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Cliffhanger Abbey

Where Perfect Manners Meet Perfect Monsters

*A two-act comedy by
Christina Hamlett and Jamie Dare*

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Cliffhanger Abbey

by Christina Hamlett and Jamie Dare

CHARACTERS

5 W / 7 M / + EXTRAS

CATHERINE MORLAND: *the heroine; a compulsive reader.*

ISABELLA THORPE: *Catherine's bewitching new friend.*

MRS. ALLEN: *an older lady; Catherine's host at Bath.*

HENRY TILNEY: *a suitor.*

ELEANOR TILNEY: *Henry's shy but pleasant younger sister.*

GENERAL TILNEY: *Henry and Eleanor's widower father.*

FREDERICK TILNEY: *Henry and Eleanor's brother.*

MR. ALLEN: *Mrs. Allen's husband.*

MRS. THORPE: *Isabella's widowed mother.*

JOHN THORPE: *Isabella's brother.*

JAMES MORLAND: *Catherine's brother.*

MR. CULLEN: *a pale but gracious party host.*

EXTRAS: *male and female characters that portray monsters, ghosts and servants.*

SETTING

England, 1815; An English manor house.

SET DESCRIPTION

Two scrim walls, the center aisle, spotlights and alternating illumination of the three main sections of the stage indicate different locations. An upstage window stage right (scrim wall #1) overlooks a garden. Downstage are two wingback chairs. Upstage of the chairs is an entry door with elegant transom. A bookcase is on the wall perpendicular to the door. A red velvet curtain is downstage right. Centerstage is a loveseat and coffee table containing books. Upstage of the loveseat are French doors to garden. Another bookcase is stage right of doors. A short staircase stage left of the doors leads to elevated bedroom upstage left (scrim wall #2). The bedroom contains an angled daybed, a downstage writing desk and chair, and upstage armoire door. Downstage of the bedroom is a gilded birdcage and a falconer's glove on a high table and an elegant dining set with three chairs. Door stage left. Period artwork adorns walls.

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ACT ONE

AT RISE: *We hear the voice of CATHERINE MORLAND composing a letter. The lights slowly come up behind scrim wall #2 to reveal Catherine wearing a dressing gown and sitting at desk.*

CATHERINE

Dearest Mama. It is hard to believe almost a fortnight has passed that I have been away from the comforting familiarity of our little cottage at Wiltshire. As I knew they would be, Mr. and Mrs. Allen are most agreeable hosts. It does concern me, however - and this should certainly not be construed as complaint - their social circle is not quite as extensive as I had been led to think. Since my arrival, I have made exactly one friend. Yet if quality not quantity is the true measure of one's acquaintances, I consider myself quite fortunate. Her name...is Isabella Thorpe.

A spotlight comes up downstage right. ISABELLA, wearing a long black gown, has her back to us. Dry ice swirls around her. She turns to reveal fabulous hair and makeup. She admires her reflection in a hand mirror and dons a black, pointy hat.

CATHERINE

Isabella is quite beautiful, though not in the haughty and vulgar way as most people who consider themselves attractively superior. Men lose their senses whenever she appears, almost as if they have fallen under a magical, enchanting spell.

ISABELLA, pleased by her reflection, issues a silvery, wicked laugh. Two GHOSTS arise from a crouched position behind her and start doing The Wave.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Isabella has a brother named John who attends Oxford just like my dear brother James. If by chance the two are classmates, perhaps James, upon meeting Isabella, might fall deeply in love with her...

ISABELLA kisses her reflection. The spotlight goes out.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Ah, but I digress. Lest it slip my mind, dear Father gave me an allowance of only 10 guineas. Am I selfish to think 10 guineas is but a pittance? Might you prevail upon him at an appropriate time to be a bit more generous? A hundred pound bank bill would be most useful. Meanwhile, I must tell you about Bath. Did you know this charming city dates from the time of Ancient Romans?

A ghostly pale ROMAN SOLDIER with fiendish eyes emerges from behind daybed.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

What a festive but frightfully fearsome race they must have been! Oh the plunder, oh the pillage!

He spies CATHERINE and draws his sword from his scabbard.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

And yet oh the thoughtful design that went into the baths we toured as part of my education.

The ROMAN SOLDIER starts to leap over the daybed.

MRS. ALLEN (O.S.)

Catherine! Catherine, are you almost ready?

The lighting expands to reveal the fussy MRS. ALLEN dressed for an evening ball and calling up the stairs. CATHERINE stops writing and flies to the door. The ROMAN SOLDIER ducks behind the daybed.

CATHERINE

Heavens, Mrs. Allen, has the time passed so quickly? I must have been distracted.

MRS. ALLEN

Just as long as you were not reading another one of those strange Gothic novels. They so corrupt young girls' minds and make them most unappealing to young, marriageable men.

CATHERINE

Whatever you say, Mrs. Allen. And no, I was not reading. I was writing to Mama.

MRS. ALLEN

Do give her my fondest wishes, but it is now time for haste. Have you chosen a frock, a bonnet and proper shoes? You do know how poor Mr. Allen hates to be kept waiting!

CATHERINE

I shall be down immediately, Mrs. Allen.

The lights go down stage left and come up stage right. JOHN (reading a newspaper) and JAMES (reading a letter) are seated in wingback chairs. Both are dressed in dapper fashion befitting university students but JOHN is scruffier: long, unkempt hair, widow's peak, bushy eyebrows. He frequently scratches his neck like a dog. JOHN suddenly emits a howling laugh.

JAMES

I say, John, what are you howling on about?

JOHN

My sister Isabella just wrote me the most amusing missive. It seems she has made a new friend of the female persuasion.

JAMES

You say that as if it were an uncommon occurrence. Have you not mentioned she is quite popular?

JOHN

With the fellows, yes, but not so much their sisters. Jealousy, you know. As you are aware, Isabella is quite beautiful.

JAMES

I know of it only from your repeated reference, never having formally been introduced.

JOHN

All the pity when you do. Like everyone else, you will throw your heart at Isabella's feet, only to have her grind it into the ground with the heel of her size 3 shoe.

JAMES

I rather doubt that prediction. I am far more focused and sensible than most fellows my age. My family expects grand things of me, a future that does not accommodate frivolous flirtations.

JOHN

Ha! I should like to put that to the test! Come with me next weekend.

JAMES

Where are we to go?

JOHN

I'm well overdue in visiting my widowed mother in Bath.

JAMES

Bath? How marvelously convenient! My little sister is on holiday in that very city. What a jolly happenstance if I were to surprise her.

JOHN

A sister, you say? How amusingly coincidental. Perhaps you could introduce me.

JAMES

Perhaps I could, though I daresay the outcome would not be to your liking. Respectfully, John, you have an unkempt wildness that my sister would find quite unsettling.

JOHN

(Standing up)

We shall see about that, I think.

JAMES

Where are you off to?

JOHN

A walk in the garden. *(Sniffing the air)* Jackrabbits!

JAMES

(As he returns to reading)

Just as long as you stay out of Mrs. Tupper's shrubbery.

JOHN exits as lights go down stage right.

SFX: A malevolent Caw, Caw, Caw

A spotlight shines on the stage left birdcage containing a ginormous black crow. The lights come up on the dining table where HENRY, ELEANOR and GENERAL TILNEY - an extraordinarily pale family clad entirely in black - are eating soup in unison bites. Each has a goblet filled with what looks like tomato juice. Henry reaches for the bowl beside him. GENERAL TILNEY smacks his hand.

GENERAL TILNEY

Gluttony is a most unfortunate vice, Henry, particularly in a second son. Might we conduct ourselves in a manner more befitting a Tilney?

HENRY

If that is your wish, Father. Like your eldest son, I can arrive late for dinner every night, having courted every trollop in Bath.

GENERAL TILNEY

You would do well to follow Frederick's example. Your brother is not simply sowing his oats. He is shouldering his filial responsibility: marrying for wealth.

ELEANOR

Perhaps someday I shall marry into fortune.

GENERAL TILNEY

And perhaps swine will grow wings and take flight. My dear Eleanor, Cliffhanger Abbey is in disrepair. It is not love that will eliminate the shambles so much as an heiress with a fortune.

HENRY

I for one think it quite possible that you marry well, Eleanor. Why, with each passing day you look more and more like our dear mother—

SFX: Thunder, lightning. This occurs whenever someone mentions Mrs. Tilney.

HENRY (CONT'D)

—God rest her soul.

GENERAL TILNEY bangs his fist on the table.

GENERAL TILNEY

Need I remind you of the rules? There shall be no mention of your mother, (*SFX: thunder, lightning*) Elisabeth, (*SFX: thunder, lightning*) Henceforward.

SFX: Caw, Caw, Caw!

GENERAL TILNEY

Do quiet that infernal creature before I exsanguinate him for dessert.

ELEANOR

Forgive me, Father. I have not had time to exercise him properly today. I lost track of the hours, darning your socks with imported wool.

ELEANOR rises, crosses to the birdcage and pokes her finger inside.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

I daresay he feels neglected. Poor Norman.

ELEANOR picks up the cage and falconer's glove. As she crosses to stage left door, a haggard FREDERICK enters. He favors a dashing military wardrobe.

ELEANOR

(Smiles)

Frederick. (*Off his silence, crestfallen*) Thank you for the cursory, if imperceptible, nod.

ELEANOR exits. FREDERICK picks up a bowl and, acknowledging no one, slurps while standing.

HENRY

Has it not occurred to you that silence is perhaps not the best course of action upon entering a room?

FREDERICK

(Not looking up)

The soup's gone cold.

GENERAL TILNEY

I gather the Governor's Ball was less than desirable?

FREDERICK

On the contrary, Father. I caught a glimpse of the most agreeable woman. Pleasant countenance, exquisite neck. We locked eyes across a crowded room.

HENRY

Was she a portrait?

FREDERICK

How appropriate that you, a bachelor, shall offer opinions on romance. When I am ready to make her acquaintance – and that of her fortune – I shall.

GENERAL TILNEY perks up upon hearing the word "fortune." HENRY notices this.

HENRY

I myself have been invited to a ball. Tonight, in fact. In attendance will be no shortage of eligible ladies, all with dowries the size of Frederick's head.

SFX: A chiming clock

HENRY (CONT'D)

The hour is late. I must adjourn to my tomb— *(Correcting himself)* A thousand pardons, room. *(Beat)* Room.

HENRY folds his napkin ever so, and exits.

GENERAL TILNEY

I believe Henry does not have our family finances at the forefront of his priorities. You must watch him closely, Frederick, without his knowledge.

FREDERICK

Worry not, Father. Mum is the word.

SFX: Thunder, lightning.

GENERAL TILNEY

Not that kind of mum!

GENERAL TILNEY shakes his fist at the heavens as the lights go out stage left.

SFX: Elegant music, a minuet.

A spotlight comes up center aisle on three elegantly-dressed MONSTER COUPLES who are dancing. A spotlight comes up center stage, where CATHERINE and MRS. ALLEN observe the dancers.

MRS. ALLEN

How uncomfortable it is, not to know anyone. And yet a relief, being spared superficial discourse. (*Tsk tsk*) Whatever was Mr. Allen thinking to accept invitation?

CATHERINE

Respectfully, you must not scruple on his account, Mrs. Allen. I am sure it was but to provide us a pleasant and prettyish evening away from home.

