

HAWTHORNE HOUSE

AN UNCOMMON  
COURTSHIP



KRISTI ANN HUNTER



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To the Creator and Giver  
of Perfect Love.

1 John 4:16



And to Jacob,  
who may not be perfect,  
but is perfect for me.

# Prologue

HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND—1796

Many a man has been inspired by a great father or a noble brother, and young six-year-old Lord Trent Hawthorne had been blessed with both. Standing by his father atop a hill that looked out over a large portion of their country estate, he didn't bother asking why he, a younger son, had been brought out to talk about the estate. Ever since he was three Father had included him in lessons, saying, "Life is unpredictable and you have to be ready. I hope you both live to see your grandchildren, but God may decide He'd rather have you as duke one day."

Trent didn't understand all that, but he liked spending time with his father and brother, so he didn't complain.

On the other side of the large man stood Trent's older brother, Griffith. Even at ten years old Griffith was showing signs that he would be as big as their father, if not taller. Trent stretched his back as straight as it would go, even lifted a bit onto his toes to see if he too could make his head reach Father's shoulder. The highest he could get was a little below the man's elbow.

"What do you think, boys?"

Trent gave off trying to stretch his spine and looked out over the land below. The vine-covered walls of an old stone keep rose from the hillside across the way, beneath a crumbling stone watchtower. The valley below boasted scraggly trees and patches of grass scattered amongst large puddles of water. More tufts of grass stuck up through the shallow water, giving it an eerie, dangerous look. Maybe they should dig out the field and make the puddles deeper so they could swim in them. But of course, there was already a perfectly good lake closer to the house.

Griffith tilted his head and looked up at their father. “Sheep.”

Father squinted his eyes as he looked over the land, considering. “Sheep, you say?”

This was what Trent loved about his father. Most of the world would have been afraid to answer him. They’d have waited to see what he was thinking and then agreed with whatever it was. After all, the big man was a powerful duke. The only people in England more prestigious than he was had royal blood in their veins. But the truth was—at least when it came to his family—John, Duke of Riverton, was the most approachable man in the kingdom. Even if the idea involved throwing sheep into a boggy mess.

Trent had no idea whether sheep liked to swim. If they did, Griffith was smart to want to bring them here instead of having them dirty up the lake. It was probably a good thing he was the older son. Even though the title would never pass to Trent, he wanted to make his father glad that both sons were included in this discussion. He racked his little brain for anything he knew about sheep. “Won’t the wool shrink if we let them swim in that? Nanny said that’s why my coat shrank after I wore it into the lake last year.”

Father beamed at his younger son and ruffled Trent’s blond hair. Bright green eyes smiled down at him, making Trent feel six feet tall, even if he never would be. “I don’t think it works that

way, son. It is a lot of water, though. Do you think the sheep like to swim, Griffith?”

Griffith looked from Trent back to his father with a hint of uneasiness that he quickly covered up. Griffith would be leaving for school soon, and their father had lately been pressing him more and more to start voicing his thoughts and opinions. He shifted his feet, almost tripping over the gangly legs of a tall ten-year-old. “I’ve been reading about the drainage ditches they’re doing in Scotland. We could build some and turn most of the area into pasture for the sheep. Then plant crops in their current pasture.”

Father bent down to be at eye level with Griffith. “Drainage ditches?”

Griffith’s throat shuddered with his heavy swallow. “Yes, sir. We dig them out and put rocks in to keep the mud out. Then the water runs down to the river.”

“Where did you read about these ditches?”

Trent tried to copy Father’s impressed demeanor, but the wind kept pulling the hair from the short queue at the nape of his neck, sending a blond curtain into his eyes. It was hard to look composed, much less impressed, with hair blocking his face. He pushed the hair back with both hands to see Griffith gathering his words. Griffith always liked to think about what he was going to say. It took too much time as far as Trent was concerned.

After a deep breath, Griffith squared his shoulders and spoke without any of his earlier hesitancy. “When we visited Mr. Stroud several years ago, all he had were those peat bogs. But when he came to us last month he brought those excellent cabbages. I asked him what changed. He gave me a book about the new methods.”

Father straightened back to his full height with a wide smile. His shoulders pressed back, and he put his fists on his hips. Trent poked at one of the jacket seams that looked a bit stretched by his father’s proud stance. Had he worn his jacket into the lake too?

“As sure as I was blessed in birth, I’ve been blessed in progeny.”

