

CHAPTER 1



The village of North Braymore was abuzz with gossip. After an exceedingly long life, Lord Chester Winthorpe had finally passed on, leaving Draysett Hall unoccupied. His only son, William, had been taken from this world a great many years ago, which left his grandson, Theodore, as the only living heir.

According to the local gossip mill, Lord Theodore Winthorpe was a dashing young man with quick wit and an adventurous spirit. He lived a carefree life of frippery and frivolity in London with frequent travels abroad. And most importantly, he remained a bachelor.

The mothers of North Braymore were overjoyed upon hearing this news, and the wheels in their minds started spinning straight-away. It didn't matter that Lord Winthorpe would most likely marry a young lady of a similar social standing; they got swept up in the romance of it all, imagining the young man falling to his knees at the sight of their beautiful daughters as he denounced the antiquated tradition of marrying only within one's own social class. Needless to say, the local merchants were pleased with all the sales of lace, silk, muslin and cotton the women snatched up to make darling new dresses for their daughters.

The girls could speak of nothing else as they counted down the days to Lord Winthorpe's arrival. Leaning their heads towards one another, they speculated about the young lord's preferences when it came to the fairer sex. Beneath the giggles, however, there was a sense of fierce competition amongst the girls, not to mention their mothers.

And then we come to the case of Jacinta Buchanan. Like all the other unmarried girls in the village, she wanted very much to become Lady Winthorpe, however she harbored absolutely no romantic notions to cloud her determination in regards to the matter. The idea of binding herself in marriage to the young lord came to her only one day prior to his arrival.

She was sitting in the drawing room of her Uncle Cameron's house, working on her sampler, when her uncle's wife, Marjorie, came swanning in, wearing a sparkling diamond and emerald necklace with the biggest gemstones Jacinta had ever seen.

"Jacinta, dear," said Marjorie. "Mrs. Wandsworth will be arriving any moment now. Of course you're more than welcome to join me in receiving her, but perhaps you'd rather adjourn to another room."

In her not so subtle way, Marjorie was asking her to vacate the drawing room, but Jacinta stayed right where she was, transfixed by the gleaming gems dangling from the vile woman's neck.

"That's quite an impressive necklace," she said. "Is it new?"

Marjorie shot her a nasty look. "As a matter of fact, it is. Cameron bought it for me when we were in Paris last month."

Jacinta sat there shaking her head, fuming.

"I must insist that you leave the room at once," Marjorie said. "I won't have you spoiling Mrs. Wandsworth's visit with your sullen face and petulant demeanor. Go now."

"Gladly."

Her petticoats gave a defiant rustle as Jacinta left the room in a huff, and somehow managed not to throw her sampler in Marjorie's smug face. Oh, the woman was horrid, and so was

Cameron. Greedy, disrespectful, disgusting human beings, the pair of them. At the rate they were spending, they would deplete her father's estate in no time at all.

Jacinta's beloved papa had passed away over the winter, which left her an orphan, for her mother had been taken only days after she was born. For reasons she couldn't begin to fathom, her papa had arranged for his younger brother Cameron to look after Jacinta's care as well as her financial interests in the event of his death.

Cameron was only too happy to do so. Since the very moment he took control of his late brother's estate, he'd treated himself and Marjorie to all the perks of a privileged life. Straightaway, Cameron purchased the finest house for sale in North Braymore and filled it with the most expensive and painstakingly crafted pieces of furniture he could find. He sought out the best tailors and dressmakers in all of England to create a lavish new wardrobe for both himself and his wife. The diamond and emerald necklace was only one of the many pieces of jewelry Marjorie had recently acquired. Her once modest collection of adornments now included an excess of pieces with stones so large Jacinta found them to be horribly garish. In addition to the luxurious clothing and the gaudy jewelry, Cameron bought a brand new landau and hired four new servants. Only the best for Marjorie and himself. They dined on the most expensive, imported delicacies and drank the finest of champagne. The greedy pair had already taken several holidays on the Continent and there was talk about the two of them sailing to New York City for a lavish fortnight in the very near future.

It just burned Jacinta up inside to watch it happening, and what made it worse was that there was nothing she could do about it. It wasn't about the money. Jacinta had never been one of those girls who swooned at the sight of a sparkling gemstone or an exquisitely constructed gown. No, what bothered her so was the careless way that Cameron and Marjorie were tearing down the legacy that her father had devoted his life to creating.

Douglas Buchanan, the son of a humble blacksmith, had

defeated the odds by conquering the world of business and by the time of his death, he was an industry titan. In addition to the bar iron factories he owned all over Shropshire, he had controlling financial interest in one of the top five railway companies in England. In addition, he had purchased Fairhaven House, a great estate in Shropshire that now stood unoccupied, and he also owned a number of properties in the London neighborhood of Mayfair.

To Jacinta's knowledge, her uncle was merely depleting the money in her father's bank accounts rather than selling off his assets, but she knew it was only a matter of time before the properties—or God forbid—the factories would be sold.

Her only hope of preserving her papa's legacy was to marry a man of sound morals and high principles. Unfortunately, this was not likely to happen—not in the foreseeable future, anyway. Setting aside the fact that Jacinta had never had any particular desire to marry and was quite content with the thought of living out the rest of her life as a maiden, there were really no feasible candidates in terms of suitors.

Her papa's sizeable income had provided her with an exemplary education, and she possessed as much grace and gentility as the daughters of the nobility. However, she was most certainly *not* a daughter of the nobility. She belonged to the curious class of the *nouveau riche*, which made finding a suitable husband rather complicated. The majority of gentlemen surely preferred their wives to come from a similar pedigree as they themselves did.

