

HAWTHORNE HOUSE

A NOBLE
MASQUERADE



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To the Creator,
who has enough depth to make each of us in His image
and yet still make us uniquely individual.

Genesis 1:27



And to Jacob,
who is incredible enough to inspire each
of my heroes in some small way.

Prologue

HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1800

It is never a happy day when an eight-year-old girl's cheesecake lands in the dirt, and she certainly doesn't take kindly to the laughing little boy who put it there.

Fat tears welled up in Lady Miranda Hawthorne's eyes as she stared at the cake now resting forlornly on the ground. Her little hands curled into angry fists at her sides.

"You're a cad, Henry Lampton!" Miranda scooped the cake from the ground and hurled it at the laughing boy, her cheeks wet with tears. There was something satisfying about seeing the creamy dessert smear across his shirt and the smile fall from his face.

Miranda didn't have long to relish her revenge because her mother appeared to lead her away from the party. Mother didn't say a word until the door closed behind them, shutting them into her study.

"Miranda, a lady never expresses her disappointment in public." Mother's admonition was gentle but firm, as it always was.

Even though she knew her mother meant well, Miranda

shuddered every time she heard the words, “*Miranda, a lady never . . .*” Occasionally it was “*Miranda, a lady always . . .*” but even then it was something like “*Miranda, a lady always pays attention to her guests, even when she finds them boring.*”

Miranda knew better than to speak as her mother lectured. Every time she tried to defend herself, it only made the torture last longer. So she waited until her mother dismissed her.

Instead of returning to the party, however, she ran to her room and threw herself on the bed, punching the pillow at the unfairness of it all.

A white piece of paper on the table by the bed caught her attention. The latest letter from her brother was sure to be more interesting than making a mental list of all the things Mother’s lady rules kept her from doing.

When Griffith had left for school two years ago, Mother decided writing to him would be an excellent way for Miranda to practice her penmanship. The first letters had been little more than her name and a sentence about her favorite doll, but over time she and her brother had grown quite close.

Their correspondence had the added benefit of giving Miranda a place to work out her frustrations with her mother.

With anticipation she broke the seal, anxious to hear about her eldest brother’s latest exploits.

My dearest sister,

I hope this letter finds you well. Your last letter was long enough to make me very thankful to be a duke. Paying to post that much paper would be costly. Perhaps next time you are bored in church you won’t try to kick down the walls of the pew.

Miranda frowned. What else was she supposed to do? The sermon had been supremely boring that day, and Mother had

warned her the week before that a lady never sleeps in church. Making Miranda sit still in a chair for an extra hour that afternoon was excessive punishment.

Marsh managed to help us avoid a group of older boys intent on making us do their chores. I continue to be grateful that God provided another young man of high rank here. He's a bit rough around the edges, despite inheriting his ducal title as a child. Almost as bad at being a gentleman as you are at being a lady.

Sticking her tongue out at a piece of paper was the definition of useless, but it made Miranda feel better anyway. No doubt Griffith was doing his best to refine the rough edges of his friend. Their beloved father had taught Griffith well before dying tragically three years ago.

I know it is difficult, but do work harder to control yourself. Mother was beside herself with worry when she found you rolling on the floor laughing over a book you were reading.

The memory brought a curve to Miranda's lips. It had been a very funny book.

One day, Miranda, you'll thank Mother for training you young. It would be helpful if you would try to apply her teachings.

Did he think she didn't try—that she enjoyed being set in the blue velvet chair beside her mother's desk and lectured about ladylike behavior?

Miranda bounced off her bed and crossed to the writing desk under the window. Snatching a quill and paper, she considered

how to phrase today's cake incident in a way that Griffith would understand.

She tried to behave. She really did. But how did one contain emotions when they felt happy or sad or scared? Didn't those feelings have to go somewhere?

It was like those stories Griffith was always telling about his friend. Marshington understood that sometimes one had to go around the rules in order to make things happen. Like the time he left the window open so the fifth-year boys' papers would blow everywhere. Cleaning up the mess had made the older boys miss practice that day, and Marshington and Griffith had finally gotten to play cricket without getting balls thrown at their heads.

Marshington would have done more than throw the dirty cake at Henry. He'd have found a way to make the boy get her a new slice. Maybe even an entire new cake.

He'd have saved her instead of lecturing her. Just like he'd saved Griffith from being tortured right out of school his first month there.

An idea took form in her head.

Did she dare?

She dipped the quill in the ink but didn't press it to the paper. It floated for long moments, until a drop of ink dislodged itself to splatter on the pristine surface. With a deep breath, she placed the nib on the paper and wrote.

