

Chapter One

Yorkshire, England
November 1848

"Briarstone Manor!"

The rough shout of the coachman jerked Elizabeth to wakefulness. Somehow, despite the rocking and juddering coach, she had managed to fall asleep pressed against the carriage wall. Now her journey north into Yorkshire had concluded, and she had reached her destination.

She adjusted her best bonnet, now sadly showing the strains of traveling the more than two hundred miles from her home back in sleepy, sunny Sussex to this grim, dramatic northern county. It had taken her the best part of a week, and if her new employer hadn't arranged traveling expenses for her, she would have never been able to take the position of governess at Briarstone Manor at all.

Shrugging aside the feelings of homesickness and regret, Elizabeth did her best to make herself presentable as she heard the coachmen unloading her valises and cases from the roof. She was the only passenger left. There had been a vicar with thin lips and a suspicious stare who had stayed as far as York itself, along with a widowed older lady who had insisted on her smelly pug being allowed in the carriage with them, instead of being strapped securely in a closed basket on top of the coach, as it should have been. To the great relief of both Elizabeth and the vicar, she had departed the coach in Leeds, taking the pug and the smell with her. Now the coach was in the middle of the famously dark and deserted Yorkshire moors at the gates of Briarstone Manor. Elizabeth was about to start a new chapter of her life as governess to the young daughter of the household.

The coach had stopped at the gates of the long gravel drive that led to the manor house. Torches burned brightly in their holders that were screwed to the side of a small cottage just before the gates. This was the home of the gatekeeper, who had clearly been waiting for Elizabeth to arrive. He was an old man, his hands swollen with arthritis, but that didn't stop him picking up the two cases, leaving her with two small valises to carry.

"You be the governess, then?" he asked, his Yorkshire accent so thick that Elizabeth struggled to make out the words.

He started to trudge up the gravel drive, and Elizabeth hurriedly followed him.

"I am," she said, peering ahead into the gloom. "I'm La—Miss Huntley."

She winced in the darkness and hoped the old man was slightly deaf as well as arthritic. Her first time introducing herself in a new county, hundreds of miles from anybody who knew her, and she almost gave the game away. She had to get better at hiding her real title.

"Tom," the old man said after a while, which seemed to be all the information that she was going to receive.

"Nice to meet you, Tom," Elizabeth said automatically, years of training with her own governess falling seamlessly into place. "You're the gatekeeper here?"

"Used to be a gardener, till me hands started to seize up," Tom told her.

Or, at least, that's what Elizabeth thought he said. His accent really was quite thick.

"So now you work at the gate," Elizabeth said, glancing around at the impenetrable darkness. There could be gardens at the side of the drive, but it was far too dark to see.

"Aye," confirmed Tom, and that was the end of the conversation.

They trudged on up the drive for what seemed like an age, until they finally turned a corner and saw Briarstone Manor itself by the light of the moon that obligingly came out of the clouds for a few moments. It was a huge old house in the old fashioned E shape favored by Tudor builders long ago. The long front range of the house hid the three wings from sight, and a large portico had been added in order to break the simple line of the building and try to give it a little elegance. Out of the darkness loomed tall towers, awkwardly added at the ends of the wings, creating an air of Gothic gloom.

Perhaps it would be more cheery in the daylight, Elizabeth thought hopefully. Now, in the dark, the tall house loomed over her, with secrets hidden at each unlit window. She craned her head back while Tom used the heavy metal doorknocker. She thought that she made out four separate stories to the house, with a few windows dotted in what must be the attics for servant quarters.

One of those could be her room, she realized, feeling a weary tide of dread rush through her, sending her pulse racing and her stomach turning. A drab attic room with a little rag rug would replace her old chamber, with its snug fireplace and writing bureau and window seat, where she'd curl up for hours reading.

She smoothed her hands over her dress, trying to push some of the wrinkles away along with her memories. Sussex was a long way away now, and the girl who had grown up there was now a woman who was leading a very different life. Thinking about the past wouldn't help her.

The front door opened with an almighty squeal that made Elizabeth wince. A soberly dressed, middle-aged man appeared and nodded at Tom.

"The governess?" he asked, and Tom nodded back.

This was apparently all the conversation that was needed, as Tom tugged his cap towards Elizabeth, then turned and disappeared into the darkness back towards his gatehouse.

"I am Meadows, the butler," the man in the black coat told her. "We have been expecting you, Miss Huntley."