MRS. ALLEN

Had that truly been his intention, a lesser occasion such as this one dims by comparison to the Governor's Ball. For the future, he must acquaint himself with more prestigious companions.

CATHERINE

Isabella is at the Governor's Ball – did I mention it?

MRS. ALLEN

Several times, yes.

CATHERINE

If she were but here instead, we should not want for a jolly circle of attentive and flattering guests!

MRS. ALLEN

It is precisely for that reason your new friend's absence should not distress you.

CATHERINE looks puzzled.

MRS. ALLEN (CONT'D)

You are a sweet-natured young girl, Catherine, but yours are not the comely features that will linger with any potential suitors. Isabella's radiance would certainly extinguish any attention you may gather, even accidentally. (*Beat*) But enough melancholy. (*Off DANCERS*) There is something quite peculiar about the guests. Have you noticed?

CATHERINE

(Surprised)

Have I?? Miss Radcliffe herself could not have conjured a more enchanting room. Such unnatural creatures. The claws, the tails, the strange colors!

MRS. ALLEN

What are you going on about? I was referring to the fact that not a single soul has asked if they might bring us refreshment.

CATHERINE

Perhaps they are simply not aware we are parched. I shall bring that omission to someone's attention.

*She starts toward them but MRS. ALLEN draws her back.
MR. ALLEN now approaches from center aisle, making
his way through the dancers.*

MRS. ALLEN

My dear Catherine! One cannot speak to people unless one first has been properly introduced. Ignoring society's most respected code of conduct will gravely hinder your chances for a smart match. *(Beat)* Besides, here comes our Mr. Allen. He shall see to our needs straightaway.

MR. ALLEN

What needs are we discussing?

MRS. ALLEN

Why, refreshment, of course! And where have you been keeping yourself hidden?

MR. ALLEN

A quadrille player took ill and I was asked to assume his place. It would have been ungracious to refuse.

MRS. ALLEN

Quite so. But Catherine and I are nearly parched.

MR. ALLEN

As am I.

MRS. ALLEN

Then we shall have three glasses of lemonade instead of two.

MR. ALLEN

And how am I to carry that, Mrs. Allen? Do I suddenly have three hands?

CATHERINE

(Points to dance floor)

That fellow has an extra hand! Perhaps he can assist you.

MR. ALLEN

(To MRS. ALLEN)

Has she lost her wits?

MRS. ALLEN

No more so than usual, Mr. Allen. I shall accompany you myself. Catherine, remain where you are.

CATHERINE

Yes, Mrs. Allen.

The music dies and the dancers exit toward the back of the theater.

MR. ALLEN

(To MRS. ALLEN)

Do you really think it prudent to leave the girl unchaperoned? We are responsible for her wellbeing while she is in our care. What if someone notices her?

MRS. ALLEN

She has been paid not the slightest bit of attention the entire evening. Why should our brief absence make any difference?

MR. ALLEN considers this, nods in agreement, and they exit stage right.

CATHERINE

Alas! How distressing it is to reach 17 without having seen a single, amiable youth who could call forth my sensibility. If I am to become the heroine to which I aspire, something must happen to throw a hero in my path.

HENRY enters and rushes by CATHERINE, catching his sleeve on her gown.

CATHERINE

Oh! I beg your pardon, sir!

HENRY

A thousand apologies, madam. I can assure you, echolocation is usually one of my strengths.

CATHERINE

Sorry, echo-what?

HENRY

Nothing, just thinking aloud.

HENRY frees himself from the dress.

HENRY

A more delicate muslin I have not seen, and my night vision is most acute. Have you been long in Bath, madam?

CATHERINE

Nearly a fortnight, sir. But we ought not be conversing without a proper introduction. I promised Mrs. Allen.

HENRY

Indeed, very well.

HENRY grabs an approaching MR. CULLEN; dapper, pale, perfect hair, blood-red lips.

HENRY

The master of ceremonies himself. Kindly do us the honor of an introduction.

MR. CULLEN

Miss Morland. Allow me to present to you Mr. Henry Tilney.

CATHERINE

Delighted.

HENRY

Likewise. Always a pleasure, Mr. Cullen.

HENRY and MR. CULLEN exchange nods. MR. CULLEN exits.

HENRY

So now we may speak to one another. Quite the relief. Have you yet honored the Upper Rooms, Miss Morland?

CATHERINE

Indeed, last week.

HENRY

And have you been to the theatre?

CATHERINE

Yes, sir, on Monday.

HENRY

The concert?

CATHERINE

In fact, on Thursday.

HENRY

The cemetery?

CATHERINE

(Thrown)

Unfortunately, no. Not yet.

HENRY

And despite that travesty, are you altogether pleased with Bath?

CATHERINE

I suddenly like it very well.

HENRY

Excellent.

CATHERINE

If I may be so forward, Mr. Tilney, I could not help but notice your most extraordinary incisors.

HENRY

Ah yes, all of my family have fabulous teeth. For that we must thank our dear, departed mother.

SFX: Thunder, lightning.

Through the stage right scrim wall, we see the silhouette of a caped FREDERICK spying on them through the window.

CATHERINE

Did anyone else feel that curious shock? I must confess, my hair stood on end.

HENRY cocks his head to one side, as if listening to something in the distance.

HENRY

I am afraid Mr. Cullen requests my presence elsewhere. But I can assure you, Miss Morland, I shall call on you again. Were you to find that agreeable, of course.

CATHERINE

'Agreeable' is my second middle name.

CATHERINE swoons as HENRY exits stage right just missing MR. AND MRS. ALLEN, who re-enter.

MRS. ALLEN

Curse this dreadful storm! The rain will shrink our gowns to nothing and we shall arrive home with all the charm and fragrance of a wet farm.

CATHERINE

I beg of you, Mrs. Allen. Mr. Allen. Might we stay? The ball has improved considerably since you exchanged wits and dashed off in search of refreshment.

MR. ALLEN

Alas, Catherine, this unexpected storm could grow worse and block the roads. Come, make haste. I would be most pleased to avoid the wind and rain. (*Indicates pants; shudders*) Wool trousers.

MR. AND MRS. ALLEN escort a reluctant CATHERINE offstage as the lights go down.

SFX: thunder, lightning.

Behind the scrim, a giant bat hovers where Frederick previously stood.

Lights come up stage left. A different tablecloth and flowers grace the table. MRS. THORPE – a plump version of Isabella – adds ingredients to a cauldron, (A severed hand, a frog, a Justin Bieber photo), as she and a seated ISABELLA talk.

MRS. THORPE

I must confess, my dear Isabella, I so look forward to our afternoon chats. What has my eldest and handsomest daughter been up to?

ISABELLA

It seems I have caught the eye of a most mysterious gentleman.

MRS. THORPE

Is he attractive?

ISABELLA

But of course! We have yet to speak but I am certain that he, like everyone, finds my demeanor most pleasing. Unfortunately, he does not appear to have a friend.

MRS. THORPE

Whatever for? One admirer is sufficient, two becomes madness.

ISABELLA

I was thinking of Catherine. Pitiably, sweet little Catherine, with her nasally voice and beady eyes.

MRS. THORPE

Underneath a sufficiently-large bonnet, she can almost look pretty.

ISABELLA

In a sparse way, I suppose. Were I able to find someone for her – preferably a man, preferably human – I most certainly would.

MRS. THORPE

I would caution against that, Isabella. A countenance such as yours is certain to raise any man's hopes. The poor fellow will be mortified to realize you are inquiring for another. (*Offering ladle*) More brew?

ISABELLA

Tea, my good mother. We call it tea these days, lest it upset the mortals. And yes, I would be most delighted.

MRS. THORPE starts to serve.

SFX: A knock at stage left door.

A BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN MAID enters.

MAID

A thousand pardons, madam. You have a visitor.

JOHN enters as the maid exits upstage. He carries a folded newspaper in his mouth, which he sets at his mother's feet.

Throughout the scene, a FRANKENSTEIN BUTLER and THE MAID cross back and forth upstage, each looking for the other.

MRS. THORPE

John! A delightful surprise!

She scratches him playfully behind the ear.

MRS. THORPE (CONT'D)

What a very good boy you are!

ISABELLA

To what do we owe the pleasure, my dear brother?

JOHN

Oxford can be so stifling, what with all the education gadding about. I missed the friendly confines of Bath. I have also brought my good friend, James, who is taking care of the carriage. He shall be here shortly.

JAMES enters.

JAMES

Forgive my tardiness. Parking is severely wanting and the horse relieved himself on my boot.

JAMES's gaze falls upon ISABELLA. He's smitten.

JOHN

Mr. James Morland. My sister, Isabella.

MRS. THORPE waits, in vain, for an introduction.

MRS. THORPE

And his lovely mother.

JAMES has eyes for only ISABELLA. JOHN, meanwhile, sniffs the cauldron and proceeds to thirstily lap.

JAMES

(To ISABELLA)

Delighted to make your acquaintance.

ISABELLA

And I, yours. *(Beat)* You say your last name is Morland?

JAMES

Regretfully, Miss Thorpe, a completely common name with neither pedigree nor prestige.

ISABELLA

Yet there is something quite pleasant about you which suggests our acquaintance shall be of long duration.

JAMES

I should like that very much. And may I be so bold as to say that you are...exactly as described by your dear brother.

ISABELLA

Is that so?

They continue to stare at each other.

JOHN

(To JAMES)

Perhaps it is best that you retrieve your jaw from the ground and take your leave, as planned.

JAMES

(Snaps to)

Of course. Your brother is correct, Miss Thorpe. My time here is brief as I am committed at present to call on someone else.

ISABELLA

And we have only just met. Pity. I can assure you, Mr. Morland, my company is more amiable than—well, anyone's. I look forward to your swift return.

JAMES

For you, Miss Thorpe, I shall move with all the grace and speed of a quarter horse.

JOHN

Excellent choice, as you most certainly smell like one.

JAMES kisses ISABELLA's hand and exits.

MRS. THORPE

What a well-mannered young man, aside from the unfortunate slighting of his dear friend's mother. *(Indicating ISABELLA)* Then again, he was standing next to sheer perfection. I say, John, is there a special someone who has caught your glowing eye?

JOHN

At present, no, Mother. My studies preclude much of a social life. That, and all the baying at the moon.

Upstage, THE MONSTER PAIR reunite and FRANKENSTEIN carries THE MAID offstage.

ISABELLA

So my dear brother is single at the moment...

MRS. THORPE

Indeed, he is!

JOHN

Whatever on earth are you two chattering about? I am certain I do not wish to know.

ISABELLA

John, I daresay you would be a smart match for my new best friend.

JOHN

Have you met this girl, Mother? I should like a second opinion.

MRS. THORPE

With proper lighting, she can be made to look somewhat... *(Wrinkles her nose)*
...acceptable.

ISABELLA

Pay her no mind, John. Shall I arrange an introduction?

JOHN

Respectfully, no. The last time I entertained one of your "friends," I found myself tending to her nine cats. It was all I could do not to eat them.

ISABELLA

Silly, John. Catherine is altogether a different breed. Simple. Pet-less. We shall call on her this afternoon.

JOHN

Why the haste?

MRS. THORPE

Yes, really, Isabella. It is not as if her looks are perilously in danger of fading.

ISABELLA

One must never postpone happiness, Mother. Besides, my own social schedule is far too full to properly entertain her.

