

HAWTHORNE HOUSE

AN ELEGANT  
FAÇADE



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To the Giver of Perfect Gifts,  
even those we don't understand at the time.

James 1:17



And to Jacob,  
for being the voice in my head  
when I needed it,  
even when I didn't want it.

## Author's Note

To readers of *A Noble Masquerade*, I first want to thank you for choosing to continue to visit the Hawthorne family and share their journeys. This book is Georgina's tale and, in true Georgina fashion, she refused to wait patiently for her turn. At the opening of this book, you will find that things are not exactly as you left them at the close of *A Noble Masquerade*. That is because Georgina's story begins before Miranda's ends. I hope you will enjoy this rare opportunity to see a few of the events from a different perspective and know that it won't take long before you'll be venturing into new territory.

If this is your first visit to Hawthorne House, rest assured that you will be able to thoroughly enjoy your time here without any prior knowledge. If what little you see of Miranda's story intrigues you, I invite you to read *A Noble Masquerade* and learn more of her adventure.

And now, *An Elegant Façade*. . . .

# Prologue

HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1800

There was something fascinating about the rhythm of writing, at least when someone else was doing it. Dip the quill, write a line, dip the quill, write a line. The quiet *scritch* of quill against paper broke the silence of the night, accompanied only by Lady Georgina Hawthorne's steady breathing ruffling the yellow curls on the head of the doll clutched against her chest.

She hugged her doll tighter and leaned her head against the doorframe. Mother probably knew she was there. Mother always knew everything that happened in the house, including the fact that Georgina often slipped away from the nursery after Nanny was asleep.

There was nothing nefarious about her midnight wanderings. It was simply that the only time her mother wasn't surrounded by people was in the evening when she sat at her desk, encircled by books, papers, and flickering candlelight.

She was beautiful, peaceful, and everything Georgina wanted to be when she grew up. One day she would be a lady with her own desk and quill, writing important letters deep into the night. Of course, first she had to master holding chalk and writing the letter

A. It wasn't at all the same as holding a watercolor brush. Nanny assured her that it was only a matter of time before Georgina would be writing as smoothly as her mother and sister. Everyone had some difficulty in the beginning.

"You'll be able to see better if you sit in the chair." Mother turned her head and smiled at Georgina, beckoning her forward.

Georgina's bare feet made little noise on the cold wooden floor as she crept closer to the desk, the paint-splattered doll held snugly under her arm. She clambered into the blue upholstered chair beside the desk and peeked over the edge, eyes glued to the writing rhythm her mother had already returned to.

"What are you doing?"

Mother stopped and set the quill aside before blowing lightly across the page filled with even lines of black scrawl. "I am writing a letter to your aunt. She wrote me this morning about a particularly fine foal, and I am telling her of the new fan you painted yesterday."

Georgina glanced at the paper but couldn't see how all of that black ink could tell Aunt Elizabeth about the green fan covered in purple and gold flowers. "Why?"

Mother laughed and leaned over to kiss Georgina on the head. "Because, my dear, a lady always responds promptly to correspondence. Especially when it is from family. It is one way for a lady to show her esteem for the other person. As to why I'm telling her about your fan, it is because it is such a splendid effort for a girl only five years old."

"Oh." Georgina thought about the many times she'd seen her mother sit at this desk, dipping her quill and writing for what seemed like hours. "You know a lot of people."

Mother smiled as she folded the letter, being careful to smooth the edges evenly. "When one is a duchess, my dear, it seems that everyone wants your opinion about something. Some I hold in higher esteem than others and enjoy trading letters with them, but a lady must always be polite, even in correspondence."

Georgina looked across the desk at the neat pile of papers that had already been folded in a similar manner. To the left of the

folded letters sat a large leather-bound book. “Who is getting that one, Mother? You must regard that person most highly.”

A laugh bounced around the room as Mother slid the book onto the empty desk in front of her, but the laugh was sad. “These are the estate accounts.”

Georgina tucked her doll under her chin, the scraggly yellow hair sticking up and making her cheek itch. “Did you write about my fan in there too?”

“No, dear.” This time Mother’s laugh was light and joyful, and she reached over to pull Georgina into her lap.

