

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun with a pink flower and gold headband, wearing a long-sleeved, off-the-shoulder purple dress, stands on a staircase with a green carpet and ornate metal railing. The background is a textured blue wall.

*A Private*  
**WAGER**

**CHASITY**  
**BOWLIN**  
USA Today Bestselling Author

**A PRIVATE WAGER**

**CHASITY BOWLIN**

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# ABOUT A PRIVATE WAGER



Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt, understands that marriage is in his future, but he's determined that it will be the very *distant* future. And since he's had an unfortunate attraction to Miss Lucy Dawes, an heiress who has embraced her status as a spinster rather than be married for her fortune, he's spent most of his time avoiding her. Which is all well and good, until they are the special guests of Lady Pandora Osbourne at a house party hosted by one of her dear friends.

But it isn't just Lady Pandora who has wagered on making a match between the Viscount and Miss Dawes. The Viscount himself has been lured, through no fault of his own, into a very damning wager with his envious cousin, Barton Warfield. Their most valuable unentailed estates are the stakes.... And the wager itself is for the hand of Miss Dawes.

Can he convince her to marry him? Can he do so without losing his heart? And when success is on the horizon, can he prevent his wretched cousin from destroying what he finally sees as his first real chance at happiness?

# PROLOGUE



## PROLOGUE



Lord Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt—War, as he preferred to be called—was sipping brandy in the billiard room of a magnificent country estate. He was early, by a day or so, for the house party that he'd been invited to by Lady Pandora Osbourne. A few of the other guests had arrived early as well. The roads had been better than anticipated. It had been quite obvious to him from the guest list—a bevy of bachelors and an equal number of unmarried ladies—that the house party was being hosted as a vehicle for Lady Pandora's favorite old trick: matchmaking. Additionally, the lady of the house had a particularly unattractive daughter who needed to find a husband. He should have known better than to accept the invitation, but she was an old family friend and had refused to take no for an answer.

“Which one has she picked out for you?”

The question had been posed by his cousin, Barton Warfield, another of the bachelors in attendance. In response, War simply shrugged. “I have no notion, nor do I care to have one. I am not in the market for a wife.”

“You couldn't even refuse the old bird's invitation,” Barton pointed out. “She'll have you married off before the end of the week.”

War rolled his eyes. His cousin was the sort of person who could turn anything into a competition, but this was one time that he had no intention of taking the bait. As Barton continued his game, War refilled his glass. It was very good brandy, after all. “I am not so easily led, Barton. Nor am I in the market for a wife.”

“Does that really matter?” Barton queried, as he sank another of the billiard balls. “Lady Pansy always gets what she wants, and right now, she wants to arrange as many matches as

possible. Although, given your general lack of charm, it is unlikely she could succeed in your case.”

War frowned at that as he stared into his glass. *Excellent brandy*. “I am accounted to be very charming. Every lady of my acquaintance has always said so.”

“You are viscount; *of course* they would say so. What you need, cousin, is a woman who has no desire to be part of the marriage mart and for whom your title would mean nothing. Then you’d learn the truth about your charm or lack thereof,” Barton crowed.

“Why must you be so irritating?” War mused casually. “Is it a concerted effort on your part or just a natural talent?”

Barton stood up from the billiard table. “I have an idea, cousin. A wager, if you will. There is a young lady here who will be utterly unmoved by your title. If you can woo her and win her hand, then I will concede that you are truly charming.”

He didn’t want to ask, but he’d had just enough brandy that it didn’t sound like a truly terrible idea. “The stakes?”

“Craddock Hall. If you win, I will sign over Craddock Hall and all of its lands to you,” Barton offered.

War whistled at that. Craddock Hall was a glorious estate which bordered his own home. With the additional lands of Craddock Hall, he would be able to finally turn things around at Harcourt Manor and make the estate profitable. “That’s quite a bet... And if I lose?”

“Stonecrest. It isn’t entailed, after all,” Burton said.