ISABELLA exits, pleased with herself. JOHN, irritated, scratches his neck.

JOHN

I do abhor it when Isabella takes charge like this.

MRS. THORPE

She has your best interests at heart, as any good sister would. Do not fret, everything will be fine. Perhaps a little play-time shall lift your spirits.

MRS. THORPE picks up the folded newspaper and throws it offstage. JOHN gives chase and exits as the lights go down stage left.

A spotlight comes up in the center aisle. GENERAL TILNEY talks to FREDERICK as ELEANOR knits the back panel of the ugly, half-finished vest her father wears.

GENERAL TILNEY

The young woman with whom your brother conversed at the ball – you say she was plain?

FREDERICK

Indescribably so, Father. Never in my 200 years have I seen a creature so utterly incapable of igniting the faintest spark of attraction.

GENERAL TILNEY

Yet Henry sought introduction?

FREDERICK

If my sources are correct – and I believe Mr. Cullen to be infallible – it was she who insisted the appropriate conversational protocols be observed.

GENERAL TILNEY

Hmmm...so she professes to be of a social class that places high value on such behavior?

FREDERICK

One would never know this, looking at her uninspired choice of wardrobe and footwear.

GENERAL TILNEY

Some women avoid adornment, Frederick, and perhaps she – like your spinster sister Eleanor – is one of them. You thought her ensemble was understated in its simplicity?

FREDERICK

So much so, it would easily lose by leagues in a foot-race with the wallpaper.

ELEANOR

Frederick! Have you always been so unkind?

FREDERICK

Well, yes. Where have you been all century?

GENERAL TILNEY

The young woman's sudden departure - was she alone?

FREDERICK

She was accompanied by a fussy matron with an equally fussy spouse obsessed with avoiding the rain.

GENERAL TILNEY

Her parents perhaps?

FREDERICK

Their camaraderie seemed much too amicable to suggest any familial kinship. Nevertheless, I followed their carriage to a modest manor house on the outskirts of Bath.

GENERAL TILNEY

And...?

FREDERICK

The owners are neither titled nor persons of enviable wealth. They are called the Allens.

GENERAL TILNEY

I know of only one such surname in all of Bath and they are childless. Might the girl be a visiting heiress seeking seclusion from an excess of suitors?

FREDERICK

You do recall I mentioned she was unpleasingly plain?

ELEANOR

Perhaps she is an orphan upon whom the charitable Allens have taken pity.

GENERAL TILNEY

An orphan?! Oh, what is Henry doing, carting one of those home! You must discourage this liaison at all costs, Frederick. The life's blood of Cliffhanger Abbey relies on one and only one thing. Must I remind you what that is?

FREDERICK

Blood?

GENERAL TILNEY

Money! A great deal of money. Money that a woefully obscure and poorly connected orphan does not possess.

FREDERICK

Trust me, Father. She will regret the day she cast a spell of deception on my unsuspecting sibling.

He exits toward back of the theater.

ELEANOR

Father, might I have a private word?

GENERAL TILNEY

Of course not. *(Then)* How goes the completion of my vest? I feel a draft.

ELEANOR

It is nearly done, Father.

He wriggles out of the vest and thrusts it at her.

GENERAL TILNEY

Good. Then there is nothing to keep me any longer in your presence.

He, too, exits toward the back of the theater.

ELEANOR wistfully hugs the knit bundle.

ELEANOR

Oh, Henry, how I admire your courage to seek a soulmate whose only dowry is love. If it is Cupid's arrow and not a fatal wooden stake that has pierced your heart, my only wish is that a similar destiny might befall me as well...

ELEANOR sighs and exits as the spotlight goes out.

The upstage left scrim light comes on in CATHERINE's bedroom where she is seated at the desk, a book in hand.

CATHERINE

Fickle Fate - how you torment me! Mr. Tilney promised to call, yet here I sit, terribly alone. *(Deep sigh)* I must, alas, content myself with the adventures of others. How fortunate Isabella and I share a common fondness for Gothic novels.

She opens the book.

CATHERINE

(Reading)

"Lady Gwen glanced about to discover that her entourage had abandoned her. She herself remained undaunted by the rumors of a vengeful pharaoh..."

The door of the upstage armoire slides open and a scary PHARAOH emerges.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

"Three thousand years beneath the desert sands had not diminished his desire to punish ..."

The PHARAOH reaches out to strangle her.

MRS. ALLEN (O.S.)

Catherine?!

She turns. The PHARAOH ducks behind her chair.

CATHERINE

Yes, Mrs. Allen?

MRS. ALLEN (O.S.)

You have a gentleman caller. Shall I say you are at home?

CATHERINE, excited, runs to the door and opens it.

CATHERINE

Most certainly, Mrs. Allen! I shall be down at once!

She closes the door, hugging the book to her heart.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Oh such joy to have my prayers answered whilst in the midst of literary distraction! And such a beautiful day as well, to go walking in the company of Mr. Tilney! I should never have doubted his word!

The scrim light goes off as the lights come up center stage. One wingback chair has been positioned to the right of the loveseat. MRS. ALLEN sits on the loveseat; JAMES – lost in thought – occupies the chair.

MRS. ALLEN

What a devoted brother you are, Mr. Morland, paying an unexpected visit on your little sister. She will be pleased and delighted to receive you.

JAMES

Excuse me, what? Did you speak just now, Mrs. Allen?

MRS. ALLEN

I was merely commenting on your most generous decision to take leave of your studies at Oxford so as to surprise Catherine.

JAMES

Yes, she has no idea I am even in the city.

MRS. ALLEN

Thus, the element of surprise to which I previously alluded.

JAMES

She is enjoying the landscape of Bath, I trust?

MRS. ALLEN

She has taken to it as a bird to water, though obviously not a graceful bird such as a swan. A scruffy but earnestly squawking duckling, perhaps. But I digress...

JAMES

It was most kind of you and Mr. Allen to extend your hospitality.

MRS. ALLEN

It is our pleasure indeed. If I might speak candidly to you, however--

JAMES

Why yes, please do.

MRS. ALLEN

It concerns me that she spends an unnatural amount of time in the company of books rather than prospective suitors. As well you may know, one cannot hope to find a husband of substance, Mr. Morland, between the pages of questionable novels.

JAMES

Excuse me, what?

MRS. ALLEN

Have I said something contradictory?

JAMES

No, no, not at all, Mrs. Allen. My mind, you see, is not quite entirely in the moment and for that I must humbly apologize.

MRS. ALLEN

You do seem a bit distracted.

JAMES

If I am, then it is the joy of true love which is to blame. Might I divulge a confidence, Mrs. Allen?

MRS. ALLEN

We have barely enjoyed the acquaintance of a quarter-hour, sir, yet I sense your desperate need for confession. Do continue.

JAMES

Only a few hours ago, I was introduced to a young lady who has so completely bewitched my soul, it takes all my power to concentrate on even the simplest thought. (*Confidentially*) Might I assume that you, too, are well-versed in these feelings of celestial bliss?

MRS. ALLEN

Such presumption, Mr. Morland! Mr. Allen and I do not ascribe to any kind of bliss, celestial or otherwise. But I digress. As you were saying...?

JAMES

Only that it is my impression the lady in question is clearly not of this world.

MRS. ALLEN

Heavens! She is not from across the pond, is she? I hear their primitive manners leave much to be desired.

JAMES

She is more likely from across the stars! If fortune favors our next encounter, I am hoping to speak boldly and by doing so provide my beloved sister that which she desires above all else.

MRS. ALLEN

An enviable dowry?

JAMES

A devoted companion, best friend...and adoring sister.

MRS. ALLEN

Would not a dowry be a more useful gift? Surely you are aware that appearances alone – or the lack thereof – are not adequate enticement to modern courtship?

JAMES

I wish for Catherine to have a dear and pleasant companion for all her days.

MRS. ALLEN

Then I shall keep good thoughts for your success, Mr. Morland.

The upstairs door opens.

MRS. ALLEN (CONT'D)

Ah, there is Catherine now.

CATHERINE descends, wearing a festive bonnet and a shawl over her dress. Her spirits fall when she sees JAMES.

CATHERINE

(With forced gaiety)

Oh, James! Tis you.

James greets her with a kiss on each cheek.

JAMES

I see by the look on your face you were not expecting me.

CATHERINE

Not exactly, James dear, though your arrival does not diminish my sisterly contentment.

MRS. ALLEN

Your apparel is a curious choice for indoor conversation, Catherine. Explain yourself.

CATHERINE

It being such a lovely day, I had thought to go for a stroll.

JAMES

A stroll – how jolly! And how fortuitous I might be permitted to accompany you.

CATHERINE

Yes, well, whatever, if it pleases you.

JAMES

It would please me nearly as much as the news I have to share.

CATHERINE

News? Of what sort?

MRS. ALLEN

Your brother intends to wed.

CATHERINE

Really, James? Is this true?

JAMES

Respectfully, Mrs. Allen, the announcement was to have been mine.

MRS. ALLEN

But, of course, Mr. Morland. Go on then.

JAMES

(To CATHERINE)

I intend to wed.

CATHERINE

So I heard. But what a puzzlement that neither you nor Mother ever mentioned you were courting.

MRS. ALLEN

That is because he only just met the young lady.

CATHERINE

How delightfully romantic! And might I ask does she reciprocate your feelings of felicitous fondness?

JAMES

Regretfully, we spoke for only a moment but I feel as if I have known her for a lifetime.

CATHERINE

Such happy news, James. I shall breathlessly await the chance to meet her.

JAMES

And what of you, Catherine? Has your stay at Bath brought a bevy of prospective suitors?

CATHERINE

Only one that I might entertain as a pleasing possibility.

MRS. ALLEN

What?! Of whom do you speak?

CATHERINE

A gentleman I met at the ball. You and Mr. Allen had gone for refreshment. Do you remember? It was just before the storm.

MRS. ALLEN

In the absence of formal introduction, this is an unseemly revelation, Catherine. I must write to your mother at once and inform her of the transgression.

CATHERINE

Oh but we were quite properly introduced. By Mr. Cullen. (*To JAMES*) We, too, spoke only briefly but there passed between us an unmistakable feeling of eternity.

JAMES

Such marvelous coincidence, is it not, that we should both meet our soulmates within the very same space of time!

SFX: Knock at front door.

MRS. ALLEN starts to rise.

JAMES

Allow me, Mrs. Allen. Age before beauty.

CATHERINE

(Chiding)

James!

JAMES

That is a compliment, no? I meant only that those who are blessed with youth, such as myself, ought assist those who are clinging to the autumn of their lives.

MRS. ALLEN

Respectfully, Mr. Morland. The door. It is highly unlikely to answer itself.

JAMES

Of course. Sincerest apologies, Mrs. Allen.

JAMES opens the door; it's ISABELLA.

JAMES

Miss Thorpe! I have been counting the minutes until we might be reunited.

ISABELLA

A sentiment I hear quite often, particularly when I enter a room.

JAMES, smitten, stands staring.

ISABELLA

... May I? Enter the room, that is.

JAMES

Yes, yes, of course. Forgive me. So lustrous is your hair, I found myself blinded by its preternatural sheen.

He steps aside.

JAMES (CONT'D)

And if I may be so bold—did you perchance follow me here, Miss Thorpe?