"Thank you, Mr. Meadows," Elizabeth said, remembering just in time to add the honorific in front of his name.

Only the family would refer to him as Meadows. Although her position as governess ranked her higher than the household servants, she was not a member of the family. She still had to defer to his authority.

"I trust your trip was pleasant," he told her, using a tone that implied that he knew very well that it hadn't been, and he wasn't interested either way.

He motioned with a hand to two footmen, who were dressed in deep green livery. They darted forward and scooped up her cases and the valises.

"Edward and Daniel will see that your cases are put in your room," Meadows told her, gesturing that she should enter the house. "I am to take you to Mrs. Barton, the housekeeper."

He turned away from her and marched briskly into the house, leaving Elizabeth no choice but to follow him. She got brief glimpses of heavy doors shut firmly in their lintels, as well as portraits of what she assumed were former inhabitants of the manor. Gas lights perched at intervals along the walls. They were used in London and other cities to light the streets, but she'd never seen them in a private home before. The lights from the lamps bounced off the shining

wooden floor, and there was a distinct smell of beeswax in the air. Isolated this house may be, but it was a clean one. That little detail comforted Elizabeth a little.

Meadows continued to twist and turn down corridors until he came to a room where the door was half open. He tapped at the door and entered immediately, Elizabeth following behind.

The room was a small parlor, lit by more of the gas lamps in their settings on the wall. The parlor was decorated in calming shades of green, and the few paintings on the walls were of flowers. The fireplace held a comfortable fire, and the heat from it made the ends of Elizabeth's fingers tingle, even in her gloves. The coach had been cold, and the heat from this little room was bringing life to her extremities. A fireguard protected the pretty green rug from embers, and chairs were organized in front of the fire around a small table.

This must be the housekeeper's office, Elizabeth judged, noting the work-desk positioned near a window, where one might take advantage of natural light. It was definitely a woman's room, although it was somewhat nicer than the room that the housekeeper at home had been used to. Clearly the master here at Briarstone Manor was good to his servants, or, at least, his lady thought to see that they were comfortable.

"Miss Huntley, do come in and warm yourself by the fire," a woman said, standing and extending a welcoming hand to her. "I am Mrs. Barton, the housekeeper."

Behind her she could hear Meadows' footsteps fall away, but the sight of the table before the fire made Elizabeth forget her manners and bid him farewell. The table held a large teapot and plate after plate of sandwiches, cakes, and other small delicacies. It had been a long time since the coach had last stopped at an inn, and she hadn't been able to afford much more than a bowl of soup, even then.

"Thank you, Mrs. Barton," Elizabeth said, unbuttoning her traveling cloak and pulling at the strings of her bonnet. "A fire would be most welcome."

"As would a good meal, no doubt," said Mrs. Barton, picking up the teapot. "Come and sit down."

Mrs. Barton, like Meadows, was unmistakably from Yorkshire. However, her accent wasn't as broad as Tom's had been and had an air of refinement about it that had been lacking in Meadows'.

Her chair was comfortable, and the cup of tea that Mrs. Barton made her was hot and blissfully sweet.

"I cannot imagine what your journey was like," the housekeeper went on as she piled sandwiches onto Elizabeth's plate. "Such a long journey for a young girl like yourself to make on your own."

Unspoken questions hung in the air. Elizabeth paused after finishing her second sandwich, and tried out her carefully rehearsed story.

"It was a long journey," she said, "but I am alone in the world, and not so young. I'm twenty-five. My parents have both passed away, and as such I must support myself."

Mrs. Barton nodded, so Elizabeth's story must be convincing. It should, Elizabeth reflected; it was nearly all the truth.

"I had been looking for a suitable position for some time, when I came upon the advertisement in *The Times*. I understand that it was you who placed it, not the lady of the house?"

That had confused Elizabeth. The advertisement had told of a position as a governess for one girl, aged eight, available immediately in rural Yorkshire. Mrs. Barton's name had been

given to contact, but Elizabeth had assumed that Mrs. Barton was the lady of the house. Now she had been shown otherwise, she was confused.

"I did place the advertisement," Mrs. Barton said, pushing a slice of delicious-looking pound cake onto Elizabeth's plate. "The master – that is, the Marquess of Hamilton – he requested that I see to it, there being no marchioness at present."

Elizabeth choked on a crumb of cake, and had to accept the handkerchief that Mrs. Barton hastily offered her.

