

DOROTHEA'S QUEST

TO THE MANOR BORN BOOK 2



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



CHESTER 1859

Dorothea Wilcox, governess, eased her position yet again as she glanced once more around the vast foyer of Cumberwell Hall. She was stiff and tired from the long and wearisome train journey and the seemingly interminable ride in the gig that had been sent to fetch her from the station.

It had been two days since she had left her childhood home, Harcourt House. Two days since she had last felt clean or comfortable. Tired as she was, she dared not take a seat, not even on the uncomfortable looking ancient oak settle arranged between two rigid sets of armor that stood guard over the silence of the hall. The stiff and formal second footman had opened the heavy front door to her some twenty minutes previously and bid her wait, then disappeared. She bit her lower lip in consternation. Had she made a dreadful mistake?

Always headstrong and stubbornly independent, Dorothea was determined not to allow her uncle to decide her future for her. Ever since her parents had died, her uncle had taken charge of her, but

she was not prepared to yield to his ideas for her future. While she knew that she would have to go into service as a governess—her uncle had made that clear almost from the moment he had moved his family into Harcourt House—she was resolved to have some say in what that future would look like. She knew her uncle would have found a position for her in the household of some obscure merchant or industrialist into which his family would never venture. She would have ended up being responsible for four or five girls in an overly furnished house in a grimy suburb of London where she would seldom have found any peace. She would have been treated as a maid of all work in addition to her responsibilities as a governess. And worst of all, she would certainly never have seen the green of the countryside again. She had seen the kind of advertisements in the gazettes: *Respectable manufacturer seeks robust governess for fine family of daughters. Must be conversant with all genteel accomplishments. Shoreditch.*

So, when her uncle had taken his wife and daughters to London for the season, Dorothea had answered a very different advertisement for herself. And now here she stood in the formidable house of the Earls of Cumberwell, waiting. But after nearly half an hour of being left alone in this imposing entrance hall, she was beginning to wonder if coming all the way to an estate in the north-west of England was really such a good idea after all. She had seen no one other than the under-coachman and the second footman, neither of whom had seemed particularly interested in showing the new governess what to do or where to go.

While she waited, the sun began to set. It cast long beams of light through great stained-glass windows on one side of the hall. Colorful patterns splayed out across the black and white granite stones at her feet. The polished cherrywood table in the center of the foyer took on a deeper glow and the sunlight caught the flowers arranged on the table in its cheerful sweep. The room's sudden brightness lit up Dorothea's face too, revealing the dimple that hid in the left-hand corner of her mouth and bringing a gloss to the

chestnut curls that she tried to keep neatly pinned at the back of her head.

Drawing confidence from the burst of light, Dorothea moved towards a painting of an ermine-draped former earl of Cumberwell. The Tudor earl overlooked the comings and goings of the current generation from his position against the central wall beneath the grand staircase. She gazed up at him. His face was stern, aristocratic, and undeniably handsome. There was, however, a glimmer of something in his eyes that suggested that beyond his intimidating appearance, he might have a spark of humor too. "Well," she murmured under her breath, "if that is a trait you have passed on to your descendants, perhaps I will cope here."

Just then she heard footsteps descending the staircase. Quickly she resumed her previous position, hands loose at her sides and her head demurely downcast. She smoothed the dull blue dress she wore, hoping the two days of travel had not left her too grubby. She watched cautiously as a middle-aged woman walked briskly towards her, her grey silk dress swishing swiftly across the hall.

"Miss Wilcox?"

Dorothea started. It was going to take some time to get used to the name she had taken for herself, her mother's maiden name, but not a name she was used to hearing. Quickly she regained her poise and curtsied. She hoped that the blush she felt sweeping her cheeks would be put down to normal shyness and nothing more unusual.

"I am Mrs. Davies, the housekeeper. Welcome to Cumberwell House." The housekeeper's voice was businesslike and clipped, almost severe.

"Good day. I am glad to be here." Dorothea bobbed her head meekly. The housekeeper swept her eyes over Dorothea and then turned abruptly and stepped rapidly up the stairs.

"Come, I will show you to your room." The housekeeper was already a quarter of the way up the staircase before Dorothea had gathered herself and started moving. She tried to hurry without seeming undignified, but tripped slightly as she made her way

behind the tall, quickly moving housekeeper. Mrs. Davies obviously had better things to do with her time than be inconvenienced by a new governess.

Dorothea thought back to the housekeeper in her uncle's house. Mrs. Mulligan had been warm and friendly, had always had time to smile and greet her kindly. She had been especially affectionate in the last few years, after Dorothea's parents had died and her uncle had brought his family to live in the beautiful house and park that had been her childhood home. But then, Mrs. Mulligan had known her since she had been a baby, had known her as the daughter of the house, and had treated her with a special compassion when her life had turned topsy-turvy.

Now Dorothea was nothing more than a servant in an earl's establishment.

She shrugged at the stern grey back of Mrs. Davies and straightened her shoulders a little more. She was not about to let the housekeeper see how vulnerable and naive she felt. She was here to prove a point to her uncle, even if he never found out about it. And she was going to prove to herself as well that she could make her own way in life. She was, she reminded herself, still her father's daughter.

Mrs. Davies led her up the stairs, along corridors, through further passageways, up more stairs until Dorothea began to feel quite dizzy. Even though she had grown up in a large house, this one confused her. She could not discern any immediate pattern to it. As the housekeeper rushed her past a variety of rooms, Dorothea caught glimpses of decor that combined a miscellany of elegant and tasteful modern furnishings, interspersed with pieces of great age and history. The house and family had clearly been established here for many generations.