CATHERINE registers her surprise upon seeing ISABELLA.

CATHERINE

Oh, la, my dear brother! And people suppose I have a most potent imagination. I'll have you know that Isabella and I have become the best of friends since my arrival in Bath.

ISABELLA

Indeed, we make a most excellent pairing. Her simplicity. My brilliance.

CATHERINE

Speaking of brilliant, my brother has the most exciting news. Go on, James. Tell her. *(Blurts)* He intends to wed.

JAMES

Honestly, does the gentleman ever get to announce his own milestones? And yes, Miss Thorpe, I hope such news meets with your approval.

ISABELLA

Of course I am delighted for you, Mr. Thorpe. *(Flirtatiously)* There are few things more appealing than a gentleman who has just taken himself off the market.

SFX: Scratching/whining at door.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)

Ah, it sounds as if someone wants in.

She opens the door to JOHN, greeting him with a kiss on each cheek and a scratch behind the ear.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)

Catherine Morland, allow me to introduce my brother, John Thorpe.

JOHN kisses CATHERINE's hand. He holds onto it perhaps a little too long and... is he sniffing it? CATHERINE registers her discomfort.

JOHN

Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Morland. I have heard—well, nothing about you. And forgive my impertinence, but there is a most pleasant scent lingering about you. Bacon?

CATHERINE

Indeed, yes. I ate that with my morning meal. *Yesterday.*

JOHN

I have been blessed with a most extraordinary sense of smell. And a talent for exploring the great outdoors. Perhaps someday we shall go for a walk? I do love tearing through gardens and, on occasion, hunting squirrels.

CATHERINE

How... clever.

CATHERINE laughs nervously and backs away slowly from JOHN. She pulls ISABELLA aside.

CATHERINE

I so appreciate the introduction, Isabella, and, of course, your brother is lovely. In a lycanthropic sort of way.

ISABELLA

Are you calling John a werewolf?

CATHERINE

Heavens, no. I only meant that Mr. Thorpe is quite masculine. But I must caution you, Isabella, I have met someone. A fine gentleman from a very good family. He has yet to call on me, however. Should I be worried?

ISABELLA

Dear, sweet, Catherine. Have you not gazed upon your own reflection? Of course he has not called. And you are wise to be concerned; Bath this time of year is overflowing with wealthy debutantes.

CATHERINE

A simple 'yes' might have sufficed.

ISABELLA

I am sure everything is fine. But until you hear back from this mystery suitor— (*Snorts*) What harm is there in being polite to John? A stylish ball is approaching and he would make a dashing escort.

They glance at JOHN who has gotten hold of a box of tissues and is ripping them up.

CATHERINE

(Deflates a little)

If that is what you wish, Isabella. I shall abide.

The lights go down center stage.

A spotlight comes up center aisle. HENRY flips through a newspaper as ELEANOR scrubs the empty bird cage.

HENRY

And though our paths crossed but briefly, I felt an instant connection. Indeed, electricity was in the air as we spoke. The ballroom very nearly burst into flame.

ELEANOR

How romantic! I so admire your courage, Henry, pursuing a love interest despite her being so dreadfully plain.

HENRY

Did I say she was plain?

ELEANOR

I meant plain in its most positive sense.

HENRY

Granted, her hair is frightfully drab and her teeth the color of harvested corn, but who amongst us does not have their imperfections?

ELEANOR

I intended no offense, please believe me. Indeed, plainness has always been something to which I secretly aspire. *(Sighs, wistful)* Someday.

HENRY

Nonsense. You are most certainly pleasing to the eye, my dear Eleanor. *(Looks at her cage-scrubbing attire)* Just not at the moment.

ELEANOR

Thank you, Henry. Not since Mother died—

SFX: Thunder, lightning.

ELEANOR

—have I received a compliment of such proportions.

HENRY

I fear this entire discussion is of little consequence, however. Miss Morland has no dowry to save Cliffhanger Abbey from inevitable financial ruin.

ELEANOR

But money does not assure happiness, as our own parents' marriage will attest. You would be wise to listen to your heart. It is, after all, the strongest portion of the body, dispensing blood to one's organs at a most alarming—

HENRY

(Holds up a hand)

Too much, Eleanor. As we discussed.

ELEANOR

I only meant it might be wise to declare your feelings for Miss Morland very soon. Perhaps you could invite her to the next ball and, while standing around being seen, disclose your fondness?

HENRY

Only if one provision is met. You must accompany us.

ELEANOR clutches the scrub brush to her heart.

ELEANOR

Me?

HENRY

Who else will tell Miss Morland good things about me?

ELEANOR

Oh, but I cannot go. Father insists I remain at home until all chimneys are swept, capped and sealed for the winter.

HENRY

Masonry, Eleanor? You shall do no such thing. At least, not on this one particular night. I shall personally select a gown for you, perhaps a white embroidered muslin, and together we shall take Bath by storm.

HENRY hands the newspaper TO ELEANOR, who stuffs it into the birdcage. Arm-in-arm, they exit.

The lights come up softly center stage. CATHERINE is curled up on the loveseat, reading a book, a blanket folded nearby.

CATHERINE

"Having emerged from the woods, they wound along the valley in an opposite direction to that, from whence the enemy was approaching."

MRS. ALLEN (O.S.)

Catherine?!

CATHERINE

Yes, Mrs. Allen?

MRS. ALLEN (O.S.)

It is well past the hour of going to bed! Mr. Allen has been snoring since dusk!

CATHERINE

Very well, Mrs. Allen! I shall close the book promptly. *(To herself)* After this chapter.

An eerie spotlight appears at the French doors; a caped, full-fanged FREDERICK is lurking.

CATHERINE

"Emily now had a full view of Udolpho, with its gray walls, towers and terraces—"

FREDERICK tries unsuccessfully to open the doors. During the following exchange, he hails TWO ZOMBIES. Being brainless, they're not much help.

SFX: Loud knock at front door.

CATHERINE

At this hour? Whoever could it be?

CATHERINE crosses to answer. It's HENRY.

CATHERINE

Mr. Tilney! A most pleasant surprise.

She realizes she's wearing night clothes. Hastily, she grabs the blanket and throws it upon herself.

HENRY

A thousand pardons for the lateness of the hour and the sudden nature of my request, Miss Morland. But I simply could not contain my curiosity until morning.

CATHERINE

Your curiosity about what, Mr. Tilney?

HENRY

Will you be attending the next ball?

CATHERINE

Indeed, I will. Regrettably, though, I expect to be dancing with my best friend's brother – an interesting lad who quite resembles a terrier.

HENRY

Of course. It was foolish of me to presume you might be available on such unfashionably short notice.

He turns to leave, dejected.

CATHERINE

It is only a courtesy, this consorting with the brother. Why, the young fellow is so easily distracted, he forgot to let go of my hand during our introduction. Perhaps he shall forget altogether that he is to be my escort.

He returns to take her hands into his.

HENRY

Well, then. One can only hope.

He kisses her hand; they stare adoringly at each other in a frozen tableau. GENERAL TILNEY enters through front door, fanged and caped, and circles the oblivious young lovers. He notices FREDERICK tapping the glass and lets him in.

GENERAL TILNEY

(Points at CATHERINE)

That is the young woman of whom you spoke?

FREDERICK

In the flesh.

GENERAL TILNEY

How appropriate she is covered in a blanket designed for cattle. Yet here she stands, hand in hoof, with my second son. A most unpleasant turn of events.

FREDERICK

Certainly Miss Morland has some value, Father. Some redeeming quality to her.

GENERAL TILNEY

Where?

FREDERICK

Perhaps we are not looking closely enough.

GENERAL TILNEY takes a step closer and looks CATHERINE up and down. He looks back at FREDERICK.

GENERAL TILNEY

Nothing.

FREDERICK

Well, she is a ward of the Allens. Recent speculation suggests that he made his fortune in trade. Were he and his wife to expire suddenly, Miss Morland could be one of the richest women in Bath.

GENERAL TILNEY

(Intrigued by this)

Then we shall extend to Miss Morland an invitation to Cliffhanger Abbey. You know as well as I what needs to be done thereafter.

FREDERICK

Indeed! *(Then)* What?

GENERAL TILNEY

Discern her monetary worth! If in fact she does have a fortune, we shall invite her into our family. If she does not...

GENERAL TILNEY and FREDERICK begin to laugh maniacally, each trying to outdo the other, as the spotlight turns to red.

The lights fade to black. END ACT ONE.

INTERMISSION

During intermission, the following set changes are made:

Behind the upstage left scrim, the desk and chair are removed. Stacks of large boxes hide the daybed; spooky cobwebs hang from the ceiling. The dining table, chairs and birdcage remain as in Act One.

The loveseat – with different pillows – is placed downstage right; a tall, decorative tri-fold screen is behind it.

The two wingback chairs are placed upstage and facing each other. The coffee table is between them and a chessboard is set up on its surface. These furnishings are draped with sheets.

The two bookcases are removed; in their place are large portraits of scary-looking ancestors, one of whom looks like General Tilney.

The grandfather clock is replaced by a freestanding candelabra cloaked in cobwebs.

ACT TWO

AT RISE:

SFX: The strains of a minuet.

The houselights dim. Another monster ball is in progress in the center aisle. A downstage right spotlight reveals CATHERINE and ISABELLA standing in front of the loveseat. CATHERINE's simple pastel dress and matching gloves pale in comparison to ISABELLA's deep red gown, black gloves and sparkling choker. Each holds a dance card. CATHERINE keeps glancing at hers, biting her lip and looking around.

ISABELLA

My dear sweet Catherine. You simply must stop looking at your dance card. It gives one the impression of afflicted desperation.

CATHERINE

I was rather hoping I would have at least one name on it before the ball is over, even if it were only that of your brother.

ISABELLA

Now, now, I forbid you to think that John's sudden bolting into the woods had anything to do with your off-putting appearance.

CATHERINE glances down at her dress.

CATHERINE

I thought I looked rather elegant.

ISABELLA

Of course you do. How precious. *(Beat)* It is just that John is so terribly fond of giving chase the moment he catches the scent of anything with four legs and fur. Given the zeal with which he pursued that mob of deer, I imagine he is not likely to return until morning.

CATHERINE

Perhaps it is all for the best, especially if—

ISABELLA

Especially if what? Have you a delectable secret to share?

CATHERINE

In confidence, Isabella, I was hoping to see a certain gentleman.

ISABELLA laughs; then realizes:

ISABELLA

Dear me! Are you quite serious?

THE DANCERS exit.

CATHERINE

He is the one of whom I spoke so fondly the other day. Mr. Tilney?

ISABELLA

The one who has not called on you despite his promise and who has seemingly forgotten you exist?

CATHERINE

Oh but he has called on me. And most mysteriously as well! Mr. and Mrs. Allen had retired for the evening and I was engrossed in the latest novel you loaned me. Suddenly there came a determined knock at the door... and it was none other than the very gentleman of whom I have been dreaming.

ISABELLA

Are you to say, then, you were completely unchaperoned?

CATHERINE

(Giggling)

And clad in nothing more than my dressing gown. *(Quickly)* But, of course, I covered myself in the nearest blanket so as not to encourage inappropriate attention.

ISABELLA

Your disclosure is most unexpected.

CATHERINE

Do you mean because he tempered his natural passions and remained steadfastly gallant in my presence?