With one arm wrapped around her young daughter, Mother flipped back the cover of the book, revealing more dancing black lines as well as boxes with numbers.

“That’s nine.” Georgina proudly pointed to a number on the right side of the page.

“Yes, it is. That is how much we paid young Charles to load all the coal bins this week.” Mother ran her finger from the number to a word on the left side of the page. “See? I put his name here along with what I paid him for.”

Georgina frowned. “But Timothy filled my coal bin last week. Doesn’t he still work for us?”

“Yes, but you see Charles has a sick sister, or was it his brother?” Mother frowned and reached for another leather-bound book from the shelf by the desk. The cover was light brown leather, but the edges and spine had darkened, leaving the book with a well-used appearance. She laid it on the desk and flipped through the pages covered with neat, handwritten lines. After turning several pages, Mother ran a finger along the last line written halfway down the page. “Ah, yes, sister. His sister is ill, and his mother is having a difficult time both taking her dolls to the market and taking care of young Clara. So we hired Charles to help them out for a while.”

Georgina’s eyes widened. “You learned about that from a book? Is it a magic book? Nanny read me a story with magic boots in it, but a magic book would be much more exciting.”

“No, darling, the book isn’t magic, but it is my little secret. One

day when you are running your own household and helping your husband oversee tenants and such, you will need a book like this.” Mother slid the book over so Georgina could see better. “Whenever I learn something about one of our people I write it in here. A lady should always know what is going on in her home. If she falters, the entire family will suffer. That is why I write everything down.”

“Everything?” Georgina ran her fingers down one page, covered edge to edge with writing.

Mother nodded. “Everything. Every tenant, servant, friend, and peddler. That way your brother . . .” She cleared her throat. “When your brother comes home from school, his people will feel like he still knows them, that he cares, that he is ready to be the duke.”

“And one day I’ll have a book like this.”

Mother nodded. “I would recommend that, yes.”

Georgina patted the still-opened estate book. “And I’ll have one of these too?”

Mother’s eyes grew wet as she wrapped her arm a little tighter around Georgina’s shoulders. “God willing, you will never have to do estate accounts. Your father—”

Her voice cracked and it took a few moments for Mother to start speaking again. “Your father always took care of these. One day your brother will take them over from me, but until he finishes school it is up to me to keep things running smoothly. There is a smaller book for the household accounts. I’ll teach you about those one day.”

Georgina looked up into her mother’s blue eyes, still glistening from earlier emotion but strong and steady as they looked at her youngest child. “I want to be a duchess just like you when I grow up, Mother.”

With a wide smile, Mother hugged Georgina to her chest. “There aren’t that many dukes around, so you might have to settle for an earl. But don’t you worry. When you keep your own secret book, everyone will think you the most attentive of ladies. You shall be the envy of the aristocracy. Now, where is Nanny? Did she fall asleep reading to you again?”

Georgina nodded. “Poor little Margery only has one shoe, but Tommy has two and he got to go to London. Margery didn’t and she’s very sad, but at least the man who took Tommy to London gave Margery two shoes to console herself with.”

Mother smiled. “At least you will be able to tell her where you left off when she picks the book up tomorrow. Speaking of shoes, you seem to have left yours behind. Let me finish here and I’ll walk you back upstairs.”

Georgina waited as Mother sealed the last letter with a dollop of wax and extinguished the candles. In the glow of the remaining lantern, the study looked magical, like something from the stories Nanny fell asleep reading every night. All it needed was a fairy doll like the ones Charles’ mother made and sold at the street fairs. One day Georgina would have a study of her own and she would be just like her mother.

Only her study would have fairies.



# Chapter 1

LONDON, ENGLAND  
SPRING 1813

Perfection, even the fabricated appearance of it, was a nearly impossible feat. Lady Georgina Hawthorne should know. She'd spent the past three years carefully preparing and planning, determined to make her debut Season perfect or, at the very least, convince everyone else it was.

Exuding anything less than complete excellence could lead someone to the truth: that she wasn't just imperfect—she was elementally flawed.

If the sparkling creation nestled in the tissue paper before her was a sign of things to come, her hard work was about to reap handsome rewards. The custom-designed mask was everything she'd hoped it would be.

