

Excerpt from  
THE INCREDIBLE CHARLOTTE SYCAMORE AND THE SECRET TRAPS

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*Chapter One*

“Charlotte, your father would like to see you hanged.”

Polly Springfield, my maid and closest friend in the castle, said this in a terrified whisper as she entered my chambers.

Gooseflesh rose on the back of my neck. My lips went dry. “Did he say this?”

“I heard him myself with Her Majesty’s guards, only a moment ago. Oh, Charlotte, they’re settin’ secret traps about the palaces to catch you.”

“This is worse than I ever thought.” I slumped against my sofa, my long skirt crumpling at my ankles. I gripped my screwdriver in one hand and the secret invention I was working on in the other. To most people, it simply looked like a silver button with a long shank. But how could I be excited about it now? Polly, in uniform, perched on a cushioned chair. Summer morning light spilled into my sitting room. It was horrid being stuck here in Windsor Castle, twenty miles from London and everything I considered home.

“My own father wishes to see me dead.”

“But he doesn’t know it’s you he’s lookin’ for,” said Polly, her golden hair tucked neatly into her mop cap. “He thinks he’s lookin’ for a man! A spy who’s stealin’ medicine and equipment from the Queen to treat the poor.”

That much was true. No one knew who I was, but people had nicknamed me the Robin Hood Surgeon. I didn’t deserve the title. I was practicing medicine *accidentally*. I had only happened to be in the right place at a time when people had needed medical help. Since I’d read many of my father’s medical textbooks and watched him practice for years, I knew how to help them. My father, Dr. James Sycamore, private surgeon to Queen Victoria, was taking it personally. He believed a thief was loose in the city, stealing *his* supplies and mocking *him*.

I’m a sixteen-year-old girl who’s mocking no one. I’m as normal as anyone my age.

Why, I could list how normal I am off the top of my head:

1. I look like any other young person. I have long black hair and constantly battle these rubbish pimples.
2. I’d rather spend time with my friends than be alone.
3. I’m excited about training my new puppy.

4. I fancy shopping at the market.
5. And I adore the feeling of home.

The only unusual thing about me is my interest in medicine. But my father and his circle would never allow me to become a doctor because I'm a girl. Sometimes I wonder if they're right. Who am I to think I could be as brave and as smart as my father?

If I had a mother, she might understand me better. She might have noticed that over the past few years, I always agreed to travel with my father in his work, rarely arguing, no matter how many times he told me we were moving again and that I had to say goodbye to newly made friends. But this time I craved to shout and argue.

"He only wants the best for you, Charlotte," Polly insisted as she watched me work the screwdriver again on the back of the button. I gave her a look. She added, "I mean other than wishin' to see you hanged. He simply wants you to marry well and learn to manage a household."

"I would rather be the royal mouse-catcher."

"*What?*"

"At least there's adventure in that."

"Blimey, Charlotte, that's nonsense." Polly rose and dusted another invention of mine. Slim daggers disguised as clothespins. One snapped and nearly sliced her finger. "Ah!"

"Careful. I can't get those working properly." Polly had become such a trusted friend in the two months since she'd been working here. Without her, I'd go stark raving mad being in the company of all these rule-loving adults. Polly was the one who helped me sneak out of Buckingham Palace after midnight, wore disguises with me, and shared stories about handsome boys. She was also very practical.

"Is your secret button nearly finished?" She moved on to the safety of straightening pillows.

"Almost. Just have to make another matching partner." The idea was to sew one into the inside of your jacket, sew the other inside a friend's, and when separated, you could communicate with each other by pressing on them. Either button would vibrate in the other person's jacket. If I had the time I intended to make several, one for each of my friends.

"Don't you miss them?" I asked. "Don't you wonder what they're doing? Jillian and Benjamin and...and Peter?" I missed them so terribly, it felt like a heavy brick was leaning on my heart. Seventeen days ago, after a foiled assassination attempt on the Queen, the royal advisors had whisked Her Majesty and her court here to Windsor Castle for her protection. (I mean, it happened so quickly I didn't have the opportunity to say

good-bye to my friends!) None of the adults would ever believe it had been me and my friends who had *stopped* the assassins. No one should be questioning *my* loyalty.