ISABELLA

I meant that you should have a caller at all. Did he have the wrong address? Or perhaps you fell asleep and only imagined this unlikely encounter...

CATHERINE

Oh, Isabella, if it were but a dream I would wish never, ever to awaken. I feel, you see, that Henry and I are destined to wed and be blissfully happy...just like you and James!

ISABELLA

Uh...who?

CATHERINE

James. My brother? James Morland?

ISABELLA

Oh yes. James. Of course. What do you suppose is taking him so long to fetch us refreshment?

CATHERINE

Perhaps he purposely means to leave us alone so I can extol his finest virtues as a potential husband and father.

ISABELLA

Silly boy. How long could that possibly take? But enough about him. Do tell me about this young man of yours. Are his looks pleasing to the eye and his conversations lively and spirited?

CATHERINE

Most definitely!

ISABELLA

Well as they say, opposites do attract. Go on.

CATHERINE

He is of a suitable age, height and weight, his clothes are impeccable, and his countenance most unusually pale.

ISABELLA

(Points stage left)

Does he bear any resemblance to that gentleman across the room who just arrived?

CATHERINE

(Gasps, a hand to her heart)

Oh, Isabella. It is he!

ISABELLA

Not to distress you, Catherine, but it appears that he is with a she. That pale young woman in the white embroidered muslin? What a smartly matched pair they are.

CATHERINE

What am I to do? My most blissful dream of romance has turned to a nightmare. Clearly my rejection of his invitation to the ball compelled him to seek out someone else.

ISABELLA

Such are the perils of unprettiness. You must build a bridge and get over it.

CATHERINE

But first I must conceal myself so as to avoid an awkward and possibly unpleasant exchange. What do you recommend?

ISABELLA

Do nothing at all.

CATHERINE

Do you mean, then, I should ignore him?

ISABELLA

What I mean is that no one has noticed you the entire evening. Why should Mr. Tilney and his winsomely willowy companion be any exception?

CATHERINE

Respectfully, Isabella, I feel that more drastic measures are required. I shall hide behind this decorative screen until a moment presents itself to slip into the carriage and go home. When James returns, please let him know I was not feeling well.

ISABELLA

Who?

CATHERINE

James. My brother? James Morland?

ISABELLA

Oh right. Yes, of course.

*CATHERINE slips behind the screen just as
FREDERICK enters from stage right, resplendent in his
uniform. He carries a red rose.*

FREDERICK

Forgive my boldness, Miss Thorpe, but might I ask if this is yours?

ISABELLA

What a curious inquiry, sir. Might I ask you to explain?

FREDERICK

Only that it seems to be the same shade of blood-red as your exquisite gown and, thus, a most complimentary and obvious accessory.

ISABELLA

(Takes the rose)

What I meant, sir, is how you happen to know my name when we have not yet been formally introduced.

FREDERICK

I make it a point to always learn the name of the most beautiful woman in the room.

ISABELLA

That would clearly be me. And you, sir?

FREDERICK

Captain Frederick Tilney.

ISABELLA

An officer?

FREDERICK

And a gentleman.

SFX: The opening strains of "Por Una Cabeza" (The tango from True Lies).

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

Forgive me for asking, Miss Thorpe, but how is it you have come to be standing alone? Surely you are not without an attentive and dutiful escort...

ISABELLA

It would appear that I am. *(Coyly)* Is that a perilous circumstance of interest to you?

FREDERICK

Only if there might be a space yet unfilled on your dance card.

ISABELLA

Let me see.

She flips it open and it cascades to the floor like a grandmother's photo brag book. She peruses it as he patiently waits.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)

As fortune would have it, Captain Tilney... *(She tosses it away)* ...I find myself free.

FREDERICK

Then let us not waste it, shall we?

He takes the rose, puts it between his teeth and escorts ISABELLA to the center aisle where they proceed to tango in a traveling spotlight. CATHERINE re-emerges and watches them exit. Transfixed, she doesn't realize JAMES has returned carrying two glasses of lemonade.

JAMES

Catherine?

She jumps, startled.

CATHERINE

James! What took you so long? Are you not aware of the disasters that can transpire when one dawdles?

JAMES

My dear little sister, how grandly you exaggerate! Certainly I have told you so no less than a million times.

CATHERINE

(Casts an anxious glance toward the aisle)

It is just that I would sincerely hate for any future unpleasantness to cloud your present optimism.

JAMES

Small chance of that, not when someone as beautiful as my Miss Thorpe is so amenable to my undying affection. *(Beat)* Speaking of my intended bride, where is she?

CATHERINE

Isabella? Um...well...the thing of it is— *(Inspiration)* I believe she went in search of you.

JAMES

Really? For what purpose?

CATHERINE

No doubt she feared you had met some harrowing form of harm twixt here and there.

JAMES

That dear, sweet, compassionate, fashionable girl. Am I truly worthy of such adoration by an angel, a goddess, an enchantress?

CATHERINE

I must speak my heart, James. No one could ever be worthy of someone as trusting, kind and effusive as you.

JAMES

But Miss Thorpe does come close, does she not? Oh say it, Catherine, please do, for I trust your judgment above all else.

CATHERINE

That you have to ask at all suggests a hesitation, James, and only more time in her company will prove if your current insecurities are valid.

JAMES

Oh right you are, as always. I must go and find her. Which way did you say she went?

CATHERINE hesitates, then points stage right.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(Hands her both glasses)

What a treasure you are. The two of us shall return momentarily.

He eagerly rushes off.

CATHERINE

Oh what a blind-sided folly romance can be! (*Sips from one glass, then the other, then back again*) And what a mockery Isabella has made of our friendship, leading me to believe her feelings for James were genuine. What a merry little home the three of us might have made, now that I am so sadly reconciled to spinsterhood. (*Glances stage left and panics*) Oh no! It is he! And with her. Isabella indeed spoke truthfully when she noted they were a handsome pair. I must not let him catch sight of me.

She scurries behind the screen just as HENRY and ELEANOR stroll on from stage left. ELEANOR is dressed to the nines: gown, up-do, long white gloves.

ELEANOR

So this is what it is like, leaving the confines of home. I am not so certain I enjoy the crowds. It is not unlike watching sheep mill about a pasture, blissfully unaware they are all about to become mutton.

A preoccupied HENRY scans the room.

HENRY

Yes, excellent. (*Then*) I am certain Catherine said she would be here, dancing with another man strictly out of obligation. Wherever could she be?

ELEANOR

In this herd? Who can tell? The entire room is a sea of corsets and thick cotton. Is it hot in here, or am I faint from the severity of this awful bun?

ELEANOR fidgets with her hair and fans herself with her hand.

HENRY

Oh dear, you do look pallid. More so than usual. Come, sit. Look, a tight-back loveseat with floral print bolsters.

He encourages her to sit; she uncomfortably perches on one arm.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Cheer up, then. It is only a seasonal ball, not imprisonment.

ELEANOR

Of course. Forgive my peevishness. Perhaps some refreshment will lift my spirits.

HENRY

It shall be my pleasure. But remember, my dear Eleanor, introductions are not merely a suggestion at these occasions. They are a way of life. Until my return, you must speak to no one.

ELEANOR

I shall do my best to ward off the masses.

As HENRY exits stage right, CATHERINE takes a peek at ELEANOR.

CATHERINE

The harmony between them is readily apparent. How I regret attending the ball with the raffish Mr. Thorpe, with his odious manners and curious propensity for scratching. *(Suddenly distracted)* Is that James? Returning already? He must not draw attention to me. Not now, not in front of her.

She scurries behind the screen as JAMES enters. He fidgets with his cravat and speaks without looking up.

JAMES

It seems Miss Thorpe has vanished into the night and— *(Sees ELEANOR)* Oh! Forgive the intrusion, madam. I thought you were someone else.

ELEANOR

It is no bother, sir. Thank you for noticing me at all.

JAMES

Oh, I never miss a pleasing countenance. In fact, I am searching for one now. Perhaps you have seen her? Tall. Graceful. Impossibly beautiful.

ELEANOR

Heavens, that could be anyone in this room. I am sorry to be of such little assistance in your search. As Father always says, nothing is the only thing I do well. If it is of any consolation, my dear Henry also seeks someone.

JAMES

May I ask who?

ELEANOR

Her name escapes me. We have never met, you see. There I go again, being ineffectual.

JAMES

One cannot be expected to remember every detail of another person's life, madam.

Suddenly, JAMES reacts as if burned.

ELEANOR

Whatever is the matter?

JAMES

We have been speaking without a proper introduction!

ELEANOR

And yet the world did not implode. Fear not, good sir, I am happy to fade once again into the background. Yet another thing Father says I am good at.

JAMES

Who is this "father" to whom you keep referring? Is it a pet name for a mortal enemy?

ELEANOR

No, it is my actual father.

JAMES

My condolences.

MR. CULLEN enters.

JAMES

Ah, Mr. Cullen! (*Gestures to ELEANOR*) If you would be so kind.

MR. CULLEN looks straight through ELEANOR.

MR. CULLEN

What.

JAMES gives a more exaggerated nod towards ELEANOR.

JAMES

The young lady? Introductions? Usually you foresee such things well in advance, as if by telepathy.

MR. CULLEN takes a closer look at the loveseat and finally spots ELEANOR.

MR. CULLEN

She has flown completely under my radar. An unprecedented occurrence, I can assure you. It is as though she is not in the room at all.

MR. CULLEN raps on his head a couple of times to ensure that something inside is still working.

MR. CULLEN

Ah, here we go. Eleanor, is it?

ELEANOR

Indeed. Eleanor Tilney.

MR. CULLEN

Allow me to introduce Mr. James Morland.

ELEANOR stands slowly, eyes locked with JAMES's.

MR. CULLEN

(To ELEANOR)

This is the part where you curtsy.

MR. CULLEN exits as ELEANOR ungracefully curtsies.

ELEANOR

Sincerest apologies. I have not had much occasion to curtsy during my sheltered lifetime. Father says it is unbecoming, what with my squat stature and oddly-bowed legs.

JAMES

Oh I beg to differ. Your father, if I may be so forward, is most unkind in his criticism.

ELEANOR

He has been that way ever since Mother—

SFX: thunder, lightning.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

—died. And prior to her unfortunate passing, as well. And during the entirety of their marriage, come to think of it. He knows not any other way.

SFX: Mozart music.

THE DANCERS return. ELEANOR watches, a bit terrified.

ELEANOR

Oh, look. Dancers. Dancing.

JAMES

Indeed they are. *(Scans crowd)* Alas, Miss Thorpe is not amongst them.

ELEANOR

Father says I have a cumbersome gait that reminds him of an ailing buffalo. Perhaps I should return to my place on that uncomfortable chaise.

JAMES

You shall do no such thing. Indeed, social customs deem it impolite for a gentleman not to ask a lady to dance, and equally ungracious for that young lady to refuse. Might I request the pleasure?

ELEANOR

Of what?

JAMES

I can assure you, the cotillion is a most enjoyable dance to perform. Best of all, you are wearing the proper attire – full-length gloves – so we shall be certain never to touch one another.

This breaks the ice. ELEANOR relaxes, smiles and takes JAMES's hand. They step into the aisle to dance; CATHERINE re-emerges as they exit with other dancers.

