him remained slightly open for the guards to protect their Queen. However, he’d come a long way from two years ago, when they insisted upon remaining in the room while he did his examinations. The Queen could stand this annoyance for only two months until she gained full trust in James, and had since banished the guards to the halls.

“It’s that molar I suspected would give you problems, Your Majesty. It’s finally grown rotten. I’m afraid it needs to be extracted.”

She sighed. “Take it out, then.”

“Opium, Ma’am? Or would you prefer chloroform to allow you to sleep?”

“No question. I’d prefer chloroform.”

There it was—the singular “I.” It meant she felt safe and comfortable in his care.

And so he searched through his four wondrous medical bags, rifling through the exquisite instruments, the most expensive and rarest potions and medications that could be bought on any continent, and rendered the monarch of the greatest empire in the world unconscious.

CHAPTER TWO



I had nothing.

No bandages. No tonic to cleanse Jillian’s shoulder or Peter’s head wound as I’d seen my father do. No stethoscope to listen to any heartbeats—and whatever else those hollow tubes were used for. No one to take charge.

Terrified, I crouched in the straw beside my two unconscious friends. Thank God they were both still breathing. My heart pounded as loud as a meat cleaver on a butcher’s block. Could I leave them here, bleeding and alone? Would more dogs come to tear them apart?

If I ran to the streets, would any monsters come after me?

Think.

My tutors consistently told me I had the ability to think clearly with a logical mind. They said it was why I scored perfect percentages on my science and mathematics exams. If it were up to me, I would’ve preferred to go further in my education, but last year my father stopped my studies to pursue what he called more “wifely skills.” Embroidery, etiquette, and how to be a perfect hostess, a perfect wife.

Fat good it did here.

“Jillian.” I shook her gently and pleaded. “Open your eyes, Jillie. If

you could just open your eyes, I promise to curl your hair again just the way you like.”

No reaction. Only the whoosh of my own panicked breathing. I turned to Peter and rocked his arm. “Peter, please. You’ve got to help me get her up. She’s lost a lot of blood. Peter,” I begged, “you promised me a game of dominoes.”

He remained still.

My mind raced for options. Their house was too far away to reach. The Palace was ten times farther. What I had to do was find that tavern and secure help. *Now.*

I jumped up in the dimly lit barn, hearing for the first time how hard the rain was beating on the lopsided roof. It leaked in around the edges and splattered the straw in big blobs.

There were no blankets to cover my friends, but they’d be warm enough. I dragged a sawhorse over to partially block the view of their bodies, on the chance someone evil walked in. I hid our swords and fencing gear in the floorboards, then spotted a jacket hanging on the wall. It looked like a fisherman’s raincoat, old and tattered, with a hood. I shoved my arms through the sleeves and rushed to the barn doors. I bolted two from the inside, but left a side door unlocked so I could get back in.

Running into the downpour, I realized I still hadn’t removed my punctured left boot to inspect my own foot.

My big toe hurt, but I was too scared to inspect it.

The mechanical dogs had rabies symptoms, I believed, but I couldn’t be sure of anything. Could fake dogs with rabies cause the same infection as real ones?

And who on earth could be responsible for constructing such monsters?

Around me, the hacked limbs of the dogs gleamed in the gaslight, their bodies shiny with rain, like glossy icing on a black cake. I hated those dogs. Black oil ran in rivulets down the streets to a nearby grate, into the newly completed sewer system of London. I turned away from it, ran past a warehouse and several blocks to the main street. I saw no one.

Whenever I had snuck out before, we usually stayed in Jillian’s

barn, playing card games and dominoes and talking well into the night, stopping now and again to pat her cow and feed her horse. We practiced dancing and sword fighting there. Last year, Peter had occasionally accompanied us to the Thames to watch the night boats pass by, but I wasn't used to the streets. Now I wondered if my two friends hadn't allowed me to see this side of London to shield me from potential danger. Tonight, *I* had pleaded that we go farther from home, to celebrate Peter's return. This was entirely my fault.

To my supreme happiness, I spotted two men in rags reeling out from a corner. One turned in my direction.

"Sir! Please stop!"

He tilted away, swaying as if his boots had come unglued from the ground, as I'd done so many times playing as a child, holding hands with another and spinning and spinning till we both fell over laughing. The other man stumbled to all fours on the curb.