Dorothea's perusal of Burke's Peerage had revealed that the Cumberwell family had owned the more than fifteen thousand acres of land on which the house stood since before the Normandy Invasion. As she followed Mrs. Davies, Dorothea could see how

that long heritage was reflected in the grand house. Over the centuries, different generations had built newer extensions onto older sections of the house. Some halls and reception rooms were low and had the heavy wooden beams and thick walls that dated back to Saxon and Tudor times. These led into open and elegant rooms of more recent design in a bewildering array. Dorothea felt as if she was walking through eons of history in just a few minutes.

In the front part of the house, beautiful works of art adorned the walls and alcoves, but as they moved further back, fewer such treasures were displayed. Here paintings only occasionally brightened the darkening hallways. The further Mrs. Davies led her, the barer the corridors became. They left behind the long corridors painted in soft blues or whites to traverse passageways revealing great paneled walls of deep-hued wood. Windows back here were draped in heavy velvet or left undisturbed, allowing in the glowing evening sun. In spite of Mrs. Davies' haste, serenity pervaded the house.

Dorothea did not see anyone else on the long walk through the house, and was fairly certain that she would not find her way back to the entrance hall again. She could not begin to recollect the number of right or left turns, or doors and windows passed, nor could she recall any particular landmarks.

Finally, Mrs. Davies stopped in front of an ancient oak door and swung it open. "This is your room, Miss Wilcox. It is not far from the children's quarters. I see that your trunk has been brought up and Martha has unpacked it. She will be up shortly with some hot water. I imagine you would like to freshen yourself after your days of travelling."

"Thank you. I would indeed," Dorothea replied, watching Mrs. Davies walk through the room and glance into the wardrobe.

"You have this bedroom with a small alcove for a working area through here," Mrs. Davies explained, indicating a recess Dorothea had not noticed until then. "I trust you will find it satisfactory."

Dorothea had to keep herself from laughing out loud and

twirling around like a little girl. Satisfactory? Of course it was! She had not had such a delightful room for herself since she was twelve years old. Her uncle had not considered it necessary to provide a niece in reduced circumstances with any comforts, even in what had once been *her* home. She looked around the room, her vivid blue eyes dancing with delight.

The dark wooden floor was covered with soft green rugs. The bed, which took up the greater part of one wall, was solid old oak but covered in a quilt the deep green of pine trees in winter. Big white goose feather pillows made a fluffy pile against the solid headboard. A dressing table and wardrobe matched the bed. Arranged prettily on the dressing table was a dainty Dresden shepherdess, also dressed in dusky green. In the alcove was a comfortable armchair before a small grate and a work table and chair stood near an open window. A bowl of pink and white chrysanthemums had been placed on the table.

Forgetting all pretense at dignity, Dorothea leaned out of the window, entranced by the magnificent view of trees and hills before her and the glimmer of setting sun on a distant lake. "Oh, Mrs. Davies, I will be very satisfied, indeed," she sang out.

For the first time, Mrs. Davies seemed to relax a little. She smiled slightly as she said, "I am glad to hear it. Well, I hear Martha arriving with your water. Will half an hour be sufficient time? I will send someone then to fetch you for your supper. The rest of us have already eaten."

Three quarters of an hour later Mrs. Davies watched as Miss Wilcox sat in the housekeeper's sitting room finishing her meal of beef stew. She nodded her head surreptitiously and then just as quickly shook it. The housekeeper appraised her positively as young and naive enough, showing a hint of gentility. But she was far too pretty with her wild chestnut curls barely contained, her shapely figure and bright eyes. She interrupted her musings to offer Dorothea a second helping of stew, but Dorothea declined. She put down her knife and fork resolutely.

"Mrs. Davies, will I meet my charge now?"

"Lady Clara? Gracious no. It is long past her bedtime. She has been asleep this past hour at least." The housekeeper sounded faintly annoyed. "You will meet her in the morning. After breakfast I will show you what you need to know of the house and gardens, and then you will be introduced to her."

"I see." Dorothea swallowed. "And when will the earl be expecting to meet me?"

"His lordship is not expecting to meet you at present." Mrs. Davies began to clear the table.

Dorothea stared at the housekeeper, somewhat dumbfounded. "But am I not being employed by him to teach his daughter?" she asked, a little hesitantly.

"His lordship is not currently in residence." Mrs. Davies' voice was clipped and abrupt. "He left me to conclude all matters of your employment. You will begin tomorrow, with a three-month probationary period." Mrs. Davies stood up and rang the bell. Immediately a maid entered to carry away Dorothea's supper dishes. "I will ring for Martha to show you back to your room. Breakfast is at seven-thirty in the servants' hall. Good night, Miss Wilcox."

"Good night, Mrs. Davies," Dorothea replied. It was clear that no discussion was to be entered into concerning the earl or his whereabouts. But that did not mean Dorothea could not think her own thoughts. Was the earl the same kind of man as her uncle, overly focused on the delights of high society and following the fashionable world in London and wherever else pleasure was pursued? She shook her head as she followed the housemaid back to her room. Even if the earl was more concerned with fashionable company than with his daughter's upbringing, surely he would be interested in meeting his six-year-old daughter's very first governess? Maybe not, she concluded. Perhaps daughters were not very important to earls. They could not, after all, inherit the title and lands. Did the earl think that all that mattered was to provide his daughter with a few superficial accomplishments and

then marry her off to the most likely husband when she came of age?

By the time Dorothea had returned to her room and was ready for bed, she was incensed. She was determined that Lady Clara Moreland would be given the very best education possible and would know kindness and affection, even if only from a governess. Starting in the morning.