Dear Marshington,

It was shocking, even scandalous, which made it exciting. Freeing. A small act of rebellion away from the eyes of her well-meaning mother, away from the censuring of her perfect elder brother.

She'd never send it, of course. A lady never posted letters

to an unrelated male. But the very writing of his name made her feel dangerous.

As she scribbled the story of the cake incident, with little care for proper wording and no thought to correct penmanship, something unexpected happened. She felt calm. And she began to see that maybe—*maybe*—her mother had a point.

Throwing cake at Henry hadn't done her any good.

But maybe writing to her brother's best friend would.



Chapter 1

HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND
AUTUMN 1812

Lady Miranda Hawthorne would support her sister tonight, even if it killed her. Judging by the pain already numbing her face, that was a distinct possibility. She massaged her cheeks, hoping to make the forced smile look and feel a little less wooden than the bedroom door in front of her.

With a sharp twist of the brass knob, she wrenched the door open and strode into the corridor. Her stride was firm. Her posture perfect. Nothing would make her abandon the endless lessons in ladylike etiquette from her mother.

Then she walked into a wall.

Oh, very well, it wasn't a *wall* precisely. Walls didn't appear in the middle of passageways, covered in wool.

"I do apologize, my lady."

Nor did they speak.

Miranda looked up at the obstruction that was in actuality a solidly built man. She retreated a step, putting as much distance

as she could between her and the man without retreating into her bedchamber. Up and up her gaze traveled.

The last dredges of sunlight filtered through a large window at the end of the corridor, sending dim squares of gold marching across the floor and up to the man's broad chest.

He wasn't family. All of her relations had blond hair, including those so far distant they wouldn't even claim the connection if her brother wasn't a duke. The dimly lit passageway prevented her from making out an exact color, but the "barricade" before her had very dark hair pulled back into a short queue at his neck.

With a deep breath, she reminded herself where she stood in life. She was a lady of quality. The daughter, and sister, of a duke. Somewhere inside her must lie the aristocratic arrogance she'd seen so many of her friends embody. If this intruder had nefarious purposes, talking was her only defense. Those long arms could haul her to a stop before she went more than two steps.

He'd yet to make a move, though. He simply stood in the corridor while she inspected him.

"Pardon me." Miranda almost clapped with glee at the clipped, snobby tone that indicated she wasn't begging anyone's pardon. "Who are you?"

She tried to look into his eyes, but his direct gaze made her nervous and shook her focus. Taking deep breaths, filling her nose with the curious scent combination of soap and a hint of evergreen, didn't help either. Instead she concentrated on his chin. Within the shadows of the passageway, he wouldn't be able to tell where she focused her gaze. Hopefully.

He held out a black evening coat. "I am taking His Grace his coat for the evening. I had to press it again."

Miranda's eyes narrowed. "*You* had to press it again? Shouldn't Mr. Herbert be pressing the duke's clothing? I'll ask you again. Who are you?"

“I—”

The slam of a door caused both of them to swivel their heads as her brother Griffith exited the master’s chambers. “There you are, Marlow.”

Miranda’s eyes traveled from one to the other. Both were large men, though Griffith was a bit larger. A blond giant with a tall frame and broad shoulders, Griffith’s appearance made as big an impression as his title. This new man, Marlow, possessed less height and brawn—not to mention a lack of status—yet somehow, the servant seemed the more powerful of the two.

Ridiculous, considering Griffith was the Duke of Riverton and in his prime.

Griffith’s arm curled around her shoulders as he gestured to the human blockade. “Miranda, this is my new valet.”

She blinked in surprise. “Where’s Herbert?”

Griffith shook his head as he turned to allow Marlow to help him on with his coat. “Dear, Miranda. Mr. Herbert is ancient. He retired. He served me for fifteen years, and he served Father for at least thirty years before that. Did you expect him to work here until he died?”

Miranda raised both eyebrows in a glare of disbelief. “No, but I rather thought *you* did. I suggested you give him a pension three years ago.”

She turned to properly greet the new valet. When he leaned forward, nodding his head to acknowledge her, a small smile tugged at the corner of his lips and he didn’t drop his gaze in a typical servant manner.

Air backed up into her lungs as she looked into his startling grey eyes. She had always considered grey a rather flat and lifeless color, but *mysterious* and *vibrant* more aptly described this man’s eyes. A world of secrets swirled in their depths.

Shaking off the fanciful thoughts that could be nothing but a trick of diminishing sunlight, Miranda gave a polite nod to

the servant. “I am pleased to meet you, Marlow. I hope you enjoy working here.”

“Thank you, my lady.” The servant bowed, then adjusted Griffith’s cravat. With a slight nod, he stepped aside.

Griffith offered her his arm, and they proceeded down the corridor.