I was breathless from running as I reached their side. "My friends are hurt. They've been wounded."

"How?" asked the man on his feet. He was older, with a long, untrimmed beard that trapped the rain. His front tooth overlapped his lower lip and wobbled, as if a good bite into a carrot might snap it.

"Dogs. Not real dogs. Man-made ones," I panted. "With rabies. I think."

The man on the ground sneered. He smelled of peat moss and stale beer.

"Please help me." I spun, arms wide, ready to show them where, but they didn't budge. "Please, there's no time to spare."

The man with the jutting tooth wavered, trying to focus on my face. The other hiccupped. I'd never seen poor drunkards before. Rich ones, yes, but not those needing a bath. Their behavior didn't look so different.

"Please," I begged. "You'll be amply rewarded. My father is the Royal Surgeon to Queen Victoria. I live in Buckingham Palace!"

They looked me up and down and blinked at my ragged clothes.

"Aye," the one with the loose tooth finally replied. "And my father was Abraham Lincoln." He patted his pockets as if looking for something. "Now where did I put me keys to the White House?"

His friend howled with laughter.

I wilted. They weren't going to help.

"Where are your doctors?" I shouted, looking frantically at the stone factories and shacks. "Which doors? Which houses?"

This produced more laughter. Why? My father held many meetings of physicians and surgeons—I knew because I organized tea and biscuits at every one—so I was well aware London had a great many doctors.

"Are you daft?" one asked.

"Such rubbish," said the other.

With a gasp of disgust, I left the laughing jackals. I ran round the corner in the direction from which they'd come. Perhaps the tavern was there.

I spotted two young women in capes entering an alley. Finally, kind-hearted women! I chased after them. One turned my way.

"Miss?" I asked, breathless.

She was oddly made up with cosmetics, rouge and lip color. Her eyes were rimmed with kohl, but due to the rain, dark lines were weeping down her pale and bony cheeks.

"Are you ill?" I turned to her plumper friend. "Are you taking her to seek help?" I thanked my lucky stars I'd run into them. We could go together.

"Mind your business," snapped the plumper one. "Get off our corner!"

Then the pale one started coughing and hacking so hard her cape shook.

"But you're obviously unwell."

"You stupid cow!" The weak one snarled at me and I jumped, hurrying down the street, confused as to why they'd be so angry and why they weren't seeking help. There were free clinics here. I'd heard my father and his colleagues talk of it only yesterday.

When I looked up again, a red sign with painted black letters announced THE BULL AND TALE. The hum of voices and banging of a piano filled my ears. I rushed inside. Heat from the fireplace and from the bodies of drinking men warmed me. That's when I realized what those two women were.

Streetwalkers.

I'd once overheard the Palace maids gossiping about those types.

Women who sold themselves for . . . for all sorts of vulgar acts with men they didn't know.

Had I actually spoken to a prostitute? *Get off our corner!*

They thought that I . . . I closed my eyes for a moment and swayed.

"Miss? Are you all right? I say, miss, what can I 'elp you with?"

Blinking, I looked into the round, clean face of a heavysset young lady. She had long, curly brown hair and wore a barmaid's tunic over her blouse and floor-length skirt. Had she been speaking to me for long?

"I need assistance," I mumbled.

"With what?" She was Irish. "Do you wanna drink?"

"No, please no."

"Matilda!" A customer, a man dressed in working clothes and with a bulbous red nose, flagged her from the other end of the long, winding bar. She turned to look, but the bartender got to him first and refilled his mug of ale.

Matilda turned to me once more. "You speak different."

"Do I?" I didn't want to sound too high-and-mighty again by declaring who my father was and where I lived. Why should anyone believe me? And any mention of mechanical dogs might have her laughing in my face, in similar fashion to those two men in the street.

"What can I fetch you?"

"I need a physician."

"You're hurt?" She looked me over, holding up a tray of empty beer glasses.

I shook my head.

"You seem a bit stunned. You're not from around 'ere, are you, miss?"

I shook my head again.

She scoffed. "There's no physicians in this place."

"My friends need help." My eyes stung from the bright wall lantern. "They've been injured—"

She held up a hand to stop me. "I don't wish to know."

Oh. I was momentarily startled. "Is there a hospital?" The rich didn't go to hospitals. Doctors came to the rich. But for the poor . . .