CATHERINE

So Mr. Tilney is married. Why on earth, then, did he arrive at my chamber so late at night, asking about the ball? Had he quarreled with his wife and sought comfort in another? Poor James, dancing with a woman who is married to such a deceitful man. *(Thinks)* This is not a very fun ball at all.

She begins to pace.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

If I ever see the disingenuous Mr. Tilney again, I shall tell him—oh, what shall I tell him? *(Rehearsing)* "Excuse me, Mr. Tilney, there appears to be something wrong with your arm. It is attached to a spouse." *(Then)* No, too disdainful. *(Then)* "Mr. Tilney, how could you?" No, much too indignant. *(Thinks)* "We need to have a conversation. About us."

HENRY enters on CATHERINE's last line.

HENRY

(Happily)

Miss Morland! At last, we meet.

She spins around, tries to speak but locks up.

CATHERINE

Goodbye, Mr. Tilney.

HENRY

Have I done something wrong?

CATHERINE

Heavens no, everything is most delightful. My companion for the evening is a true gentleman – so charismatic, he even attracts members of the animal kingdom.

HENRY

Gadzooks. Animals?

CATHERINE

Deer, specifically, but that is another story altogether.

She glances towards the aisle.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

One more thing, Mr. Tilney. My brother James is, at this very moment, dancing with your wife.

HENRY

Is he? Well, then, I shall like to meet her. Is she very pleasant? Did I marry up?

CATHERINE

Regretfully, I do not find this situation amusing.

HENRY

I am only teasing, Miss Morland. I am, of course, unmarried.

CATHERINE

Please, Mr. Tilney, do not lie to me. I saw the two of you arrive together, arm in arm. I also know her last name is Tilney.

HENRY

My dear Miss Morland. It is good to know you care enough to become cross. But you need not fret for another instant. Eleanor, you see, is my sister.

CATHERINE

You have married your sister?

HENRY

I suspect you have read one too many novels. Rest assured, Eleanor is only my sister. And, indeed, my only sister. We both have the same mother.

SFX: thunder, lightning.

HENRY

(Pointing skyward)

That happens to Eleanor as well.

CATHERINE

Yes, come to think of it. That did happen while she was talking to James. *(Looks to dance floor)* And I do see the resemblance now. Oh, Mr. Tilney, I feel so utterly foolish. Can you ever forgive me?

HENRY

I shall have to think it over. *(Then)* Done. All is forgiven. Now that we have disposed of that matter... would it be too presumptuous to ask if there is an available spot on your dance card?

CATHERINE

I shall have a look.

CATHERINE holds up her dance card and tries to unfurl it like ISABELLA; nothing drops down, despite her furiously shaking it.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

As luck would have it, I am completely free.

HENRY

The fortune is all mine, Miss Morland. May I have the honor?

HENRY offers his arm. CATHERINE takes it. They lock eyes and do a slow turn as the lights go down.

A spotlight comes up center aisle, where MR. ALLEN stands holding a number of hat boxes. MRS. ALLEN holds up a letter.

MRS. ALLEN

What have we here, Mr. Allen? A most curious letter from General Tilney at Cliffhanger Abbey. If it pleases you, I could use some help with the translation.

MR. ALLEN

What is the difficulty? It is written in plain English, Mrs. Allen.

MRS. ALLEN

Yes, and while I understand each individual word on the page – collectively, they make no sense.

She shows him the note.

MR. ALLEN

"We sincerely hope Miss Catherine Morland can oblige us with her company, this weekend at Cliffhanger Abbey." (*Beat*) That is indeed puzzling. Have they seen Catherine?

MRS. ALLEN

Or met her? Perhaps they are looking for a different Catherine. One who is, you know, interesting.

He examines the envelope.

MR. ALLEN

No, it does say "The Catherine Morland Who Is Staying with the Allens."

MRS. ALLEN

Well, perhaps it would be wise not to look this gift horse – Catherine, appropriately enough – in the mouth. The Tilney family has two sons, both single and of marriageable age.

MR. ALLEN

Have they any daughters? If neither son warms up to Catherine, it would be good if she had a friendly shoulder upon which to weep.

MRS. ALLEN

I have heard nothing about a daughter, no.

MR. ALLEN

Whether by design or by error – and I presume it was the latter – it seems Catherine's prospects are finally looking up. (*Beat*) Something else puzzles me, however, Mrs. Allen.

MRS. ALLEN

What is it?

MR. ALLEN

Are not such invitations the purview of the lady of the house? Why should General Tilney write to Catherine in his own hand?

MRS. ALLEN

Oh surely you jest, Mr. Allen.

MR. ALLEN

I jest not. I was merely inquiring why the letter did not come from his wife.

MRS. ALLEN

It is because his wife, Mrs. Tilney, is quite dead.

SFX: thunder, lightning.

MR. ALLEN

Indeed?

MRS. ALLEN

Many years now, in fact. You simply must pay more attention to community scandal, Mr. Allen. Rumor has it that her sudden passing was most unnatural.

MR. ALLEN

What was it? A runaway horse and carriage accident? An unfortunate turn of influenza?

MRS. ALLEN

Some say it was murder and that General Tilney himself—oh but, of course, nothing was ever actually proven.

MR. ALLEN

Are you to say, Mrs. Allen, that we would dispatch Catherine to a setting so dangerous, she may not return safely to us on Monday? That seems unwise.

MRS. ALLEN

You need not worry about it, Mr. Allen. As most people are aware – myself being one of them – murderers typically tend to murder only those with whom they are keenly familiar and with whom they have grown irreconcilably and desperately vexed. That Catherine has never even met General Tilney – much less given him any good cause to wish her dead – I am sure she will pass the weekend without unpleasant incident.

MR. ALLEN

I defer to your judgment, Mrs. Allen.

MRS. ALLEN

Come quickly, then. Let us break the shocking but nonetheless excellent news. Catherine must reply yes before the General realizes his error and invites someone else!

MRS. ALLEN exits hastily with MR. ALLEN in her wake as the spotlight goes down.

The decorative screen and loveseat stage right have been removed to afford an unobstructed view of the window. A spotlight comes up behind the scrim where an anxious JAMES awaits CATHERINE.

JAMES

Ah, Catherine, you came at once...just as I knew you would.

CATHERINE

Your note conveyed such urgency, James, that I could not think to do otherwise. Whatever is the matter?

JAMES

Two things of enormous proportion, I confess. One is of the most troubling and unsettling sorrow and the other of the most profound and unabashedly glorious joy. *(Beat)* Which would you prefer to hear first?

CATHERINE

Sorrow is never a welcome guest, of course, and so I should think—

JAMES

The sorrow part is all about you, by the way.

CATHERINE

Me?

JAMES

Or rather, someone quite dear to you. I dread the heart-wrenching distress you shall experience upon hearing it, and yet feel honor-bound to tell you myself.

CATHERINE

Who is it, then? And what dire misfortune has transpired since last we spoke?

JAMES

It is about your companion. The beautiful Isabella Thorpe?

CATHERINE

Oh pffffff! She has not crossed my path in nearly three days and to speak honestly I shall not be terribly woeful if it never happens again.

JAMES

You have had a falling out?

CATHERINE

She is most certainly not the person I thought her to be when first we met. In fact, she is quite the opposite and— (*Catching herself*) Oh but James, forgive me. I quite forgot I am speaking disparagingly of the woman you love.

JAMES

Oh pffffff! A passing fancy, nothing more. You need not fear that I have been mortally wounded by her flippant duplicity and her gravitation to a most unsavory officer.

CATHERINE

So the engagement has been broken?

JAMES

It is all for the best, is it not? Besides, that leads to the happy portion of my news.

CATHERINE

Do tell!

JAMES

I have fallen madly, deeply, truly in love.

CATHERINE

So soon?

JAMES

Time is much too short to waste, Catherine. It was love at first sight!

CATHERINE

Might I gently remind you, James, that such was the same condition which prompted you to pledge eternal devotion to the deceitful Isabella.

JAMES

No, no this is completely different. They are nothing alike. Isabella inflamed me with combustible thoughts of torturously mad passion. In contrast, my beloved Eleanor warms my soul like a winter hearth, a cozy blanket and a bowl of stew.

CATHERINE

Eleanor, did you say? Does she have a last name?

JAMES

It is Tilney. Eleanor Tilney of Cliffhanger Abbey.

CATHERINE

What a strange coincidence! The man upon whom I fondly spend my every waking thought is her dearest sibling, Henry.

JAMES

Imagine that! Why if you were to marry Henry and I were to wed Eleanor, it would mean that Eleanor would become your sister and Henry would become my brother and the two of us would be related!

CATHERINE

We are related already, James.

JAMES

Hmmm...quite so. In my excitement, I forgot we share the same parents.

CATHERINE

A double wedding would be lovely as well as admirably thrifty.

JAMES

Am I to assume that your prior dissatisfaction with Mr. Tilney's odd behavior has been forgiven?

CATHERINE

Most certainly. Why only this day I have received a gracious invitation from his father, General Tilney, to spend a lovely weekend at Cliffhanger Abbey.

JAMES

Oh, Catherine, how marvelously and fortuitously convenient for me!

CATHERINE

In what way?

JAMES

My beloved Eleanor shall be there, too, shall she not?

CATHERINE

It is where she lives so, yes, I would imagine her presence could be counted on.

JAMES

Then you shall spend every waking moment impressing her with stories about me, so that she accepts my proposal when I come to collect you.

CATHERINE

Respectfully, James, why must everything always come back to you? Is this not my moment to bask in the unconditional adoration of others?

JAMES

Oh but Catherine, you misinterpret my intentions. It is as much your future as mine that governs this carefully crafted course of action. When I summon the courage to speak to her father, he shall see that the Tilney house will be doubly blessed by the addition of fine Morland blood.

CATHERINE

Once again, I must acknowledge the wisdom of your superior gender. To think I shed even a single tear that Isabella danced out of both our lives.

JAMES

Interesting, is it not, that no one has seen her since the evening of the ball?

CATHERINE

Do not think me unkind, James, but I hope she one day receives the same unpleasant treatment from her new beau that she visited upon you.

JAMES

Twixt you and me, those are my secret sentiments as well.

They smile and do a fist-bump as the lights go down.

A spotlight comes up in the center aisle where ISABELLA strolls with FREDERICK. (During their exchange, the loveseat is moved back on stage with a sheet thrown over it.)

ISABELLA

Is this not the most glorious afternoon? The sun is out, the sky is bright, and two of the most attractive people on Earth have united as a couple.

As ISABELLA drones on, FREDERICK begins to nod off.

ISABELLA

Think of the elegant parties we shall attend! The hosts upon whom we shall grace our presence. We must announce our engagement soon. And how long before the wedding? A week? *(Off FREDERICK's silence)* Captain Tilney? Captain Tilney, are you awake?

He has fallen asleep standing up. She gives him a tweak on the cheek and he wakes with a start.

FREDERICK

(Groggy)

... Mother?

SFX: thunder, lightning.

FREDERICK realizes where he is and deflates a little.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

My word. We are still having this conversation.

ISABELLA

Captain Tilney, is something the matter?

FREDERICK

Respectfully, Miss Thorpe, I find it tiresome that all conversation must revolve around you. I marvel that you seek companionship at all when, clearly, a simple hand mirror will suffice. I am afraid I must take my leave.

ISABELLA

To go defend the country?

FREDERICK

No, to escape you.