"The Marquess of Hamilton?" she managed, after a small coughing fit. "I wasn't aware that I was to be employed by a member of the nobility. There was no mention of it in the advertisement."

"The situation is an unusual one," Mrs. Barton said delicately.

"The marquess is not married," Elizabeth said, frowning. "And yet there is an eight year old girl in need of a governess. Is the marquess a widower, Mrs. Barton?"

"No, Miss Huntley, he is not," Mrs. Barton said, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"I see," Elizabeth said, taking a sip of her tea to give her a chance to gather her thoughts.

Of course the Marquess of Hamilton didn't want anybody to know that he was in need of a governess; he'd have to admit to the world that he had a bastard child, but a bastard child that he was feeding, housing, and educating, a small voice in her head reminded her. Not many of the nobility would be willing to do such for their by-blows.

Elizabeth pursed her lips.

"Please, Miss Huntley, don't make any decisions yet," said Mrs. Barton, a note of pleading in her voice. "Miss Violet is in sore need of a governess, and the master is willing to offer a very decent wage."

It was an extremely good wage, Elizabeth noted. In fact, it was so good compared to wages offered by other families in need of a governess that she was amazed that she'd received a reply to her application. Her references were both scant and a forgery, so she had dismissed the thought of actually being offered such a plum job. Now she was here, two hundred miles from home and all those who knew her and her embarrassing plight. She was being paid well to remain in isolation from the world, and that suited her situation very well, indeed.

What did it matter that the child she'd be educating was not born in wedlock? It wasn't her fault, and there was something faintly honorable about the marquess' actions in acknowledging his natural daughter.

"There isn't a problem, Mrs. Barton," Elizabeth said firmly. "I am here to educate Miss Violet, not to make judgments on her parentage."

The older woman's face broke into a relieved smile.

"I am so glad you feel that way, Miss Huntley," Mrs. Barton said. "I must admit, we have had problems retaining governesses once they discover the, ah, unique situation here at Briarstone Manor."

"I am made of sterner stuff than they, Mrs. Barton," Elizabeth said, selecting another slice of cake. "Can you tell me more about the manor? I didn't see much outside, as it was too dark. It is an old building, is it not?"

Elizabeth deliberately encouraged the pleasant housekeeper to continue talking. The more she talked, the more the ravenous Elizabeth could eat.

"Very old, to be sure," Mrs. Barton said, topping up Elizabeth's cup with more tea. "Built during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in the fashion of the time. There are three wings extending back into the grounds. This is the south wing, and it houses the kitchens and the servants on the

ground floor, and guest rooms on the floors above it. The north wing contains family chambers, with the nursery on the third floor. That's where you'll stay, of course, in a room adjacent to Miss Violet's."

"Of course," demurred Elizabeth. A room near the nursery was better than up with the housemaids in the attics.

"Between the north and south wings is the east wing, with all the public rooms of the house – drawing rooms, the dining room, the library, the master's study, the long gallery, the music room, that sort of thing," explained Mrs. Barton.

"The portico at the front of the house looks to be of a more modern style," Elizabeth commented.

"It was built during the reign of one of the Georges," Mrs. Barton agreed. "Most of the Marquesses of Hamilton have tried to improve the building in one way or another. The north and south wings have had towers added, although you won't have seen them well tonight, and one of the marchionesses thought it would be a grand idea to create follies in the grounds. On some of the walks you can't go more than five minutes without coming across Roman ruins or gazebos or some such nonsense."

"The current marquess hasn't added anything to the house?" Elizabeth asked.

"The master has spent a lot of money modernizing the house," Mrs. Barton explained. "We're the first private home in the county with gas lights, you know, and we now have both hot and cold running water everywhere in the house!"

"Really?" asked Elizabeth, quite impressed.

Her old home, so much prettier than this strange mish-mash of styles, had still required servants to heat water and carry it in large jugs if any of the family wanted a bath.

"He also built the stable block up from the small one that stood there before, but that's because he's fond of his horses," Mrs. Barton said in a more matter of fact tone. "He doesn't spend much time here at Briarstone."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, confused. "I thought that this was his principal residence."

"No, dear," Mrs. Barton said kindly. "This is by far the least of the marquess's properties, and he is more often to be found in London or at the stud farm on his estate in Devon than here."

Elizabeth's mind boggled. "The least of his properties?" she said, her amazement showing in her voice. "But it is so large!"

"The marquess is a very wealthy man," Mrs. Barton said, clearly proud of her employer.