"Far away. But it's a true place of misery. You're forced to stay for

weeks and sometimes leave sicker than arrivin'. Even so, to be admitted you have to prove you are worthy of the charity."

With a sinking feeling, I scanned the drinking men. "Is there anyone nearby with medical knowledge? Apothecary? Nurse? Midwife?"

Matilda studied me for a moment. "No one nearby. No one this time of night." Crackling light from the fireplace spilled over her tunic. For the first time, I noticed she had a bump underneath her clothing. Was she with child? She had a full bosom, too, and looked matronly, despite her youth.

She noticed me watching her and said softly, "I delivered three days ago."

I thought she was joking. I thought surely a woman doesn't deliver a baby and come back to work three days later, if not sooner. Where was her child? Who was looking after it? The confusion must've registered on my face.

"I'm tellin' you the truth because you look like you've been through a war."

Yes, my skirts were sopping wet and stained with black oil, and Lord only knew what my face and hair looked like. "Who helped you?" I pleaded. "Who helped you deliver your baby?"

"My sister was my midwife. She's lookin' after Sara now."

Relief flooded through me. Finally, someone older with experience who could help me bandage Jillian and know what to do with rabies.

"She's twelve," Matilda added.

"Twelve years of age?"

Matilda nodded. "Five years younger than me. She doesn't know anything. She can't help you."

I swallowed hard. That made Matilda seventeen. One year older than me. Yet she had a newborn baby. "There . . . there are free clinics in this area somewhere. I've heard of them. Where?" I swiveled my shoulders toward the windows. "Could you point me?"

"Free clinics?" Her eyes narrowed. "Yea, there was a free clinic 'ere last week. Everyone was excited. Line was three days deep. Slept in the streets, we did."

"What happened?"

“It was open for six hours. Said that’s all they could do that day, but they’d be back in another two months.”

“But how do you cope with illness here?” My voice crackled with frustration.

“We cross our fingers.”

I stared at her, and at the faces of the men who were starting to bob around her, leering at me with interest.

My mission was useless, but perhaps I could still manage something from it. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Could you please give me some towels to mop the blood? A tablecloth? Anything.”

“You can pay?”

“No.” I had no money in my pockets. I hadn’t needed it with Jillian and Peter.

“If I did that,” she said, “I’d lose my employment. Me and my baby and sister would be out on the street come mornin’. You see the man behind the bar? He owns this place, and I’ve done enough talkin’.”

“Matilda.” A big man with muttonchop whiskers snapped at her from behind the bar. Matilda went racing back to work, but when her boss looked away, she stepped toward me again.

Her dark eyes glistened with sympathy. She tossed me the towel from her shoulder, then spun back to her tables.

I grabbed the cloth and ran out the door. I escaped the leering men, running and running and running through the rain until I was back at the barn. I recalled the large elm on the corner and the low fieldstone wall beside the barn, so I knew I was in the right spot. But the remains of the dogs were gone.

I looked about. Who could have taken them? The black oil had drained into the sewer and the rain had washed away our tracks. Then I panicked that Jillian and Peter would be gone, too.

I dashed in the side door. They were lying on the straw, still unconscious.

Whoever had removed the dogs didn’t realize my friends were here. Otherwise, wouldn’t they have tried to question them? Or . . . or perhaps tried to do them in for good? But then who could guess what went on in the minds of such criminals. I was only grateful that Jillian’s bleeding had stopped and that both she and Peter were breath-

ing steadily. I looped Matilda's towel across Jillian's shoulder for extra support.

Shivering to my boots, I removed the raincoat and hung it on a nail. It was dripping wet and only made me colder. I crouched on the straw beside Peter to warm up, feeling comforted by his nearness if only for a moment till I could think of a new plan. My bones dragged heavy with exhaustion. I'd come back to my friends as empty-handed as I'd left. How useless was I? I couldn't picture Peter ever coming back empty-handed. He always took care of everyone.

There was no choice; I had to go to their mother. Their house was far away, perhaps a mile, but it was the only option left. I could try to contact the police. I'd read in my father's newspapers that bobbies patrolled these neighborhoods, though I hadn't come across any. How was I to find one?

I should've asked Matilda. I should've done so much more.

Leaning against the stall boards with my knees pulled up to my face, I tried to remember the path we'd taken from Peter and Jillian's small barn to get here. My head slumped with weariness. Was it the right or left alley from the main street?