Jacinta wouldn't mind being courted by a member of the upper middle class. Perhaps she would meet an agreeable clergyman or possibly a physician who had no desire to squander away her father's estate. She felt she could be content with such a betrothal, but there simply weren't any bachelors that fit the description within a reasonable distance of the village. To find such a man, she would need to travel further afield.

And such a journey was simply out of the question. She had already brought up the matter to Cameron, and he had forbidden it

straightaway. He spouted a whole lot of nonsense about how she mustn't even think of engaging in a courtship, much less a betrothal so soon after her dear papa's passing. He told her she must remain in mourning for a year at the very least before she was to think of such things.

What a load of rubbish. Jacinta knew full well that Cameron only opposed the suggestion because if she were to marry, he would no longer have access to his late brother's riches once the dowry fell into the hands of Jacinta's husband. He really was a heartless demon, that man. She found it positively bewildering that he and her papa were of the same blood.

Once she reached the top of the staircase, Jacinta stomped into her bedchamber, kicked the door shut behind her and flopped down on the bed. Blinking back tears at the injustice of her predicament, being at the mercy of her horrid uncle, she felt very hopeless, indeed.

Later that day, Jacinta found herself to be in better spirits. Or to be more accurate perhaps, she was more resigned. There was not a thing she could do about her papa's estate for the time being, and Cameron couldn't really deplete the entire thing in the space of one year. At least she hoped not. She only had to wait eight more months. By that time it would have been a year since her papa's passing and as soon as she was permitted, she would marry the very first honest, kind-hearted man she met. Upon bestowing the dowry, her papa's legacy would be beyond reach of Cameron's greedy paws, once and for all.

Jacinta was sitting on one of the stone benches in the garden on the side of the house, thumbing through a book of poetry when she heard a nearby door open. A burst of female laughter followed, and Jacinta tilted her head, her curiosity piqued.

"Oh, how you make me laugh, child!" said one of the women. "Think of how all them haybags will be looking when they find out!"

"Flat old fools, the lot of them," another woman replied.

"Ah, don't be so hard on the poor dears," the first woman said. "Not their fault they don't know. Get the tub and bring it over here, would you, love? Me arms been aching like the devil."

And that solved the question of who the women were. It had to be the laundry maid doing a bit of washing with the help of the scullery maid. But another question remained: who were these women they spoke of and what made them so foolish?

After a few sounds of the washerwomen at work, the first one laughed quietly under her breath and said, "Was it really all that bad?"

"As sure as I'm standing here," her companion replied. "According to me sister, Draysett Hall is a right rookery—stained carpets, broken windows, broken light fixtures, torn cushions and about two inches of dust covering the whole lot. She said the walls look like they're crumbling, too. Said she was happy to get out of there before the roof came crashing down on her head."

"My heavens!" the first woman exclaimed, thus expressing Jacinta's sentiments.

This was staggering news, indeed. Jacinta, like all the other residents of North Braymore, was under the impression that Lord Winthorpe's country estate was a grand old manor house.

"I expect the young lord will arrive with a fortune to repair the old place," the woman went on to say. "What d'you reckon?"

"I reckon he'll arrive with nothing but the clothes on his back."

"Let's not be silly, Gracie. You speak of his lordship as if he was as low a muck snipe."

"Without the title he would be! Pound to a penny, he'll arrive in the village without so much as a pocketful of farthings, and yet he'll expect us to treat him like a king."

"He must have a fair share of means. After all, Mr. Harrison brought your sister in to interview for the maid's position."

"And me sister swears on her very own soul that the interview was all for nought. Says the young lord would never in a million years be able to scrape together enough to pay her measly wages."

Jacinta was utterly fascinated by the conversation. Imagine a noble family such as the Winthorpes falling into financial ruin...

"I reckon that would explain why his lordship has managed with only one manservant and one cook all these years," said the washerwoman. "I had him down as an eccentric, but it might be he couldn't afford to pay any other servants."

"Too right." Her companion laughed. "I know 'tis awful bad of me, but I can't wait to see the faces of all them gulpy haybags when they realize they're trying to marry their daughters off to the pauper of the peerage."

"Shame on you, Gracie!"

The servants went on to speculate on Lord Winthorpe's financial status, but Jacinta's mind was whirling at such a rate, she couldn't be bothered with listening. If what the maid said was true and Lord Winthorpe arrived in North Braymore without the means to repair the manor house—not to mention the funds to support the sort of lifestyle he had surely grown accustomed to—he would find himself in dire straits, indeed.

He would be forced to marry a girl whose dowry would provide the necessary funds. Given his compromised situation, he might even consider marrying beneath his social class if the terms were agreeable. He might even agree to marry *her*, to marry Jacinta. If she were in his shoes, she certainly would be open to the possibility.

Before she got too carried away with the idea, Jacinta reminded herself that she didn't have the foggiest idea what sort of person Lord Winthrope was. For all she knew, he could be just as greedy as her uncle, and her papa's legacy would be no safer in his hands than in Cameron's. She wasn't foolish enough to think the costs of repairing Draysett Hall would not be considerable. They would, of course. Even so, she felt confident that she would be able to work out some sort of agreement that satisfied both parties. Lord Winthrope needed money; Jacinta needed a husband to safeguard

her papa's legacy. It was perfect. Or at the very least, it had the potential to be.

Closing the book of poetry, she got to her feet, opened the door to the solarium, stepped inside and pulled it softly shut behind her, taking care to keep the noise down so the maids wouldn't have to worry about being overheard. She ducked into Cameron's office to borrow a fountain pen and took a few sheets of notepaper before heading back upstairs to her bedchamber. She had quite a few figures to work out and other details to consider before approaching Lord Winthorpe with her proposal.