Father wrapped one strong arm around Griffith's shoulders and pulled him in tight. "God knew what He was doing when He gave you to me. Let the Lord guide you, boy, and you'll be a better duke than I ever was. In some ways, I think you already are."

They tromped back through the fields toward home, talking about drainage ditches and throwing stones.

Four days later, the duke died.



# Chapter 1

HERTFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1814

Lord Trent Hawthorne was convinced that breakfast was one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. What better way to celebrate the Lord's new mercies and fresh beginnings than rejoicing in the day's opportunities by eating a crispy rasher of bacon? Even after his father had passed, the morning meal had been a source of consolation for Trent, a reminder that God still had a reason for him to be in this world. Yes, for most of his life, Trent had awoken every day secure in the knowledge that nothing could ruin breakfast.

It took a wedding to prove him wrong.

Specifically, it took his wedding.

To a woman he barely knew.

Trent frowned at his plate, and the sweet roll plopped in the center of it frowned back. For the first time he could remember, the eggs looked unappealing, the bacon appeared dry and brittle, and the toast tasted like dust bound together by spoiled butter. He simply couldn't see a positive side to the way this day was beginning—and he'd been searching for the past three weeks.

Three weeks of listening to the banns read in church, bearing



the speculative glances and thinly veiled curiosity alone while his bride-to-be spent the weeks in Birmingham acquiring a new wardrobe, since clothes fit for an unmarried young lady apparently disintegrated into dusty rags when she finished reciting her marriage vows. He didn't remember such a thing happening to his sisters' clothing when they'd married last year, but Lady Crampton must have witnessed it at some point because she'd been adamant that her daughter be outfitted in an entirely new wardrobe.

Of course, she'd also been adamant that they not wait any longer than the required three weeks between the reading of the banns and the actual wedding, so Trent wasn't inclined to think her the most logical of decision-makers.

Not that he'd ever cared much for Lady Crampton. Or her daughter—at least not the daughter he'd known about. As he'd probably known at some point in his life but had rediscovered only three weeks ago, Lady Crampton had a second daughter. A second daughter with no debility or problem aside from the fact that she'd been born second—and that Lady Crampton was already focused solely on devoting her time to raising a spoiled, selfish, scheming, socially ambitious viper in her own image and hadn't found the time or inclination to raise a second one.

Of course, the countess was more than happy to claim that daughter today. She was marrying into the Duke of Riverton's family, after all, and what more could a mother want for her daughter? In Lady Crampton's case, she probably preferred that her daughter be marrying the duke himself instead of the duke's younger brother, but all in all it was still a rather nice match for a girl who knew all the best places in the district to gather mushrooms—including the depths of an old stone keep on a neighboring estate beneath a half-fallen roof and a partially collapsed floor.

Trent poked at his eggs before letting the fork clatter to the plate. "I'm going to rip those ruins down with my bare hands."

"Hardly necessary now that you've spent a whole day and night

clearing the vines from one of the windows with a rock. An endeavor that did enough damage to your hands that I think you should reconsider using them on the stone wall.”

Trent turned his head to glare at his older brother, seated next to him and having no issue with the meal whatsoever if the dents he was making in mounds of food on his plate were any indication. Griffith, Duke of Riverton, was a mountain of a man, but Trent had trained with the best pugilists in the country. He was pretty sure he could take his older brother down.

Griffith shrugged as he cut a perfect square of ham. “Well, you did. How are they doing, by the way?”

Trent flexed the appendages in question, pleased to note that the pain in both had subsided to a tolerable level. A few faint lines remained from the cuts he’d sustained while hacking away at a dense covering of thorny vines with nothing but a sharp stone for assistance. The knuckles he’d smashed in the near futile task could finally bend enough to curl into a fist. “My hands are fine, though I’m going to be much more conscientious about having a knife on me in the future.”

A single golden eyebrow climbed Griffith’s forehead. “You intend to make getting trapped in old ruins a regular occurrence? I suggest you make sure the next one isn’t being occupied by a young lady. You can only propose once, you know.”

Trent groaned and rubbed his hands over his face before letting his gaze crawl across the room in search of his new wife. Her slender form was rather easy to spot in a group of well-fed aristocrats—and was likely the reason she’d been able to walk back and forth across the floor that had crumbled beneath him. Once the floor had given way, the stair joist holes she’d used to climb down to the bottom of the ruins had become a useless ladder to nowhere, and they’d been trapped.