“When did you hire him?” Miranda whispered as they approached the stairs. She stole a quick glance over her shoulder at the servant’s retreating form.

“This morning. I’ve been quite pleased so far.”

“I should hope so. If you were displeased with him after less than twelve hours it would not bode well for the rest of his employment.”

They joined their mother in the drawing room.

“Miranda, you look lovely.”

As her mother’s arms wrapped lightly around her, Miranda focused on the love behind the compliment and swallowed the observation that she looked lovely because she was wearing one of the pastel-colored dresses her mother had allowed this past Season instead of the white and cream she had dressed her in for her first two Seasons. Next Season would be her fourth, and Miranda hoped to eradicate the complexion-killing colors completely.

“I’m sorry William couldn’t make the trip with you.” Miranda sat on the green-brocade-covered settee, knowing they probably had a while to wait before her younger sister, Georgina, joined them.

A small smile touched her mother’s lips as she sat next to Miranda. “I am sorry as well. Next time I will visit longer and he will come with me.”

Griffith folded his large frame into a club chair. “Will you return for Christmas?”

Mother shook her head. “We’ve decided to travel to the coast to celebrate. We never did take a wedding trip, you know.”

The love her mother felt for her new husband made her look years younger, though the woman had aged better than anyone else Miranda knew. They could almost pass for sisters when she smiled like that. “It suits you, being Lady Blackstone.”

“It does. It was surprisingly easy to go from a duchess to a countess, despite what my friends seemed to think.” Mother patted Miranda’s hand. “I can’t thank you all enough for giving us this year.”

Griffith rose to kiss his mother on the cheek. “You deserve it, Mother. His children are married. Yours are all but grown. You should be able to set up housekeeping without us underfoot.”

Miranda nodded in agreement, though she had to admit the past year had been freeing for herself as well. Without her mother’s constant watchfulness and reminders of proper ladylike behavior, she’d been able to relax a bit, enjoy herself, and even make a few new friends. Having her mother back in the house for the past week had stretched Miranda’s emotional control.

Mother cast a worried glance toward the door. “Am I doing a disservice to Georgina, though? She’s had such an awful time of it since I moved away. Perhaps I should stay. Or bring her back to Blackstone with me.”

Miranda had never seen her mother question anything. Her entire life she’d seen the woman as self-assured, confident, unshakable. It pained her to see doubt and guilt in her mother’s eyes. Particularly when the guilt came from doing something all of her children had pressed her into doing for herself.

As for Georgina, her jealous, childish antics in London a few months ago had almost ruined the relationship between two of Miranda’s dearest friends. Having a *tendre* for a man did not make it all right to spread damaging rumors about the woman he was courting. Pity was not what Miranda felt when she thought about that time. “Georgina’s problems were of her own making, and I think she learned from them.”

Griffith rested a hand on Mother's shoulder. "And you're here now, when it matters, for Georgina's first dance as a grown woman, even if it is just a small country assembly."

"It did Miranda good to start small. I wanted Georgina to have the same advantages."

Miranda cleared her throat and looked across the room, deciding a red-and-green vase required her utmost attention. The so-called advantage had done Miranda little good. She was still unmarried and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Learning the man you'd planned to marry cared more for a plot of land than for you could do that to a girl.

A statuesque seventeen-year-old in a blindingly white dress swept into the room. It was unfair that though the sisters' coloring was similar, Georgina could wear the pure color and look angelic. She possessed a special glow about her that made her seem a bit untouchable, a little ethereal.

Miranda recalled the energetic young girl in bouncing blond curls. She'd grown up well. "You look beautiful, Georgina."

"Thank you, sister dear. You are looking well this evening. That blue is ever so much better for your complexion than white. I'm glad you were able to add more color to your wardrobe this year."

She'd also grown up a bit spoiled. Had Georgina just attempted to pay a compliment or to remind her sister that she no longer belonged in the group of fresh-faced young women vying for the best husband?

Either way a compliment from Georgina was a rare and wonderful thing. She would accept it as such. "Thank you. I rather like the variety. Perhaps I will stand out amongst all the white now."

Miranda winced as Georgina smirked and their mother frowned. She had meant to keep that last digging observation to herself. Hadn't she? But it didn't require much imagination

to think that the gentlemen might find her more appealing now that she didn't look ill.

Unbidden, a memory of the valet's small smile flitted through her mind, bringing with it a recollection of his scent. Miranda nearly ran for the door, hoping the cool evening air could clear the last of the man's scent from her mind. Her impending spinsterhood must be bothering her more than she realized if a servant was catching her attention in such a way.

Of course, he was a very nicely put together servant.