A shouting voice startled me. Light seeped into the barn. Oh, no, I'd fallen asleep!

"Jillian!" boomed the deep male voice again. "Peter!"

Someone was calling from outside. With a quick look at my unconscious friends, I seized the raincoat and ran into the street. My hood protected me from the cold, damp morning. It had stopped raining, and the sun broke through some spots in the clouds. The place had come alive in the couple of hours I'd slept. There were factory workers heading to work, children walking to school, a shopkeeper opening his door across the way, and two men with a cart selling fresh bread to a line of customers.

These were decent people. Hardworking people I could relate to.

In the middle of all the commotion stood a man dressed in woolen overalls and a big gray hat, shouting, "Jillian! Peter!"

I didn't recognize him. He was roughly ten years older than me, with large, callused hands. Jillian and Peter's father had passed away

long ago, so this man was an uncle, perhaps, or an older cousin. How many others were looking for them?

I lurched forward and held up a hand to get his attention, but no words came. I lowered my arm. Something stopped me from telling the full story—I feared that Peter and Jillian’s mother might lose her employment at the royal stables if it became known that I had snuck out last night in her wagon. That all this trouble we three had gotten into would rest on her.

So I walked by him as if I were marching to work, too, then turned about. “I saw a young couple enter that barn. You might want to have a look.”

“That one, miss?” He had a square, friendly face.

I nodded.

“Could you show me?”

“I’ll—I’ll be late for the factory.” I marched on as if I had purpose, adding, “You’ll want to know, I heard of dogs in the area last night. Demented dogs with rabies.”

His mouth lost its color. “The saints be still.”

I could only hope that he’d do all he could for Jillian and Peter. I raced off toward the Palace, fully intending to seek the help of my father.

My stomach growled. My forehead pounded. My legs felt like heavy cement sacks. Dizziness overtook me and I stumbled against a young boy.

“Miss? You feelin’ all right?”

He was ten or eleven, yawning and half asleep himself. He scratched at a red rash on his wrist. A younger brother tagged along beside him. Both were blond, with a boxful of freckles scattered on their cheeks.

I tried to focus. My toes were numb—I hoped only from the cold. I had to find a place to wash my injured foot soon. “I’ll—I’ll be fine. You go along to school.”

“We’re not on our way to school, miss.”

“But all these children.” A dozen in my view. “There must be a grammar school nearby.”

He yawned again. “No, ma’am, we’re headin’ to the factories.”

Factories? My lashes fluttered. Yes, right. I’d often skimmed my

father's newspapers when he thought I was tossing them out—*The Times* and *The Morning Post*. I knew young children of the lower classes worked. They went to mills and shops and farms and factories rather than their studies. Laws had been passed that prevented children younger than nine from working. I'd also read of other things—horrible crimes, murders and robberies, slum landlords and diseases.

I knew all of this intellectually, but I had never seen it in person. I had never felt the blow to my heart as I did now.

His younger brother chased after a frog that hopped from the cobbles to the grass, then turned and smiled timidly at me. He had a terrible red rash on his jaw, similar to the one on his brother's wrist. The younger boy's handsome front teeth looked as though they'd only just grown in and hadn't quite reached their full potential yet. How could someone with such young teeth be headed to work? I watched the brothers enter the side door of the leather mill across the street, followed by two slightly older girls, an occasional adult, and more children.

I weaved a crooked path in the street. Dizzy again, I fell to one knee. I stumbled back up, weak and worried how on earth I would make it home.

What I was seeing was overwhelming, completely different from the life I knew.

The sobs came without control. My father hated it when that happened, so I didn't let it happen very often.

"Do grow up, Charlotte," he'd say gently. "Tears are for children."

But I couldn't stop myself. I sobbed and cried like the naive, stupid girl I was. I cried for the yawning boy and his frog-chasing younger brother who would never open the pages of a book. I cried that Matilda had thrown me a towel at the risk of losing everything. I cried that last year at the Christmas luncheon, the Queen had accidentally nicked her finger with a table knife and I had counted eleven people jumping to help her, including my father. I cried for the cruelty of the person who'd developed the mechanical dogs, and that Jillian and Peter and I might now have rabies.

What kind of world did I live in?

I cried for my London.