And not just for the night. Trapped for the rest of their lives by the bounds of propriety that demanded Trent salvage her

threatened reputation by marrying her. Never mind the fact that no one knew they'd been there. Regardless of the fact that they'd managed to free themselves by breaking through the vines as the sun crested the horizon the next morning. As a gentleman, Trent could not leave her reputation to chance when he was the one who caused the problem in the first place. "Actually, you can propose as many times as you like. You can only be accepted once."

A spurt of laughter had Griffith lunging for his serviette as he tried to avoid choking while still keeping his bite of food in his mouth. He swallowed and dabbed at the corners of his lips. "Nice to see a bit of your humor coming back. For a while I thought you'd broken it along with your ankle."

"I didn't break my ankle." Though he should have, given the way he'd fallen through the rotten floor of the old stone keep. "The surgeon said it was simply a bad sprain. Made worse by the fact that I left my boot on all night and then proceeded to ride without removing it the next day."

Not that he'd had any choice. Escorting Lady Adelaide home from their adventure had been a necessity, as had discussing a wedding settlement with her father, the Earl of Crampton. Unfortunately the conversation had also included the sickening cloying of the socially ambitious Lady Crampton. That awkward meeting had also taken place over breakfast.

Griffith snagged the sweet roll from Trent's plate. "If you're only going to frown at this, I'm going to eat it. You might want to consider not looking so tortured, you know. People are starting to stare."

Trent grunted but adjusted his posture and tried to smooth his facial features. "They've been looking since I sat down. Why do you think they're avoiding this table?"

"Because they've all stopped by to congratulate you, and you've done nothing but nod in acknowledgment?"

Trent grunted again and shoved the rest of his plate in his broth-

er's direction. A somewhat familiar-looking brown disk lay on the edge of Griffith's plate. "What is that?"

"Mushroom." Griffith grinned. "I think your new wife might be a bit of a wit. They're quite tasty. Would you like to try one now that it's been properly prepared?"

"No, thank you." Trent tried not to gag at the thought of eating the mushroom. During that interminable night, they'd had nothing to eat other than the flat, brown winter mushrooms Lady Adelaide had climbed down to collect. And while they were rather good even when raw, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to eat a mushroom again without thinking about being trapped, sitting in the dirt of a partially crumbled stone castle, watching his life plans slowly fade with the setting sun.

Trent picked up his napkin and ran the edge through his fingers. "I've never paid much attention to etiquette at these things. When do you think I can leave?"

"You do intend to take Lady Adelaide with you, don't you?" A canyon of concern formed between Griffith's thick blond brows as they lowered over deep green eyes. It wasn't a look Trent saw very often, but it was the one that proved Griffith was going to make an excellent father someday.

"Of course." Trent balled up the square of fabric and tossed it onto the table. "It's no gentleman's trick to leave his wife in her father's house. Especially when it's inhabited by a woman like Lady Crampton. I'm still not thoroughly convinced Lady Adelaide was raised by that woman. She's far too sweet."

"And you've spent how much time in her company?"

Trent frowned. "A day and a night. But we spent those sitting in the dirt, and she didn't turn into a shrew. That has to count for something."

At least he hoped it did.

Lady Crampton and her elder daughter, Lady Helena, were two of the most irritating people Trent had ever met. And he'd met all

of London's aristocracy and a good portion of the gentry. If the second daughter turned out to be cut from the same cloth, Trent's life was going to become difficult indeed. "I'm sure we've run into her at gatherings over the years, given that we live near the same village and all. The very fact that I don't remember her when I so clearly remember her mother must be a good sign."

"Looking at her now you wouldn't think she'd be so forgettable. She's rather unconventional."

Trent followed Griffith's gaze and had to acknowledge the truth in his comment. Lady Adelaide was rather unique in appearance, with thick hair so dark it was nearly black and enormous blue eyes that would have appeared even larger if she had been wearing her spectacles. Several locks of hair—too short to curl or smooth back into her coiffure—fell across her forehead. Without the black-framed spectacles, a few wisps of hair threatened to droop into her eyelashes. She'd accidentally burned the hair along her forehead while trying to use curling tongs one morning, and it was taking a long time to grow back.

That was one of the things he'd learned while sitting next to her in the dirt eating mushrooms. In the quiet darkness between short snatches of sleep and attempts to hack through the vines, they'd talked. It was the one thing that made Trent not completely terrified of this marriage. If they could find their way back to the way it had been before they'd admitted their fate, it was possible this marriage could at least be tolerable.