After a few minutes of conversation, they climbed into the waiting coach, Miranda sitting backward with her brother to allow their mother and sister the forward-facing seats. Georgina pressed herself against the side to look out the window, and her excited chatter rang through the coach for the entire trip to the assembly hall.

A twinge of jealousy hit Miranda in the back of the throat. That kind of excitement and anticipation had deserted her long ago. Society gatherings were now just something she did. Oh, they were still fun in their own way, but they were also rather ordinary.

Mother's steady voice responded to Georgina's lively prattle, but Miranda paid no attention to what she said. Chances were Mother was reminding Georgina of the proper behavior expected of her. Miranda had heard those reminders often enough to quote them in her sleep.

They descended from the carriage for the short walk into the assembly rooms. Mother squeezed Georgina's arm and leaned in to whisper in her ear. Georgina's smile brightened—how was that even possible?—and she nodded before kissing Mother's cheek.

Miranda glanced around the crowd of people making their way into the assembly hall. They all looked familiar. The same faces she'd seen for the past three years.

They walked between the intricately carved wooden lantern stands and up the pathway to the assembly hall. What felt like a lifetime ago, she herself had walked this now-familiar rough-hewn brick path for her first adult outing. The loud clatter of carriage wheels and horses settling in to await the evening's revelers had seemed like music then. Now it was simply loud.

Miranda kept her steps slow, determined to take in everything she might have missed before, desperate for something new and exciting.

By the time she entered the room, Georgina's crowd of admirers had already begun to gather. The innocent excitement of the carriage ride had transformed into a well-practiced grace and just a hint of flirtatiousness. Her sparkling white gown already moved through the crowd of dancers, and if the cluster of young men watching her go was any indication, she would be in constant demand for the rest of the evening.

Miranda refused to be jealous, at least not overly so. She scooped up a cup of lemonade and crossed the room to chat with some of her married friends and a group of mothers watching their daughters from the edge of the dance floor.



He'd used at least twenty names over the last nine years, but none had given him as much trouble as this one. Remembering that he was Marlow, valet to one of the most prestigious and powerful men in the country, was requiring an enormous amount of effort.

Now, more than ever, he had to immerse himself in the role. He had to think, act, even breathe as Marlow, valet to the Duke of Riverton. An untold amount of privileged information crossed that man's desk every day. How much of it could be of use to Napoleon was anyone's guess.

The slightest mistake could mean doom for the entire mission. His final mission.

He pushed the thought away, not wanting to think of the number of men who had gotten injured, captured, or killed on their final trip to the shadows. Vigilance would let him actually see retirement from this business rather than only speaking of it.

He refused to die as Mr. Marlow. The name was horrid, which was why he'd chosen it for this mission. It would keep him from getting comfortable, from forgetting that he was in this home as an employee of the powerful Duke of Riverton, not as his friend.

Once the family had departed for the country dance, it didn't take long for the servants to set the house to rights for the night. While the last maids bustled around the upper floors, Marlow occupied himself with preparing the master chambers for Griffith's—no, His Grace's—return.

He'd searched the duke's room upon arrival this afternoon. Every part of him vehemently rejected that his oldest friend had knowledge of the traitorous activities taking place on the estate, but Marlow couldn't afford to ignore the possibility.

Everyone was a suspect at the beginning.

The unoccupied bedchambers were easy to search and quickly discarded from his suspicions. Using those rooms on a regular basis would have drawn someone's notice. His targets were most likely using a much more public area for their nefarious activities. It was always easiest to hide in plain sight.

He paused outside of Lady Miranda's room, hand poised over the handle. A smile tugged at his lips as he remembered her charging through the door like Henry V running "once more into the breach."

The passionate determination on her face had surprised him. He knew he'd been in the shadows for too long, but he hadn't

realized the mere sight of honest emotion would affect him so much.

Moments passed and still his hand hovered over the latch. He should go in, search her room. Being a beautiful, emotional female did not exempt her from suspicion. To some it would increase it. His instincts told him she was cut from the same cloth as her brother, but he couldn't afford to trust the vague intuition. His head had to be convinced.

With a jerk, he pulled his hand back. He started to stab it through his hair but remembered it was slicked back into a queue. A vital part of his disguise, the perfect—and annoying—hair style needed to remain impeccable in case someone saw him. He released his frustration by spinning on his heel and jerking his lapels into place.

Miranda's room would still be there tomorrow. He could start his search in the more public rooms and deal with his strange hesitation later. It didn't mean she was innocent, simply that he was allowing his instincts to dictate which people were more pressing to investigate. He all but knew it had to be a staff member, so he might as well start with rooms most of them had access to.

As he stepped silently down the stairs, he almost believed himself.