And a man who keeps his by-blows tucked far away from London society, or judgmental country neighbors, Elizabeth thought shrewdly.

"Indeed," Elizabeth said. "I take it that he is not in residence at the moment?"

"No, the marquess is in London presently. I expect that he is acquiring new breeding stock from Tattersall's for his stud in Devon. I do not anticipate his returning to Yorkshire for a good while."

Good, Elizabeth thought. As far as she knew, her father didn't run in the same circles as the marquess did, so there was very little chance that he'd recognize her as the daughter of the debt ridden and disgraced Earl of Warrington, dead now these past two years after a terrible hunting accident that most suspected was no accident at all. She'd had several London seasons and met any number of titled noblemen, but she didn't remember ever being introduced to a Marquess of Hamilton. He wouldn't know that her late father's debts were so huge that their entire estate had been sold to pay the creditors, and that the portion of her mother's dowry that

was supposed to provide for Elizabeth had been gambled away years ago, probably when her mother had still been alive.

Lady Elizabeth Warrington was that most wretched of things, an upper class woman with no money. Any friends her father had left had melted away after his funeral, and there were no relatives around to look after her. She had been forced to remove herself from Huntley Park—it had been sold to cover her father's debts. She lasted as long as she could, living off her meager savings, but they eventually ran out, forcing her to seek employment. At twenty-five, she had to make her own way in the world. She had no practical skills—young ladies of her class were brought up to manage servants and not to produce anything more practical than a decent watercolor or a pretty Mozart tune on the piano. She counted herself lucky that she had always loved to read and had spent most of her time reading anything she could get her hands on. She had enough French and German to teach to a young girl, and a good enough understanding of mathematics and grammar to pass for a governess. Everything else she'd just have to stumble through.

This job in the largely deserted Yorkshire moors was a godsend. Hopefully, after a few years, people would forget that Lady Elizabeth Warrington had ever existed, and she could make her way back to the south again, perhaps even seek a position in London amongst the prosperous middling classes. For now though, a position with an absentee master suited her very well, indeed.

"Have you had enough to eat?" asked Mrs. Barton, politely. "Shall I show you to your room?"

Elizabeth looked at the near empty tea tray with embarrassment. She had been hungry indeed, and she had all but demolished the contents.

"Thank you," she said, with as much dignity as she could. "That would be very kind of you."

The housekeeper led her on a small tour of the house, noting the principal rooms. Elizabeth took in the expensive furniture and oriental carpets; clearly the marquess believed in living in luxury, even in his third home. Mrs. Barton paused as they entered the long gallery, a space used by long-ago women of the family to promenade up and down on days when the weather was inclement. It now housed ancestral portraits of the Hamilton family, and Mrs. Barton pointed out a few notable characters.

"This is the master," she said proudly, stopping under a large oil painting of a handsome young man on a large chestnut horse.

"He looks very young," Elizabeth said, noting the strong lines of his shoulders and the length of his limbs.

"Aye, it was painted before his father died, back when he was known as Viscount Dalton," the housekeeper explained. She chuckled. "Getting him to pose for it was a real struggle. The old marquess insisted that it be painted—all the Hamilton heirs have their portrait painted, it's a tradition—but the master said he didn't want to waste time he could have spent riding. The old marquess was forced to compromise and have him painted on his horse. The only portrait of a Marquess of Hamilton not set in the library!"

Mrs. Barton looked to Elizabeth to see that she was properly amused by the situation. Elizabeth offered her best false smile, long perfected in society ballrooms when entertaining gentlemen that she had no care for. Clearly her smile still worked, because Mrs. Barton nodded happily and bustled on ahead. Something about the name Dalton rang in Elizabeth's brain though; she rather thought she had danced once with a Lord Dalton in her very first season, when

she was eighteen, although he had been older than the young man caught in the portrait, impatient to be off on his horse and away from the confines of the picture frame. He'd been tall, and rather handsome, but frighteningly severe. He'd partnered her only once, and she'd not seen him again. It hadn't been long after that dance that her father had disappeared into the woods around their home with his shotgun, and Elizabeth's world had come to a sudden and abrupt end.

She followed Mrs. Barton up flights of stairs until they came to the floor that housed the nursery.

"This is Nanny Jackson's room," Mrs. Barton said as they passed a closed door that reverberated to a thunderous snore. "She sleeps next to the night nursery, where Miss Violet sleeps."