"It looks even prettier than I imagined." Harriette, Georgina's lady's maid and companion, released the reverent whisper as she extended a hand to brush the cluster of feathers bursting from the top left edge of the mask. "You are remarkable."

Georgina smiled, unable to resist the urge to touch the mask herself. While acknowledgment of the craftsman who constructed the mask should certainly be made, Georgina felt comfortable

taking some of the credit for herself. She had given the man very detailed drawings of exactly what she wanted.

“If everything else follows the plan this well, I’ll be married and settled by the end of the Season.” With a sigh, Georgina slid the lid onto the box, blocking the delicate creation from view. As much as she would enjoy looking at the mask for the next three days, she couldn’t risk marring the white silk or bright white feathers before the ball. “Has the dress arrived?”

“It came this morning,” Harriette took the box containing the mask and disappeared into Georgina’s dressing room. Moments later she reappeared with a large bundle of white in her arms. “It’s quite splendid as well.”

Georgina fought past her initial excitement over the dress to look at it with a critical eye. If anything needed to be changed they needed to do it now. The ball was only three days away. Even though it was a masked event, it would be Georgina’s societal debut. It needed to be more than simply perfect. It had to be exceptional.

It would take a fairly spectacular appearance to make everyone forget what a fool she’d made of herself chasing the Marquis of Raebourne last year before she’d even been officially out of the schoolroom. That was what happened when she let emotion cause her to stray from her plan. The marquis would have suited her needs perfectly, but his absurd interest in a woman of little significance put her prime marital target out of reach.

Even so, she should never have allowed the ensuing panic to convince her to share family gossip with Lady Helena Bell. She should have known Lady Helena wouldn’t be able to use the information to successfully break the couple’s attachment. It had all been horribly embarrassing, but Georgina had learned a very important lesson: No one else could be counted on to carry out any part of her plans.

This year she would rely only on herself. She looked at her maid, inspecting the skirt for loose threads. And Harriette. Dependable, loyal Harriette could always be relied upon. In fact, Georgina

would be lost without her. “Your brother is due to start school soon, isn’t he?”

The maid looked up from the dress, plain brown eyes narrowing in her commonly rounded face. She straightened herself the full length of her average height and scolded Georgina with a voice laced with an extraordinary amount of intelligence and tenacity. “You’ve already taken care of it. I won’t take any more of your pin money.”

Georgina tried to hide her smile as her friend gave a decisive nod and turned back to the dress.

Though no one else in London would likely believe it, the two were friends. No one on earth knew Georgina as well as Harriette did. Without the other woman’s friendship as a child, Georgina would never have been able to keep her shortcomings hidden from her perfect, noble family. As it was, they all thought her a hopelessly spoiled brat, a condition she tried to use in her favor as often as possible. “I could tell Griffith to give you a higher wage. He wouldn’t doubt me. Probably thinks you deserve one.”

Harriette draped the dress over the bed and crossed the room to grasp Georgina’s hands. “Don’t fret. I’ve been with you since you were seven. I’m not going anywhere.”

It was hard to believe that Harriette was only two years older than Georgina’s eighteen years. Sometimes she seemed too settled and mature for one so young.

Georgina pulled her lip between her teeth. “This is going to work, isn’t it?”

“Stop that.” Harriette shook a finger at Georgina. “You’ll make your lips all cracked and wrinkly if you bite them.”

Georgina smoothed a finger along her bottom lip.

The maid nodded before continuing. “Of course it’s going to work. We’ve been through *Debrett’s Peerage* three times since last Season, making a list of all the options. We know every unmarried man who fits your requirements. One will come up to snuff. Four of them are even dukes.”

“I can hardly marry my brother, so we can consider there to be

only three.” Georgina held the masquerade dress up to herself and spun around the room, enjoying the novelty of the Elizabethan-styled gown. “Spindlewood is most likely going to be escorting his granddaughter around this Season, though he’s been out of mourning long enough to consider remarrying.”

“You don’t consider him too old?” Harriette’s eyes widened as she sank into the chair at Georgina’s dressing table.

“I do, as a matter of fact. Were he to die, I would be a very young dowager with no firm ties to the next duke. There’s not nearly enough power in that position.” Georgina slipped her feet into her slippers and did a final inspection in the mirror. “It’s too bad that his grandson is so young. He’s not even out of school yet.”