ISABELLA

Do tell me you are teasing.

FREDERICK

I can assure you, Miss Thorpe, I have no sense of humor whatsoever.

He gives ISABELLA a cursory nod and exits. ISABELLA, shocked, watches him go.

ISABELLA

The nerve! Oh, dear me. My cheeks are flushed well beyond what is considered socially acceptable. Even I do not look good with a ruddy complexion. (*Fans herself with her hand and begins to pace*) What to do? Consult a doctor? No. No one must see me in this awful state. But I must speak to someone. Someone with extensive experience in being so horribly rejected. (*Snaps fingers*) I know! I must find Catherine at once.

She exits as the spotlight goes out center aisle.

SFX: Ominous Caw, Caw, Caw!

Eerie lights come up on the full stage. The lighting outside the French doors suggests it's nearly dusk. Unseen by the audience, GENERAL TILNEY crouches behind the shrouded upstage furniture. ELEANOR uses large tongs to feed Norman.

SFX: Knock at front door.

ELEANOR opens it to CATHERINE in her traveling clothes and carrying a suitcase.

ELEANOR

Miss Morland! Come in, we have been expecting you.

She kisses her on both cheeks then appraises her at arm's length.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

Why, up close and in this evening twilight, you are really not that unattractive at all.

CATHERINE reacts to the "compliment," and steps inside.

CATHERINE

It is an honor to be here, Miss Tilney. Your home is extraordinary. I can only imagine the stories that lie beneath all of these mysterious linens.

ELEANOR

Ah, yes. Sincere apologies for the hideous nature of our decor. I do hope you are not allergic to unfathomable layers of dust. Cliffhanger Abbey has been in mourning since the untimely passing of our dear mother.

SFX: thunder, lightning.

CATHERINE

My condolences. You must miss her terribly.

ELEANOR

I do, indeed. *(Shakes head sadly)* Mother, mother, mother...

SFX: 3 loud claps of thunder and lightning, in rapid succession.

ELEANOR

I myself draped the furniture the day after her funeral. Father suggested I cover myself as well. But then he realized no one would be around to wait on him, wing and foot, at all hours of the day.

CATHERINE

I am sorry, did you say "wing?" And foot?

ELEANOR

"Hand." Hand and foot, of course. At any rate, perhaps your visit will lift this dreary old house out of its doldrums and restore life to its sorry, weathered bones.

CATHERINE

Oh, dear. I am not certain I brought the proper attire for that. I expected only to go for long walks while making idle conversation.

ELEANOR

There will be a touch of that as well.

SFX: Loud thumps.

CATHERINE

Is that General Tilney? I am very eager to make his acquaintance.

ELEANOR

No, that is my dear little bird, Norman, subduing a rodent. He – my father, not the bird – has yet to come up.

CATHERINE

From London?

ELEANOR

From the basement. Father spends a great deal of time down there. But as night falls, he rises, so I expect he shall join us shortly.

SFX: Louder than usual Caw!

ELEANOR

Norman again. Pay him no mind. He is only begging for more of his favorite dinner. Fingers.

CATHERINE

I beg your pardon??

ELEANOR

Dear me, did I over-share? Henry cautions me against that. I meant, of course, to say "table scraps." Appendages are so very difficult to find nowadays.

CATHERINE

(Nervous laugh)

Is that so?

CATHERINE notices ELEANOR staring at her hands and quickly hides them behind her back.

ELEANOR

If it pleases you, Miss Morland, I must check on our evening meal. Do make yourself comfortable.

ELEANOR gestures grandly to the dreary, covered room. There is nowhere to sit so CATHERINE sits on her suitcase.

ELEANOR (CONT'D)

A word of caution before I go. One must never venture up the stairs to the third floor. Father strictly forbids it.

CATHERINE

A mysterious room. How Radcliffian! And what happens if one does? Ventures up the forbidden stairs, that is?

ELEANOR

I am not exactly certain. No one has ever dared to try.

ELEANOR exits stage left. CATHERINE begins to peek under the drop cloths. She stops to stare at General Tilney's portrait.

CATHERINE

How darkly terrifying! It is as though the eyes are following my every movement.

Engrossed by the portrait, she doesn't hear GENERAL TILNEY rise from behind the shrouded furniture. He sneaks up behind her.

GENERAL TILNEY

Welcome to my home, Miss Morland.

CATHERINE

(Turns, startled)

General Tilney! Indeed, the pleasure is all mine. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have been invited to an estate as— *(Hesitates)* —as unconventional as Cliffhanger Abbey.

She places a hand over her heart, gathering her composure.

GENERAL TILNEY

My keen sense of hearing detects that your heart is racing, sending fresh blood coursing through your veins. Did I startle you?

CATHERINE

Heavens, no. That is to say, not much. I read quite a bit of Gothic fiction and as such do not frighten easily.

GENERAL TILNEY

(With an evil smile)

Then I shall try harder next time.

He begins to walk slowly, menacingly, toward CATHERINE. She inches downstage.

GENERAL TILNEY

You have mentioned that you read. Does your father own a library?

CATHERINE

No, sir.

GENERAL TILNEY

A university?

CATHERINE

Again, sir, I apologize. But no.

GENERAL TILNEY

A profitable bookstore?

CATHERINE

No.

GENERAL TILNEY

Might one assume, then, that he does not work because he is independently wealthy?

FREDERICK enters from behind stage right curtain. CATHERINE doesn't realize she's about to back into him.

CATHERINE

General Tilney, I mean no disrespect but I am uncertain as to why such inquiries about my beloved father are of any importance.

FREDERICK

What inquiries?

CATHERINE spins around and sees FREDERICK behind her. She does a double-take.

CATHERINE

Pardon my gaze, sir, but I am having the strangest sense of déjà vu. Have we met?

FREDERICK

In an anthropomorphic sense? No.

FREDERICK and GENERAL TILNEY begin to close in on her.

CATHERINE

How peculiar. I have a nagging sense our paths have crossed, but I simply cannot put a finger on it.

ELEANOR returns.

ELEANOR

(Eagerly)

Did someone say fingers?

GENERAL TILNEY

Not now, Eleanor!

ELEANOR looks from her father to her brother and realizes she has interrupted something. Her shoulders slump.

ELEANOR

Dinner is served. Forgive me.

CATHERINE

I am certain everything will be wonderful, Miss Tilney. But should we not wait for Henry? *(Realizes her faux pas)* That is to say, the younger Mr. Tilney?

FREDERICK

Heavens, no. My brother is quite capable of monitoring his own punctuality. He is, after all, a grown man. *(Then, pouting)* And he never waits for me.

ELEANOR

I wonder what might be keeping Henry? I do hope nothing untoward has happened.

CATHERINE

The world is rife with potential disaster. Kidnapping, murder...

ELEANOR

Stake to the heart.

Daggers from GENERAL TILNEY and FREDERICK.

FREDERICK

(To ELEANOR)

This is why we ask that you not speak more than three words at a time.

GENERAL TILNEY

Children! Need I remind you, we have a special guest in our home? If some horrible tragedy involving buckets of garlic has befallen Henry, we shall hear about it directly. Until then, let us retire to the dining room for some pleasant conversation about Miss Morland's assets. *(Corrects himself)* Er – interests.

An awkward silence descends. NORMAN caws loudly as the lights go down on the main stage.

A spotlight comes up center aisle. A distraught ISABELLA talks with MRS. ALLEN, who sips calmly from a tea cup.

ISABELLA

Respectfully, Mrs. Allen, I do not believe you are taking my request seriously. I must see Catherine at once.

MRS. ALLEN

My dear girl, I heard you the first eleven times. Five cups of tea and two trips to the toilet later, my answer remains unchanged. Catherine is simply not here.

ISABELLA

I find that rather difficult to believe. What on earth could Catherine possibly have to do?

MRS. ALLEN

Actually, Miss Thorpe, Catherine's social calendar is suddenly quite lively. At the request of General Tilney, she is visiting Cliffhanger Abbey and shall not return until Monday.

ISABELLA

General Tilney? I see the good Captain Frederick is now disguising himself as an officer of higher rank. No doubt a pathetic attempt at making himself appear more important. (*Scoffs*) The vanity. What did I ever see in him?

MRS. ALLEN

You poor creature. I sense you are quite distressed about all of this. Perhaps some tea will calm your spirits. (*Offering*) Oolong?

ISABELLA

And a fond farewell to you, too, Mrs. Allen. I must rescue Catherine at once from the insidiousness that is "General" Frederick Tilney.

ISABELLA rolls up her sleeves, determined, as the spotlight goes out.

The eerie lights come up onstage. CATHERINE and ELEANOR, seated on the still-shrouded chairs, play chess.

Outside the French doors, a HEADLESS HORSEMAN chases an IGOR SCIENTIST carrying a pumpkin.

ELEANOR

Are you enjoying your holiday at Cliffhanger Abbey thus far, Miss Morland?

CATHERINE

Oh yes indeed, Miss Tilney, although I implore you to abandon the constraints of formality and call me Catherine.

ELEANOR

And I in turn must insist you address me as Eleanor.

CATHERINE

A request I can fulfill most enthusiastically! Might I confide in you, Eleanor?

ELEANOR

But of course!

CATHERINE

I am hoping before the season is out that a certain surprise engagement may be announced...

ELEANOR

(Claps her hands in glee)

Are you speaking of a match between the House of Morland and the House of Tilney?

CATHERINE

Would that please you?

ELEANOR

Beyond words, dearest Catherine! I must confess to you that I was afraid my suspicions of his romantic interest were a product of wishful thinking.

CATHERINE

Then how happy I am to set any fears of perpetual spinsterhood to rest.

ELEANOR

You must be quite close in order to be the very first person to whom he would confide his best kept secret.

CATHERINE

Under the circumstances, why should that be so unusual?

ELEANOR

In truth, I had rather hoped to be the one to tell you.

CATHERINE

Oh what jolly sisters we are to be, Eleanor, each more giddy than the other to be the bearer of such exciting news.

ELEANOR

Would it be too soon of me to insist on the role of maid of honor?

CATHERINE

Why, the sooner the better! You need not ask twice, for I can think of no one more admirably suited to the task.

ELEANOR

How lovely...if not a smidge of a bit boastful.

CATHERINE

And, of course, I shall insist on doing the same for you!

ELEANOR

Doing the same what?

CATHERINE

Being your maid of honor if you should ever marry. It would only be fair, I think.

ELEANOR

Your train of thought appears to have gently jumped its track, Catherine. I was referring to my wedding to your brother James.

CATHERINE

James has asked you to be his wife?!

ELEANOR

Not as yet but you have clearly revealed that he plans to do so. Has his impending proposal of marriage not been the very subject of our present discourse?

CATHERINE

I cannot fathom how you would jump to such a conclusion, Eleanor, when I have most transparently been sharing my feelings about your brother Henry.

ELEANOR

Has he spoken to your father?

CATHERINE

No. *(Beat)* Has James spoken to yours?

ELEANOR

No.

CATHERINE

Oh dear. I hope our fathers shall not become respective obstacles and impediments to our happiness.

ELEANOR

Mine, I am afraid, shall prove the more contentious of the two.

CATHERINE

How so?

ELEANOR

Father will never permit me to marry a man without a sizable income, nor will he welcome a daughter-in-law who cannot deliver a substantive dowry to Cliffhanger Abbey. That you and dear James are siblings in the same household...