“Well, yes, I do miss talkin’ to them, and laughin’ the way we do,” Polly whispered with a smile. “The saints be blessed, all’s been quiet here for these seventeen days. There don’t seem to be any other assassins. They’ve all been caught, put to trial, and hanged.”

“Exactly my point. Why can’t we return to the city? Surely the Queen is safe now.”

Polly began tidying one side of the room while I grew exasperated with the screw that would not tighten. I pinched and pinched and finally tossed the screwdriver and button into a drawer with the others. I walked to the tall windows and scooped my nightclothes from the floor. I was a rather messy person, but didn’t that prove again how normal I was?

I peered out of the windowpanes. Three golden, mechanical owls soared in perfect unison to sit on my ledge. The iron birds were breathtakingly beautiful. Their six-foot wings sparkled with pure gold feathers. They’d been created by the Royal Gadget Engineers and their duty was to frighten away any pigeons that might build nests and create a mess on the castle walls.

“Ack!” shrieked Polly behind me. “Those owls are huge!”

“They won’t harm you.”

I picked up a golden feather that I’d been working on. A few of the owl’s feathers had fallen out over the past couple of weeks on my ledge, and I had retrieved and modified them.

“What’s that?” asked Polly.

“A feather I made into a miniature beacon.” I slowly cranked open the window and inserted it into an owl’s wing.

The owl ruffled its plumage, but didn’t fuss with the new feather. Delighted, I added two other feather-shaped beacons to the two other birds.

Success! They were imperceptible. Hopefully if I ever got my secret button working, it could also be used to communicate and call these owls. I wasn’t sure for what exactly, but a girl never knew when a trusted mechanical owl might come in handy.

“I don’t know how you think o’ these things,” said Polly, getting back to her work.

I looked down at the guards patrolling the courtyards and cliffs. Loneliness chilled my heart. What did the Queen and her stuffy advisors care about me? What did my father care what it was like to be uprooted with him every time the Queen traveled?

It was no use talking to adults.

I tucked away my nightclothes and turned to Polly, who was dusting the fireplace mantel. I hesitated to ask the next question for fear of the answers, but knew I must.

“What sort of traps is my father setting?”

“I didn’t hear specifics, I’m afraid.” Polly pulled out a pocket-handkerchief and sniffled into it. “Sorry, but it’s so frightenin’, I can’t keep from blatherin’.”

I swallowed past my dry throat. “I shall have to be extra cautious then.”

Polly scowled. “Don’t you fear for your life?”

“What sort of life is it when I can’t choose my own direction?”

“Please, I beg of you, stop this beastly mess. You don’t need to give away any more of the Queen’s supplies. You don’t need to learn medicine – ”

“It’s not that I’m trying, it just happens – ”

“But you’re givin’ me turnscrew nights – ”

A bang on the door startled us. We both swung round.

Polly, fourteen years of age and two years younger than me, adjusted the cap on her peach-colored hair and raced out to answer. “Who is it please?”

She pulled open the door. Her posture went rigid.

My father’s voice bellowed from behind the slab, alarming me as well. “I wish to speak to my daughter.”

Polly allowed him entrance and he stepped inside, dressed in a formal frock coat, pressed shirt and tie.

“Yes, sir?” I went to greet him. My heart was pounding from fear that he was here to snatch me and give me to the Queen’s guards.

He towered over me, same black hair I had, same curled lock on his forehead. Except he was twice as heavy, and a hundred times more powerful in the royal household.

This was the man who would see me dead.

My throat constricted. I didn’t dare look at Polly for fear of giving away my anguish.

My father and I used to get on so well. There was a time when I could tell him anything and he would understand. But something had happened when he thought I had reached marriageable age. He wished to train me to become a wife to someone suitable, and there was something else inexplicable, perhaps to do with my becoming a woman and his fear for my future.

I still loved him, but he might never know how much. He'd taught me how to swim and hold my breath under water. How to tell the difference between a turtle dove and a pigeon. He'd taught me how to sword fight before others made him stop. He'd taught me to value myself and my own beliefs. But the one thing he didn't teach me, would never teach me, was how to do what he did.