Harriette tilted her head to the side. “You could wait for him. He’s sure to enter society within the year.”

As if Georgina could afford to wait an entire year in the hopes that the duke’s grandson would prove as socially proficient as the rest of the family.

Georgina shook her head before carrying the dress into the dressing room for storage. Harriette’s light footsteps followed her.

“What I need, Harriette, is for the Duke of Marshington to make a reappearance, seeking the most advantageous bride for his reentry into society. That would set me up for life. I might actually believe God was looking out for me if that were to happen.” Which meant she had little to no hope of it happening. She was certain God was up there somewhere, but she was just as certain that He’d tossed her aside long ago.

“There’s still one other duke, a marquis, and two earls on your list, though I do wish you would reconsider removing the Earl of Ashcombe. Your sister—”

“My sister should have married him when she had the chance.” Georgina checked the reticule she’d had made for the upcoming ball, ensuring it was packed with everything from a spare pair of slippers to a needle and thread for urgent dress repairs. Nothing could be allowed to ruin her night. “Ashcombe is popular, wealthy, and conscious of the importance of reputation. He stays on the list.”

Harriette said nothing as she laid a white velvet cloak on the shelf beside the white ball gown.

A pang of guilt nudged the back of Georgina's thoughts. Ashcombe had courted her sister during her first Season, but Miranda was embarking on her fourth turn through the ballrooms this year. She'd had plenty of chances to win the man's hand. Now it was Georgina's turn.

The fact that she thought the man a supreme bore placed him a bit lower on her list, but she'd rather be bored than ruined.

Not for the first time, Georgina wished Miranda had gotten married last year. The threat of Miranda's impending spinsterhood might make Georgina's quest to be the Season's Incomparable a little more difficult. Association carried its own form of guilt, after all.

She pressed her hand to her chest, as if she could reach through and force the nerves into submission.

"Everything is ready, my lady." Harriette fluffed the skirt on the dress until the white-on-white embroidery was shown to perfection.

Georgina's heart calmed as she looked over the ensemble she would wear as she took her first turn in society as an adult. It was the epitome of everything she'd been working to build. Entering on the arm of her brother, the powerful Duke of Riverton, would seal her as one the most popular girls of the evening.

The masquerade was going to be the best event of her life.



This was one the ugliest places he'd ever been in his life.

Colin McCrae glanced over his shoulder at the rickety stairs he'd carefully picked his way up. They looked even worse from the top than they had from the bottom, which meant he'd be holding his breath when it came time to travel back down them.

Assuming he lived that long. Calling on his friend Ryland without warning wasn't the safest thing to do. Spies for the Crown tended to be a little wary of things like that. Fortunately, the man was inclined to look first and shoot second, a politeness that could

probably be attributed to the fact that the man was also the Duke of Marshington. He may have dropped out of society for the past nine years, but he'd had eighteen years before that to learn gentlemanly behavior.

The passage at the top of the stairs looked as if someone had at least considered doing some maintenance in the past decade. In truth, it wasn't the worst place Colin had visited Ryland in the five years they'd known each other, but it was close.

He took care to keep his greatcoat away from some of the grimmer-looking shadows. Just because Ryland chose to eschew the finer things in life to pursue English justice didn't mean Colin had to.

After three strong knocks on the grey wooden door, Colin stepped back, positioning himself so that whoever cracked open the door would be able to see him.

The door opened enough to reveal the face and shoulder of Jeffreys. The man was Ryland's valet, though his duties included far more clandestine activities than simply shining the duke's shoes. This was probably the only set of rooms in the entire building that could boast a manservant of any kind.

Colin grinned at the thin man. "Please don't shoot me, Jeffreys. I'm quite fond of this coat."

Jeffreys laughed as he opened the door wider and allowed Colin in. Sure enough, Jeffreys had been hiding a pistol behind his back as he answered the door.

Another, deeper, laugh came from the next room, and Colin followed it to find Ryland sprawled in a chair that could be called upholstered if one was feeling charitable. There were a series of threads covering whatever remained of the chair's cushioning.

Ryland waved an arm toward the only other chair in the room, a plain wooden chair that looked old but sturdy. "What brings you by?"