CATHERINE

Oh dear. This does not bode well for a happily ever after.

THE HORSEMAN, now with the pumpkin as his head, crosses past French doors in triumph as the lights go down on.

A spotlight comes up in center aisle where FREDERICK approaches his impatient father.

GENERAL TILNEY

What took you so long? Have you searched her room as I instructed?

FREDERICK

From top to bottom, bottom to top, side to side and back again.

GENERAL TILNEY

And?

FREDERICK

Does that not cover the extent of my search?

GENERAL TILNEY

(Smacks him upside the head)

Fool! I was inquiring what you discovered!

FREDERICK

Curiously, nothing to speak of. If she has jewels, she chose not to bring them.

GENERAL TILNEY

What about money?

FREDERICK

A paltry ten guineas tucked in the toe of a shoe.

GENERAL TILNEY

And her clothes – what did they reveal?

FREDERICK

Only what we already knew – that she has incredibly deplorable taste. Personally, I would not be caught dead in any of them.

GENERAL TILNEY

One would certainly hope not, Frederick.

FREDERICK

So what are we to do now?

GENERAL TILNEY

Her presence here has been a complete waste of time. We must dispatch her as soon as possible.

FREDERICK

(His eyes lighting)

In the usual manner?

GENERAL TILNEY

The usual manner would attract far too much attention.

FREDERICK responds with a gesture of "rats!"

GENERAL TILNEY (CONT'D)

At the first opportunity, we shall stuff her into a carriage and send her home.

FREDERICK

But how are we to explain it to Eleanor? For inexplicable reasons, she seems to have grown quite fond of our guest's companionship.

GENERAL TILNEY

I shall task your sister with enough chores so as to keep her busy and not notice Miss Morland's departure.

FREDERICK scowls.

GENERAL TILNEY (CONT'D)

Your scowl suggests disagreement. I do not like disagreement, Frederick.

FREDERICK

I was only having a thought, Father.

GENERAL TILNEY

Ah, that explains your brutally pained expression.

FREDERICK

What if she has already seen or heard too much to now put our lives in jeopardy?

GENERAL TILNEY

Then perhaps it may be necessary for Miss Morland to meet with a most unfortunate...
accident.

FREDERICK grins, rubs his hands together and proceeds to give his best evil laugh. He stops when he notices his father is glaring at him.

FREDERICK

Yes, of course. You are right again, Father. As always.

GENERAL TILNEY now laughs (Without FREDERICK joining in) as the spotlight goes out.

SFX: Conga-line music.

As the eerie lights come up on stage, a line of dancing SKELETONS crosses from stage left to stage right, passing behind an oblivious CATHERINE who sits on the shrouded loveseat reading a book.

SFX: Knock on front door.

She waits to see if someone will answer it. The knock comes again. She sets her book aside, gets up and opens the door to an old crone (ISABELLA in disguise) in a black shawl and carrying a basket.

CATHERINE

Why good evening, old crone. How may I help you on this dark but not yet stormy night?

ISABELLA

(Disguising her voice)

Would this be Cliffhanger Abbey, dearie?

CATHERINE

Why yes it is. Were you expected by the household this evening?

ISABELLA sweeps her aside and enters without invitation.

ISABELLA

Oh gracious no. I always prefer a good old-fashioned surprise. *(Evil cackle)* Is General Tilney in residence?

CATHERINE

Regretfully no. But might I deliver a message for you upon his return?

ISABELLA reaches into the basket and withdraws a large, shiny red apple.

ISABELLA

Would you be so kind as to give him this?

CATHERINE

What a beautiful apple! And curiously engraved with his name.

ISABELLA

Do tell him to eat it as soon as possible - I should so hate for it to spoil. (*Another evil cackle*) Keep the basket as well. One less thing for a decrepit old crone to carry.

CATHERINE

Might I tell him who called?

ISABELLA

Oh I believe his memory will supply that answer at first bite.

She starts to go. CATHERINE glances down and notices something.

CATHERINE

Excuse me, but—

ISABELLA

Yes, dearie?

CATHERINE

If I am not mistaken, there is something uncannily familiar about your shoes.

ISABELLA

My what?

CATHERINE

I know of only one person with exactly the same pair. (*Beat*) Isabella? Is that you?

In exasperation, ISABELLA pulls off the crone mask and drops the shawl to reveal she's in a drop-dead gorgeous gown.

ISABELLA

There! Are you quite happy?

CATHERINE

Happy to see you? To be honest, not so much really. Did you actually expect me to forget so quickly that you broke dear James's heart?

ISABELLA

Who?

CATHERINE

James? James Morland? My brother?

ISABELLA

Oh pfffft! Water under the proverbial bridge. What I meant was whether you are quite happy to be ensconced in the home of a duplicitous scoundrel whose only intention is to wrongfully lead you astray?

CATHERINE sets basket on dining table.

CATHERINE

I am not ensconced at all, Isabella, but only visiting for a pleasant weekend. And as for your cruel assertions of any wrongdoing on the part of—

ISABELLA

Cluelessly foolishly dense little Catherine! Can it be that I have come too late to your rescue? That already you have been tricked into believing a promise of marriage?

CATHERINE

I have not yet said "yes," Isabella, nor for that matter, has he even asked, but I assure you that when he does—

ISABELLA

You shall look him directly in the eye and tell him—

CATHERINE

"Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!"

ISABELLA

That was not the answer about to leave my lips.

CATHERINE

Is it jealousy on your part that seeks to aggressively dissuade me from marrying the love of my life?

ISABELLA

You do not know the first thing about him!

CATHERINE

But I intend to spend a lifetime learning.

ISABELLA

Then I regret we have nothing further to say to one another. *(Collects the mask and shawl)*
Goodbye, Catherine. Forever!

*ISABELLA dramatically sails out the front door just as
FREDERICK enters from stage left.*

FREDERICK

Were you talking to someone just now?

CATHERINE jumps.

CATHERINE

Oh Captain Tilney, you startled me! Dear me, there it is again. That odd sense of déjà vu.

She looks from FREDERICK to where ISABELLA just fled. Then back to FREDERICK. Something clicks.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

My goodness, I have just remembered where our paths have crossed. It was at a ball in the Upper Rooms.

FREDERICK

Could you be more specific? That is a bit like saying we met here on planet Earth, on a day that the wind blew.

CATHERINE

You were courting my friend, Isabella.

FREDERICK

Who?

CATHERINE

Isabella? Isabella Thorpe? My friend?

FREDERICK

Never heard of her.

CATHERINE

But you were to be engaged.

FREDERICK

Respectfully, I meet so many women and for such short durations, it is wholly impractical to learn any of their names. Much less remember them. (*Noticing apple*)
Look, fruit!

FREDERICK picks up apple and polishes it on his shirt.

CATHERINE

I mean no offense, Captain Tilney, but that apple is intended for your father.

FREDERICK

Surely you are mistaken, Miss – Moribund?

CATHERINE

Morland.

FREDERICK

Whatever. Apples are like little flakes of snow, you know. They are all quite identical.

CATHERINE

Actually, no two are identical and—

He prepares to take a bite.

CATHERINE

Wait! That apple has your father's name carved into it!

FREDERICK freezes, terrified, when he sees the General's name. He puts the apple back into the basket.

FREDERICK

I was not very hungry, anyway. *(Beat)* So. If I may be so inquisitive, what are your plans for the day's remainder? *(Before she can respond)* You simply must visit our third floor.

CATHERINE

But Eleanor cautioned against this. Very much so. She said the third floor is strictly forbidden.

FREDERICK

Oh, pshaw. She says that to all the guests. It is only so she does not have to clean yet another room.

CATHERINE

Are you quite certain? I should hate to impose.

FREDERICK

I can assure you, it is no imposition at all. What good is a well-appointed room if there is no one available to admire it?

He shoos CATHERINE towards the staircase.

FREDERICK (CONT'D)

Just remember to walk carefully. Heaven forbid you to miss a step and plunge to your death with a broken neck.

FREDERICK issues his best evil laugh and exits upstage through the French doors. CATHERINE begins to pace.

CATHERINE

That does not sound like Eleanor at all, telling lies simply to avoid house cleaning.
(Looks at staircase) Were I to get caught, I could simply tell the truth. Captain Tilney
granted me permission to loiter about upstairs.

Very carefully, she walks up the stairs. The main stage lights dim as the light behind the scrim reveals lots of boxes, cobwebs and...the ghost of MRS. TILNEY, frantically waving her arms at CATHERINE.

CATHERINE

Mrs. Tilney? Mrs. Tilney is that you?

SFX: thunder, lightning.

MRS. TILNEY

Murder...

CATHERINE

I realize we have not been formally introduced, but I do hope that—

MRS. TILNEY

(Louder, spookier)

Husband Murder! Murder! Murder!

CATHERINE

Some other time, then!

The scrim light goes out as CATHERINE scrambles down the stairs – and into the arms of HENRY – who has just entered through the French doors.

CATHERINE

Mr. Tilney! Whatever are you doing here?

HENRY

I live here, Miss Morland. And that is the staircase closest to my chamber. May I not, in my turn, ask how you came here?

CATHERINE

I was exploring the third floor. Captain Tilney gave me permission.

HENRY

Captain Tilney, my brother?

CATHERINE

Yes, yes. The one who wears the military uniform yet never appears to serve?

HENRY

That would be him.

CATHERINE

Honestly, Mr. Tilney, we have more important matters to discuss. I have discovered some most distressing information indeed. It is about your mother.

SFX: thunder, lightning.

HENRY

My mother?

SFX: thunder, lightning.

CATHERINE

I know she did not die of natural causes. Or illness. It was something far less pardonable.

HENRY

And you arrived at this conclusion how? By examining the disposition of her dressing closets?

CATHERINE

I hardly think that ridicule is necessary. *(Then)* I saw her ghost.

HENRY

And from that, you have derived my father is a murderer?

CATHERINE

He might have included that detail with his invitation.

HENRY

My dear Miss Morland, my father may be blunt, and stern, and shallower than a snake's grave—but he has welcomed you into his home. To be rewarded with wanton trespassing and unfounded accusations is beyond what any immortal – pardon me, mortal – should have to endure.

HENRY crosses to French doors.

HENRY (CONT'D)

It would be most agreeable if we never saw one another again, Miss Morland. Good day.

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes

PRODUCTION NOTES NEXT PAGE

PRODUCTION NOTES



CAST: 5 female, 7 male + extras

COSTUMES: Period clothing of 1815 except as noted

FURNITURE: Two wingback chairs, loveseat, coffee table, two bookcases, daybed, writing desk and chair, dining table, tri-fold screen

PROPS:

Writing Materials	Mirror
Letter	Newspaper
Huge Crow	Serve Ware and Goblets
Falconer's Glove	Huge Bat
Broom	Cauldron
Ladle	Severed Hand
Frog	Justin Bieber Picture
2 Teacups	Folded Newspaper
Knitting Needles and Yarn	Box of Tissues
Scrub Brush	Blanket
Boxes	Chessboard
Pumpkin	Free-Standing Candelabra
Sheets	Dance Cards
Rose	Hat Boxes
BBQ Tongs	Drop Cloths
Suitcase	Old Crone Mask
Basket with an apple	Bridal Bouquets

LIGHTING AND SOUND: As indicated.