

His Precious Inheritance

Chapter One

August 1878

Chautauqua Lake, New York

“What is amusing you, Clarice?”

Clarice Gordon met her mother’s gaze in the mirror and the smile on her face turned into a grin. “I was remembering the flabbergasted look on the milliner’s face when I refused to have any adornment put on my hat.” She settled the brown felt hat forward of the thick swirl of hair knotted at the back of her head, tilted the front edge of the brim down toward her forehead then snatched up her hat pin and anchored it in place.

“Some Brown-eyed-Susans would add a touch of color. A cluster of them at the front would look pretty.”

There was a wistful note in her mother’s voice. “No doubt. But I’m not interested in looking pretty, Mama.” She adjusted the three tabs of fabric that fell like a flat cravat from the base of her high, stand-up collar then tugged the hem of her bodice down to straighten the row of buttons that marched from beneath the tabs to her narrow waist. *Plain and serviceable. Perfect.* She smoothed her hands over the front of the long skirt and turned from the mirror. “I’m a career woman. I want the men I encounter in my endeavors to take me seriously, not want to court me.” She left the rest unsaid.

“Not all men are like your father and brothers, Clarice.”

There was a resignation in her mother’s voice that plucked at her heart. The mention of her father and brothers chased any commiseration away. “I suppose not, Mama.” It was the best she could do by way of capitulation. The hardness in her heart would not yield to any appeal for softening. One look at her bedridden mother assured that. It also affirmed her determination to never marry and put herself under the grinding thumb of a man.

She pulled on her half gloves and walked to the bed. “Lean forward and I’ll fluff your pillows before I leave.” She pulled them from behind her mother, pummeled and replaced them. “Let’s see, you have fresh water to drink... And Mrs. Duncan will come in throughout the day

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with meals and to help you with your private needs...”

“Stop fretting, Clarice. I’ll be fine. I’m not used to being fussed over.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. But that’s the reason I brought you here to live with me, Mama. So I could take care of you.” She looked down at her mother’s work-worn hands resting against the quilt that covered her legs and tried for her sake to swallow back the bitterness. It was wasted effort. The resentment she held against her father for working her mother into a frail, bedridden woman was a part of her. Her brothers were as bad with their selfish demands. But her father’s cruelty was the example they followed.

Her face drew taut as it always did at the memories. Her father and brothers had treated her mother as their personal slave. And they’d tried to do the same to her.

God bless Miss Hartmore for rescuing her and making her education possible! If her teacher hadn’t whisked her away from her father’s tyrannical grasp, she would still be tending the garden and chickens and pigs and scrubbing piles of their filthy oil-coated work shirts and pants and socks with no hope of escape.

And for saving her mother all these years later. When she thought of her mother lying on the grass by a basket of wet laundry and unable to rise... And of her father declaring he had no use for a cripple and wanted no part of the burden of caring for one! His own *wife*, who had destroyed her health carrying out his demands.

She spun from the bed and walked through the archway to the desk in the small turret that formed the outside wall of her room, trembling from head to toe. She supposed she should be grateful for her father’s callus attitude, as he’d made no objection when Miss Hartmore took her mother into her home. That had made it easy for her to go and bring her mother back here where she could care for her. If only she could have done so sooner! But the train fares had taken all she’d been able to set aside for the purpose and a bit more. Her stomach churned. How was she to manage her mother’s care? How was she to pay for the increase in room and board?

She snatched her writing box off of the desk and headed for the bedroom door, the short train of her skirt bouncing across the floor with her jerky stride.

“You need to let go of the anger, Clarice. You need to—“

“Please don’t talk to me of forgiveness, Mama!” She whipped around and stepped to the bed. “You’re lying there unable to walk because your husband and sons worked you to the point of crippling you. They are cold, cruel, *heartless* men. They don’t deserve forgiveness!”

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“If they deserved it, they wouldn’t need it.” The hard calluses on her mother’s fingers and palms rasped against the soft skin of her fingers. “It’s not for their sake you need to forgive them, Clarice. It’s for yours—and mine. I couldn’t bear it if the anger you hold inside ruins your life.”

“The way my Father tried to?” She choked back a torrent of useless words. “The anger won’t hurt me, Mama. It has driven me to succeed, to become a teacher, like Miss Hartmore.” She took a calming breath and curved her lips into a smile. “And I truly enjoy writing articles for newsletters and magazines. I’m hoping that one of my articles will one day favorably impress the editor of a daily newspaper, and he will offer me a job as a journalist.” Her smile faded. “Though that’s not likely. It’s a man’s world—at present.”

“And you believe this suffrage movement you talk about will change that? Women have been trying to gain equal rights for years with little success.” Her mother shook her head. “Only God can change a man’s heart, Clarice.”

There was no point in trying to debate with her mother about God. “Well, perhaps He is using the suffragists to do so. Oh, I almost forgot...” She reached into her pocket, fingered the two coins she had left after paying the extra board for her mother then pulled out one of them. “Here Mama, you may need something when I’m not here to go to the store. If so, I’m sure Mrs. Duncan will fetch it for you.” She leaned down and kissed her mother’s cheek. “I have to hurry or I’ll miss the steamer for Fair Point. I’ll be back tonight, Mama. Mrs. Duncan will look in on you.” She relaxed her knuckle-aching grip on her writing case and hurried out the door.

Charles Thornberg buttoned the starched collar and cuffs onto his fresh white shirt then opened the small drawer in the center of his chestnut wardrobe. Light glinted on the silver pocket watch with its attached fob and the pair of silver-framed carnelian cuff links that rested there. The silver initials set into the brownish-red stones of the links gleamed up at him. *TJT. Thomas Jefferson Thornberg.*

Charles lifted the cuff links out of the drawer and stared down at them resting on his hand—all he had left of his father, thanks to his mother’s ambition and incompetence. She had lost everything else, including their house and furnishings, when she’d taken over the running of his father’s prosperous investment business on his death and driven it into bankruptcy. Of course, he was already living in the boarding school by then. She’d sent him away the day after they buried his father.

