

Episode 9

Didi tried not to show her disappointment when Charlie eagerly reached for her hand instead, of kissing her. There was plenty of time.

He led her up the inner staircase to the main floor. She had never been to this particular theater and her first glance inside, as he took a playbill from the usher, was of an older, intimate theater that pre-dated the revolution of electricity. The red velvet seats were arranged in circular tiers around the stage and a huge decorative disk holding vast chandeliers was set into the center of the ceiling. Soft sconce lights hung from the balconies producing a warm glow.

Leading the way, her hand still in his, he shuffled along a row of the upper balcony to a pair of seats centered on the stage. When they were settled, he reached an arm around her, his warm fingers against her skin and she was grateful she had worn a strappy gown. The other hand found hers and she intertwined her fingers with his.

"Have you heard about this play?" he asked.

"A little. Strangers are stranded at a train station that is reported to be haunted."

"That's right. The station master encourages them to leave but they refuse, preferring to stay for the night and take the early train. I think it is rather suspenseful."

An excuse to hold her tight? She hoped so.

"Jolly good! I like a little tension," she replied.

"Do you have plans for Christmas?"

Had she heard him correctly? He had been looking at the stage when he said it.

"Christmas? Not really. I'll just be at home with Mummy, Daddy and Granny like usual...unless I get a better offer."

He snapped his head to look at her. What was that expression in his eyes? *Hope?*

"My parents are visiting family in Scotland and I really don't want to go..."

She turned in her seat almost bouncing. "Then you must come to us! Mummy would love to see you!"

"I wouldn't want to impose," he began.

"Charlie! Of course, you wouldn't be an imposition. Do come!"

She thought she saw his shoulders relax.

"If you insist," he said with that heart-stopping smile. "But I will wait for you to check with your mother before I make plans."

"Deal!" she said as the lights went down.

At intermission, he was still holding her hand.

"Shall we?" he asked.

He slid his arm from her shoulder as she stood, and they made their way to the stairs.

"What do you think of it so far?" he asked.

"I'm finding it very interesting. People from so many walks of life thrown together by circumstances. And the threat that something terrible is going to happen keeps the tension bubbling. I was on the edge of my seat."

"Cocktail?"

"Actually, I'd prefer some white wine," she replied. She found cocktails much too strong.

He found a tall table in a corner and left her there while he went to the bar. She watched him stride across the marble tile and catch the bartender's attention then flash her a fabulous smile. As much as she was trying to rein in her emotions she felt herself falling headlong as she returned the smile.

He turned to give his order and as Didi watched, a curvy brunette in a devastatingly low-cut gown, shrieked then threw her arms around Charlie, planting a crushing kiss on his lips.

The perfect dive into love halted mid-air as an icy hand gripped Didi's heart.

When the voluptuous brunette came up for air, Charlie cast a look of abject horror across the room to Didi, lipstick smudged on his mouth. It was true that he had been rigid during the whole exercise, but disappointment threatened to overwhelm her.

The dark-haired beauty followed his gaze and slapped a hand across her ruby red mouth. She said something to Charlie who began to walk toward Didi with the girl in his wake. She tottered across the floor with such speed that she reached Didi first and crushed her into a bear hug while yelling, "I am sooooo sorry! I had no idea Charlie was here with someone. Can you forgive me?"

An American.

Stunned, Didi was speechless.

"Didi, meet Margot Frobisher, a very old friend."

Didi did not greet any of *her* old male friends that way.

“Shucks, honey!” cried Margot holding up her palms as if in surrender. “My deepest apologies.”

“Margot and I met on one of my travels. I haven’t seen her for two years,” explained Charlie.

“Three, darling,” corrected Margot, reaching for Didi’s hands. “Please say you forgive me. I was just so thrilled to see Charlie again.”

“Of course,” said Didi, trying to create an expression of acceptance. At least Margot wasn’t a current flame as she had feared.

“I’m over for a wedding and thought I’d take in a show,” Margot explained. “I’m here with my sister.” She flicked a hand behind her to a tall, thin girl with glasses and an underbite.

A waiter brought over their drinks and Didi took a slug.

“I won’t spoil your date,” Margot said, already walking away. “But let’s get together, Charlie.”

They both watched as she swung her hips with every step toward her invisible sister.

Charlie turned to Didi, pursing his lips, eyes wide with anxiety.

A feeling started to tickle way down in her stomach and burst out of her mouth as an energetic giggle.

Charlie’s face softened and he began to laugh too.

“It was like I was being sucked by an octopus,” he managed to say between waves of laughter. “I couldn’t breathe and all I could think about was you watching.” Tears ran down his cheeks.

“Here,” she chuckled, handing him a handkerchief from her clutch and wiping his mouth.

“That is a lot of lipstick.” He took the hankie and wiped a few more times until he was all cleaned up.

“I’d much rather it was your lipstick on me,” he murmured into her ear.