Colin sat, crossed his booted feet at the ankles, and placed his hat in his lap. "Other than the joy of welcoming you back to Town, you mean?"

A single dark eyebrow lifted in an expression of condescension, the aristocratic arrogance of the duke showing through, despite the fact that Ryland looked considerably more like a dockside worker. "I haven't officially returned."

"And I'm not officially here." Ryland worked for the War Office. Colin didn't. At least not in any capacity that anyone would recognize as official. He had been known, on occasion, to use his business contacts and observation skills to assist them in one project or another. Though he made sure to say no often enough to keep the War Office from taking advantage, he never turned down a request from Ryland.

It was the developments from just such a request that had brought him to this decrepit building.

Ryland sat up a little straighter. "You have news?"

Colin nodded. Ryland had recently disguised himself as a valet on the Duke of Riverton's estate. As the two were old school friends, Riverton was, of course, in on the plan and had agreed to engage in false correspondence in order to trap the group of Napoleonic spies operating on the estate. Colin's contribution had been business letters about a doomed mining venture.

The decoy information, originally intended to be little more than fluff to fill out the fake correspondence, was actually being used. As only the people selling secrets to France had access to that information, the interest in the mine was certainly suspect.

While Colin filled Ryland in on the details, Jeffreys went about his business, moving quietly around the room.

A glaze of deep thought covered Ryland's grey eyes. Colin settled into his wooden chair as best he could, knowing the other man could contemplate the ramifications of Colin's news for five minutes or five hours, and he would expect Colin to be there when he was done.

"All the more reason to come out of hiding, Your Grace." Jeffreys hauled a small trunk from under the bed and began folding clothes into it.

Colin sat up a bit, mild curiosity replaced with genuine surprise.

Was Ryland truly planning to come out of hiding? It would be a good time for it, with the social Season prepared to start within the week.

Instead of berating the other man for interrupting his thought process, Ryland turned his intense gaze to the valet. Clearly there was a hidden meaning to Jeffreys' proclamation. "And have you also planned where I shall make my debut?"

Only years of practice at remaining outwardly calm kept Colin in his seat. Ryland was not only returning to London but to society as well? Was this a new project? A new case that required he come out of hiding? Or was he truly following through on his intentions to stop spying?

Jeffreys extracted a small white card from his pocket and flipped it across the bed. Ryland snatched it out of midair, crumpling the corner a bit.

Colin strained to get a look at the card. It looked like an invitation. Who would have sent Ryland an invitation? Half of London thought he was dead.

"She's going to be there?" Ryland ran a thumb along the edge of the card.

Jeffreys nodded. "The servants have been speaking constantly of the various costumes their lords and ladies have procured. That invitation was meant for your aunt. Price said it was a shame she never received it."

Ryland looked over the card and grinned. Grinned. The jaded, world-weary spy grinned.

Colin rose and leaned over Ryland's shoulder, his thoughts ticking through everything that had been said or done since he arrived. The invitation was for a masquerade ball, but that fact paled as the importance of Jeffreys' statement became evident. There was a girl involved, and by the look on Ryland's face, she wasn't related to his work.

And since it was personal, Ryland wasn't about to volunteer information. Colin turned instead to the valet. "There's a she?"

"What is her costume going to be?" Ryland tapped the invitation

against his palm, probably hoping he could learn what he wanted without letting Colin ask any questions of his own. Which made Colin all the more determined to know who the *she* was.

Jeffreys continued packing as he spoke. “We aren’t sure, though we know it’s blue. She and her sister and mother were all seen at the modiste ordering dresses for that event. The sister was quite excited. The mother was less so.”

“Not surprising.” Ryland’s face turned thoughtful once more. He seemed to have forgotten Colin was in the room. “Masquerades are not known for keeping the faint blush of youth in a young lady’s cheeks. I wonder at Lady Blackstone letting that be Lady Georgina’s first society appearance.”

Colin had never met the Ladies Hawthorne or their recently remarried mother, Lady Blackstone, but he had done business with their eldest brother, the Duke of Riverton—whose estate Ryland had recently been spying on in the guise of the duke’s valet.

This was going to end badly.

Colin coughed. “Lady Georgina Hawthorne?”