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His fingers curled over the cuff links, pressed them against his palm. He'd been so frightened when the strange man came to take him away he'd snuck into his father's dressing room and grabbed the cuff links to take with him. They were his father's favorites, and holding them had made him feel better—braver. He'd clutched them in his hand for the entire two-day long journey to the boarding school.

His face tightened. Five years old and left all alone in a strange new place with no one to ease his fears or comfort him over his father's death, all because his mother wanted a *career* for which she was patently unsuited. As she had proven. He poked the studs through the small slits in his shirt cuffs, flipped crosswise the tiny bars to hold the treasured cufflinks in place, then tucked his shirt tails into his pants.

He hadn't had a home from that day—until he'd bought the *Jamestown Journal* newspaper and this house last month. He still remembered the bust of Shakespeare he'd stared at while the dean of the boarding school had given him the news that his bankrupt mother had remarried and gone to live with her new husband in Europe, along with the assurance that his schooling had been paid for, as if that made his mother's abandonment of him all right. He'd been unwanted, *discarded* to live in school dormitory rooms with pendulum clocks that ticked away the lonely years and then in rooms in boarding houses wherever his work as a roving reporter took him. But he'd survived. Even prospered.

He swept a satisfied glance around his richly furnished bedroom then lifted a doubled strip of dark blue silk off a peg, wrapped it around his neck and secured it with a simple knot in the front. A smile touched his lips. That wandering life was over now.

In the end, he had inherited more than the cufflinks. He'd had one more bit of communication from his mother—a letter she'd left with the dean to be given him the day he finished school. It contained information about a trust fund his father had established for him that was to be his upon graduation. By making wise investments, he had turned the money from the trust into a small fortune. And in doing so, he'd discovered his father's talent for making advantageous business decisions ran in his blood. *That* was the best inheritance of all.

He buttoned on his vest, took the watch from the drawer and tucked it into his vest pocket letting the fob dangle, then shrugged into his suit coat and glanced in the mirror. *Uneven*. He frowned at the short ends of the blue silk tie resting against his white shirt, adjusted the knot until the ends hung even, then folded the stiff collar down over the blue silk encircling his neck.

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The pendulum clock hanging between the two windows on the far bedroom wall gave a soft gong to announce the half-hour. He tucked his steamer ticket and money into the inside pocket of his suit coat, grabbed his top hat and gloves, closed the wardrobe's double doors and hurried from the bedroom. He could hear Mrs. Hotchkiss working in the kitchen as he trotted down the stairs to the entrance hall and out the front door.

The balmy morning promised a lovely summer's day. He settled his hat on his head, tugged on his gloves and left the porch, rehearsing the finer points of the business offer he hoped to make to the leaders of the Chautauqua Sunday School Assembly held at Fair Point every August as his long strides ate up the distance to the dock. The deal was a good one, beneficial to both parties. He should have no difficulty getting an agreement from the Chautauqua leaders, *if* he could meet with them today.

He frowned and joined the line to board the steamer. He hated doing things on the spur of the moment, but he'd been too busy until now with ordering equipment and moving the newspaper to the new building to act on his plan.

Today was his last chance of obtaining a meeting with the Chautauqua leaders before the assembly began tomorrow. They would be too busy to see him for the two weeks after that, overseeing the Bible studies, teacher training classes, musical entertainments, recreational activities and lectures the assembly offered. His frown deepened. And then it would be too late for him to do the work needed for this month—

"Ticket, sir?"

"I have mine." He pulled the ticket from his pocket, showed it to the collector and moved past those in line buying their tickets. Lake water flowed under the gangplank and lapped against the pilings of the dock. He boarded the *Griffith* and made his way forward through the crush of passengers milling about and talking, his reporter's senses on alert to pick up any tidbits of conversation that might lead to a story. Excitement was running high. Clearly, people were eager to attend the Chautauqua Assembly.

The steamer's whistle blew. The deck quivering beneath his feet lurched. He glanced down at the water and watched the gap between the ship and the dock widen. The hum of conversation swelled. He edged into an empty spot near one of the posts that supported the upper deck and looked over at the passengers occupying the benches on the open deck. A young woman whose stylish gown matched the color of her blue eyes, smiled at him. He gave a polite

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nod in return and shifted his gaze to the crowded bench seat across from him.

Another young woman smiled, her bold glance clearly showing she was available for a little flirtation to while away the time aboard the steamer. His barely polite nod declined her invitation. He turned his head and stared down at the water, watched it foaming by and willed the steamer to put on more speed. He needed to have this meeting at Fair Point, then get back to Jamestown as soon as possible. He had a newspaper to get out.

He turned back to look at the passengers, the reporter in him seeking inspiration for a story. His gaze fell on a young woman perched on the end of the bench opposite him and a smile tugged at his mouth. She looked like a wren sitting among canaries and bluebirds and cardinals. His smile widened, the editor in him pleased by the apt description. The young woman was definitely plain as a wren, though her profile was more attractive than one as she stared out at the water. Her lack of color or adornment captured his attention. That, and her posture. There was something alert about her, though she sat perfectly still—except for the tapping.

He lowered his gaze to the thin wood box resting on the young woman's lap, focused on her tapering fingers, which extended from a pair of half gloves. Their soft tapping on the box belied her quiet posture. And if the slight ripple occurring rhythmically at the hem of her long skirt was any indication, she was tapping her toe, as well. What had her so impatient? Or was it worry that— The ripples stopped. He lifted his gaze.