"I'm surprised Mother didn't make it back for this. You received a letter from her yesterday, didn't you? Did she say why she wasn't coming?" Griffith sliced through the sweet roll, releasing a waft of steam from the still-warm pastry that simultaneously made Trent's mouth water and his stomach roll over.

Although the queasiness in his stomach probably had more to do with the fact that the reason his mother hadn't made it to the wedding was because he hadn't told her. He'd tried. Sort of. He

wanted to believe there was a way out of this situation, though, and putting it down on paper made it seem so permanent.

Rather like the parish register they'd signed a mere hour ago.

Trent cleared his throat and avoided Griffith's gaze. "Er, no. She didn't mention the wedding."

Griffith's eyes widened in surprise. "Really? I had no idea she disliked Lady Crampton that much."

"I am certain I once heard her say that one of the best things about getting remarried was that she didn't have to live next to the countess anymore."

The countess, Trent's new mother-in-law, didn't appear to be having any of the discomfort that the bride and groom were experiencing. She stood next to her daughter, smiling and talking, while Lady Adelaide's serene smile tightened and her unfocused eyes began to look panicked. Trent looked a little closer, trying to see if there was a problem or if the attention was simply getting to her. As she stumbled to the side it became clear the heel of her slipper had somehow gotten snagged in the hem of her dress and she was trying to free it without anyone noticing. She wasn't being very successful, if her mother's warning looks were anything to go by.

This was something Trent could save her from. If nothing else good came of this wedding, at least Trent would be removing Lady Adelaide from her mother's influence—and perhaps save London from one more vapid attention seeker.

"I'd like to make London tonight." He had a closer estate, a small one his brother had sold him for a pittance, but the bed-chambers had been damaged in a recent storm and were still under repairs. Besides, going to London meant they had to leave right now, and even then it would be a hard ride.

"It's quite a large party, and you are the guest of honor." Griffith dabbed at his mouth with a serviette, but Trent was fairly certain it was with the intention of hiding a forming smile.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you.” Griffith had always warned Trent that one of his schemes would one day blow up in his face, but this hadn’t been a scheme. This had simply been him coming across a lone horse tied up by the ruins and investigating out of curiosity. Regardless, consequences like this were a bit much for even a brother to revel in.

“No. Though I have done a bit better job resigning myself to it in the past few weeks.” Griffith set down his fork, and the smile fell from his face, leaving it solemn and thoughtful. “I’d take your place if I could. I considered it. Lord Crampton wouldn’t have protested such a switch.”

“As if I would have let you make such a ridiculous proposal.” Trent closed his eyes and sighed at the idea of Griffith stomping his way into Moonacre Park with his younger brother dragging at his heels. It was a funny picture, and this situation could certainly use a bit of humor. “In all honesty, Lord Crampton would have fallen down and kissed your feet. After he shoved Lady Crampton out of the way, of course.”

Griffith’s answering smile was small and a bit sad, still tight with a look of regret as he shifted in his chair. Since boyhood Trent had marveled at his brother’s size, wondering why God had chosen to make a man with such incredibly broad shoulders. Now it was obvious. Without them, Griffith wouldn’t have been able to carry the abundance of responsibilities he’d claimed for himself. Responsibilities Trent had been unwilling to help with as he’d gotten older.

Watching his older brother rub his forefinger against his thumb like a world-weary old man instead of a young fellow of twenty-eight, it occurred to Trent that his own twenty-four years meant it was time for him to shoulder a bit of the manhood himself. As much as he wanted to avoid the consequences of his circumstances, he would never have been able to abide Griffith suffering in his place.

“God doesn’t make mistakes.” Trent’s declaration cut through Griffith’s guilt-ridden pondering.

“What?”

“God doesn’t make mistakes. You told me that. When I was starting school and I said it was wrong that Father wasn’t there with me.” Trent swallowed hard at the memories. He hadn’t cried over his father in years. Now was not the time to renew the old habit. “You said God doesn’t make mistakes and He had something planned for our lives even though we didn’t understand.”

“Well, I . . .” Griffith eased back into his chair, looking once more like the sophisticated duke. “That’s true.”

“Then we trust Him in this. Yes, they’d love to have married a daughter off to the duke. But they got me instead.” God willing, it was a title he’d never hold. “So I’ve married Lady Adelaide. And we’re going to see what He has planned for that.”

Griffith smiled. His proud, fatherly smile. The one that puffed up Trent’s chest even as it broke his heart. “When did you become so wise?”

Trent grinned back, doing his best to look boyish, trying to bring Griffith back to being a still-young older brother. “Must have been when I was trying to be you.”