Others might call me the Robin Hood Surgeon, but he'd given me his own nickname: the Queen's Thief. Sadly, if they ever caught me, he would surely walk the gallows beside me to the hangman's noose. Everyone in Her Majesty's court would hold my father accountable for my treason to the Queen.

Some would say that I had two identities. It was something I grappled with. Who was I and who did I wish to be?

"Pack your things, Charlotte," he rumbled. "We're returning to London."

*Oh.* How unexpected.

A ripple of relief met my lips.

I would see Peter. I would be with all of my friends. I looked discreetly at Polly. She was frowning. I knew what she was thinking, but I could not agree.

*Stop this beastly mess.*

## ***Chapter Two***

Peter Moreley wondered what the future held for him the following evening, as he tossed another shovel filled with dung. Surely, not more dung! Didn't anyone here at Buckingham Palace realize? He wished to be a Scotland Yard detective!

But more than that, he thought, peering at the riches around him, the fine-bred horses, glittering coaches and shiny leather saddles, he wished to look after his sister and mother financially. Accepting a position here in the Royal Mews was the only way he could properly do that. But only until he was old enough to apply to the Metropolitan Police. He was seventeen; he needed one more year. Until then, he would protect his sister, mother and their home – ramshackle as it was – in the East End of London. Most people called it the slums, but that label rankled him.

Everything seemed to be rankling him lately. Ever since Charlotte had left.

“What do you think of your new position?” His twin sister Jillian passed by him. She gripped a cleaning cloth. She was officially the helper of a helper of a carriage cleaner for the Queen’s coaches.

She was smiling, openly pleased at the task he’d been given.

But he wished to be so much more than a laborer and servant. Still, looking at her freckles, braided auburn hair, and worn white blouse, no one would guess that part of her shoulder was missing and would never be whole. Peter cursed the mechanical dogs for mauling her, and twisted with guilt that he’d survived with only a few scars on his ankle. It had happened nearly a month ago. Charlotte had been bitten, too, but as far as he’d heard, her toes had healed.

He tried to muster enthusiasm for the job, but his voice sounded flat. “They’ve given me a grand opportunity.”

“Mother and I think so, too,” Jillian gushed. “It was wonderful of them to hire you on.”

He bristled. “Only until I become a bobby.”

“Of course, yes, that goes without saying. You’ll make a fine police officer. But if you should find something else here, another position that you fancy – ”

“That *won’t* happen,” he insisted. He didn’t wish to be what others saw him as. He wished to set his own direction in life.

“All right, all right. Keep your hair on.” She turned around so quickly, she bumped into the mechanical walking-and-talking dictionary.

“Par-on me, Miss Jillian,” the iron talkbox rattled. “Par-on me.”

“He’s missin’ his d’s again.” Benjamin Ford followed with an oil can and stood beside Jillian. He was a year younger than Peter, taller and skinnier, and a good friend. “Hold still Snowson,” said Benjamin, “while I grease your throat.”

“Yessss,” the machine rattled, stuck on the s. He was a silver metal cube with hundreds of colorful tattoos etched into his metallic skin. He’d been brilliantly developed by the Royal Gadget Engineer, Mr. Harold Snow. The cube was four feet tall with a bulbous head, blinking eyes made of two swirling marbles, two cylindrical pivoting arms, a torso, and rolling legs. His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, had ribbed the inventor Mr. Snow by calling the iron talkbox his son, hence the name Snowson had stuck.

Peter didn’t trust the artificial talker, but others liked him.

He had his limited uses.

For one, he was an expert speller. Mr. Snow had programmed him with thousands of words, mostly for the children of the working staff to keep up with their vocabulary lessons. For another, he was a rudimentary order-taker and could follow simple commands.

Benjamin tilted the iron head off its socket, squirted the tongue area with oil, then repositioned it. “Try it now.”

“At your service, Mr. Benjamin.” The iron talkbox had a voice that rattled like a deep bullfrog, void of emotion.

Benjamin added with a sense of humor, “Say ‘hey diddle diddle’.”

“I do not understand these words. Diddle is not in my dictionary.”

Jillian laughed and patted the iron shoulders. “It’s all right, you said the d’s properly.”