Even though Colin hadn’t met the young lady, he’d certainly heard of her. And what he’d heard would have made her the last lady he’d have expected Ryland to become interested in.

“The hostess, Lady Yensworth, is a particular friend of Lady Blackstone’s—otherwise I’m sure they would be skipping the event.” Jeffreys pulled a pair of ruined-looking boots from the bottom of the closet. “Are we keeping these?”

Ryland raised a brow. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Your Grace.” The valet tilted his head to the side.

Ryland’s brows drew together. “What?”

“Only reminding you that you are a duke. I don’t know a whole lot about the aristocracy, but I know they don’t wear boots that look like this.”

Normally Colin would have settled into the corner, content to gather as much information as possible from a personal conversation taking place in his presence. But this time he could not afford to misunderstand what was happening. It was simply too unbelievable.

He stood and grabbed Ryland's shoulder, unable to keep the shock from his face. "You've intentions to court Lady Georgina Hawthorne?"

Colin couldn't picture it. Ryland was a gentleman to the core, but he'd lived too long in the shadows for all of his edges to stay refined. He'd rip a delicate society flower to shreds.

"What? No." Ryland shifted in his seat, looking as uncomfortable as Colin had ever seen.

Colin turned an inquiring look to Jeffreys. Something was disturbing the normally unflappable duke, and being the good friend that he was, Colin couldn't wait to hold it over the other man's head.

Jeffreys frowned at the old boots. "The older sister, sir."

"Ah." Colin relaxed considerably and grinned. He hadn't heard as much about Lady Miranda, but he'd heard enough to know she'd be a much better fit for a man who'd spent the past nine years hiding in the shadows. Any woman willing to turn down multiple offers of marriage had to possess a considerable amount of courage. Something that could be necessary if danger decided to follow Ryland home.

Ryland glared at Jeffreys as the valet strode about the room gathering items. "Why are you telling Mr. McCrae my secrets, Jeffreys? Isn't your loyalty supposed to be to me?"

"Of course, Your Grace. That's why I didn't tell Mr. McCrae that you've been brooding over the young lady since you left your position at her house several months ago." Jeffreys threw the dilapidated boots into the trunk. "Only the least discreet of valets would reveal that you've actually paced the floor as you've contemplated what you'd do when she returned to London."

Colin laughed so hard he fell back into his chair, holding his right hand to his side. Ryland had left Riverton's house before Christmas, after sending the band of treasonists fleeing to hide in the large city. Spring was now nudging at London's edges. The idea that he'd been pining for a woman that long was entertaining indeed.

Ryland turned his glare from the valet to send a calculating look at Colin. “I don’t suppose you received an invitation to this dance?”

Colin swallowed his laughter and nodded. He should have known he wouldn’t escape being pulled into whatever scheme Ryland and his valet had concocted. In all honesty, if it included watching Ryland dangle on a hook, Colin didn’t want to miss it. “I have. I hadn’t intended to go, but if you’re going to be there, I’ll have to change my plans. The *ton* won’t know what to do with such an interesting piece of gossip.”

Ryland tapped the card into his palm. “I think a masquerade will do nicely. I can ease her into the idea of my being in Town without her recognizing me.”

A groan trapped itself in Colin’s throat. Lady Miranda had already met Ryland, only not in the form of a duke. She knew Ryland as her brother’s valet, the role he’d played while he investigated the French spies in Hertfordshire. Obviously the woman had made a considerable impression on Ryland, and it was possible he’d made an impression on her as well, despite his posing as a servant. No amount of esteem was going to make a woman happy that she’d been deceived for months, though.

And there was no easing someone into a revelation of that magnitude.

Not to mention the fact that Ryland was still, as far as Colin knew, actively seeking the Napoleonic spy who had gotten away. “What about the case?”

The other man shrugged. “Every lead but one is stone-cold. Another agent of the War Office can follow Lambert as easily as I can.”

Colin looked at Jeffreys, who shook his head, silently agreeing with Colin that there was nothing to be done to change Ryland’s mind. Clearly, the duke wasn’t thinking straight.

Ryland’s life was about to get very complicated. And Colin planned to be right in the middle of it.

After all, watching Ryland muddle his way through such a revelation was going to be too much fun to miss.