Mrs. Barton cracked open the next door, and Elizabeth made out a small lump in a large bed. There was a suitable fire banked in the grate, and the bed had plenty of coverlets. Shadowy furniture turned out to be child-sized chairs, chests of drawers, and wardrobes. It seemed that not only was the child well cared for, she could sleep through an amazing amount of noise because the adjoining door to Nanny Jackson's room was wide open.

"The day nursery is along here on the left," Mrs. Barton continued, indicating another closed door. "This is where you will teach Miss Violet. Your room is at the end of the corridor, here."

She opened the door and adjusted the gas lamp attached to the wall, lighting it with the candle she had been carrying. The room was larger than Elizabeth had expected, with solid furniture and a good-sized fireplace where a roaring fire sat behind a guard. The bed looked well stocked with blankets, and the floor was carpeted with rugs that looked like they had been once used in the grander areas of the house. They were slightly threadbare, but would keep the chill of the floorboards off her feet.

"There is a bathing room opposite that you share with Nanny, and a water closet next to that," Mrs. Barton told her, slightly embarrassed at having to mention such an indelicate part of the house.

"Thank you, Mrs. Barton," Elizabeth said. "This is a most well-appointed room."

Mrs. Barton smiled, clearly pleased that Elizabeth liked her surroundings.

"Your meals will be brought to you," she explained. "The governess always eats with Nanny and Miss Violet."

Elizabeth nodded. She had expected as much. A governess occupied an odd role in the structure of the household; as an educated person of gentle birth, she was considered of higher status than the household staff, who ate together in the kitchen. However, despite the circumstances of her background, she was still a paid employee, and staff did not eat with the family. It was an odd and lonely existence, and often the cause of a lot of resentment amongst the household staff at what they saw as preferential treatment.

"I expect after such a long journey, you'd like to settle in," Mrs. Barton said. "Miss Violet has a cold at the moment, and Nanny insists that she's in no condition to be in lessons. When it comes to Miss Violet's health, we must defer to Nanny. Tomorrow you may orient yourself in the house, and perhaps lessons will start on the next day."

Elizabeth nodded. A day's grace before meeting her charge would be useful.

"Trying to force an unwell child to study is very cruel," she said. "I can use the day to prepare lessons for when Miss Violet is feeling better."

"Very well, Miss Huntley," Mrs. Barton said. "I'll leave you to your unpacking. Good night."

After the older woman had gone, Elizabeth began to unpack her clothes from the cases that had been brought up. All of her old dresses had been sold, she was ashamed to admit; the fine material had been unstitched and sold for enough money to keep her from going hungry while she had been looking for work. She was left with a few serviceable day dresses that she had bought cheaply from a second hand shop, and one good dress, suitable for church on Sunday. All of her beautiful silk dancing slippers had been sold, as had her fanciful hair decorations and most of her jewelry. She'd sold whatever she could in order to pay the wages of the loyal servants who had stayed with her as long as they could. She'd let herself keep one strand of pearls that had belonged to her mother. On the days when the coal had run out and she'd limited herself to one meal a day, she'd thought about parting with them. Something had made her keep them, though; they were the one link she had with her dead mother, and she'd never part with them.

She hung up her clothes and put her sensible shoes away in the wardrobe, and laid her unmentionables in the chest of drawers. They really were unmentionable, she thought ruefully; the fine linen was so thin as to be nearly transparent, and the lace edging had been repaired again and again.

Christmas was coming soon, she told herself. Perhaps there would be time before then to go to the nearest town and buy herself some new ones as a present. Now she had a guaranteed wage coming in, she could afford a little luxury.

Shaking her head in disbelief at what her life had come to, she unbuttoned her dress and got ready for bed. Her hand-made back-laced corsets had long ago been swapped for a more manageable new housemaid corset, which meant that she could lace herself into it. Her personal lady's maid had been one of the first servants to go in the exodus after her father's death. She groaned in relief at being freed from the restriction of the leather and metal apparatus; her body boasted natural curves of breast and hip that were just not fashionable in these modern times, when an unnaturally small waist was the dream of every determined woman. Even months of reduced living had not altered the shape of her body very much. She thought longingly of throwing the accursed corset onto the fire, but she didn't dare. Rich ladies could afford to behave scandalously. Poor governesses who could barely afford new underwear could not.

Despite the fire, there was still a chill to the air; November in Yorkshire was not a warm experience. Elizabeth changed into her nightdress quickly and huddled under the layers of covers.

Exhausted by her journey, she fell asleep immediately.