She took the clockwork broom that was leaning against the stall and turned it on. Very neatly, the iron broom made its way down the cement floor, sweeping the straw bristles. Snowson followed with a pan and collected it.

Jillian was becoming keen with mechanics and gadgets.

“Why can’t the Gadget Engineers invent something to shovel this blasted dung?” Peter complained. He lifted his shovel again and heaved.

“Because there needs to be a human touch round the Queen’s horses.” Benjamin, a groomer’s helper in the Royal Mews, knew every detail of fitting saddles, shoeing horses, and the differentiating between breeds. But even with all his knowledge, Benjamin was not allowed to touch the expensive horses. “Her Majesty would never allow mechanical contraptions near her Thoroughbreds an’ the Windsor Greys.”

Peter grumbled. “So I’m the lucky one.” He wasn’t allowed to approach the prize horses, either, for he didn’t have enough experience. Except for shoveling. He manoeuvred round a fine-looking mare that was obviously pregnant.

Benjamin looked as though he wanted to pat the mare on the nose, but duty restrained him. “And the Queen is especially protective of Hanna, here.”

“I hear she’s worth a fortune,” breathed Jillian. “Why so much more than the others?”

The mare stirred and chomped her oats. She had a brown coat and sleek black mane, lively eyes, and sloping shoulders with pronounced withers. And a very round middle.

“Hanna is a remarkable breed,” said Benjamin. “A Hanoverian. Loyal, strong, and brave. They’re trained for the military, some for fox hunts, or to draw elegant coaches. Hanna’s done all of these things. She was bred with a stallion that’s a champion racehorse at Ascot. He’s the Queen’s most expensive Thoroughbred.”

“My,” said Jillian with amazement.

Benjamin added, “When Hanna’s foal is born, it’s sure to be extra tough, courageous, and athletic. Rumor is that the Queen has already received enormous offers to buy it, but she’s refused.”

Peter whistled. He figured that this one foal was worth more than all the houses in the East End together.

Jillian tipped her head at the mare in the stall next to them that was quietly inspecting her feed. She was a speckled gray horse with fine markings and lean muscular build. “I rather fancy Rapunzel. She’s not worth as much, but she’s calm and quiet – ”

“And going half-blind,” Benjamin whispered. “She’s lost her peripheral vision.”

“Oh, no,” said Jillian. “What will happen to her?”

“No one in the Mews seems to have noticed yet. I noticed only this morning when she was out in the paddock, and haven’t the heart to tell anyone. In the event they...” Benjamin didn’t finish his sentence.

*Destroy her*, Peter thought with alarm. “You could be wrong about her vision.”

Benjamin shrugged. “Doubt it.”

“If it’s true, Charlotte will notice,” said Jillian. “Rapunzel is her favorite riding horse.”

“Maybe they’ll let the horse be,” whispered Peter.

The pregnant mare, ten feet away in the other stall, whinnied as though communicating with Rapunzel, and Rapunzel put her mouth into the feed and began eating. Had Hanna told Rapunzel that it was safe to lower her head? Nah, thought Peter. *Horses can’t communicate with each other.*

Peter peered through the open doors. Evening light spilled into the courtyard outside. People were letting off for the day. Something was different, though. Some folks were scrambling past, faster than usual. Peter liked to notice details; it gave him the opportunity to practice his detective skills.

“What is it?” he asked of two passing milkmaids.



“The Queen! The Queen returns!”

Jillian gasped. “Charlotte will be with them.”

“Hmm,” said Benjamin, always the serious one.

“Right,” muttered Peter, caught off-guard by the news.

“Aren’t you excited?” Jillian asked. “We’ll get to see Charlotte.”

Peter nodded but focused on lifting another sopping shovel. He wasn’t very proud to be seen doing this.

And Charlotte *was* engaged to someone else.

He tried to block her from his mind. It was difficult, but the only thing that could distract him was if he thought of his brighter future. He wondered what things he would be learning in his first year at Scotland Yard. Would it be self-defense with clubs and handguns? Perhaps how to use horses to chase criminals? Or if he was fortunate, learning how to properly light a dynamite keg? Yes, Scotland Yard was a much better topic to consider than the Queen and all the people of her court.

People who didn’t know – or care, he thought with a wince – that he existed.

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