It was the only estate in all of his holdings that was currently profitable. If he lost it, he wouldn’t be paupered, but it would certainly make life significantly less comfortable. “That’s a bit steep for what should be a friendly wager.”

Barton smiled. “Ah, I see. You’re less than confident in your abilities.”

War looked at his glass of brandy. How much had he had to drink? He couldn’t quite recall. It must have been a great deal, however, because even as he intended to refuse, the

words coming out of his mouth were anything but a refusal. “Very well, Barton. I will take your wager. Name the object of my campaign.”

Barton’s smile turned into something that looked positively wicked. “Miss Lucy Dawes.”

War let out a bitter curse, one so foul that even the gentlemen in the billiard room were scandalized by it.



IN HER CHAMBER, LADY PANDORA OSBOURNE STARED AT THE scraps of paper on the writing table before her. Each guest’s name had been scrawled on the page and then carefully torn free. As she stared at them, she began arranging them. Some were discarded in a pile. Others were spread out in a grid. She sorted again and again until she was down to only a handful of names.

A few stood out in stark relief to her: the Viscount Harcourt, Mr. Barton Warfield, Miss Emily Cartland, and Miss Lucy Dawes. Between those four names, she weighed the risks and benefits of each separately.

“Making your decisions, m’lady?”

Lady Pandora looked up to see her maid, Collins, entering the room, carrying several garments that had been freshly pressed. They were the gowns she’d requested to have readied for the following day. “Yes, Collins. I’ve whittled it down to only a few options. What do you know of Miss Emily Cartland?”

“Oh, she’s terribly in love with a young man in London, my lady,” the maid said. “I heard her maid talking about in the kitchens! Apparently she weeps and wails over him constantly and can’t bear the fact that her father has insisted they wait until she’s completed her first season before accepting any offers.”

With a sigh, Lady Pandora took the scrap of paper with Miss Cartland’s name scrawled on it and placed it in the pile with the others to be discarded. She had a week. It was possible to make a couple fall in love in that time, but it was

not possible, however, to make someone fall out of love and then back into it with another. That left only Miss Dawes, and she was a stubborn one.

“Mr. Warfield or the viscount?” Even as she asked the question, Lady Pandora was already reaching Mr. Warfield’s name and tossing it on the pile with the others. “Never mind, Collins. When there’s a choice between a mister and a viscount, it is always the viscount.”

The maid chuckled mildly. “So it is, my lady. So it is!”

With her prospects laid out before her, Lord Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt and Miss Lucy Dawes, she contemplated her next step.

“Collins, find out everything you can about Miss Dawes and the viscount. I need to know what each is after. Miss Dawes in particular. I think she could be difficult.”

Collins nodded. She understood her instructions. It wasn’t her skill with the ladyship’s coiffure or even her ability to tackle stubborn wine stains on fine fabric that kept her employed, after all. It was her ability to ferret out information. *Lady’s maid, yes, but also spy extraordinaire*, Collins thought with a satisfied smile. Indeed, she could have been one of Wellington’s own.

“Yes, my lady. I’ll let you know as soon as I discover anything of note.”

# CHAPTER ONE



**M**iss Lucy Dawes came down for breakfast while her aunt and chaperone, Mrs. Wilson, remained abed. The journey to Lady Pandora's estate had not been a pleasant one for her, but then her aunt was a notoriously poor traveler. She suffered horrid sickness whether in a carriage, on a ship, or even horseback. If she wasn't moving place to place on her own two feet, she would require a day's convalescence at least. In short, Lucy would not have a chaperone until the following day. It was something of a disaster.

She absolutely detested being in society, being part of the marriage mart. It was a ridiculous enterprise for someone who had no wish to be married. With a sizable dowry, she encountered fortune hunters at every turn. Without her aunt's presence at her side, she would be at their mercy. They would clamor around her like a pack of wild dogs.

Steeling herself against that prospect, she pulled her shoulders back, lifted her chin in a haughty, challenging manner, and entered the breakfast room like a general going into battle. It rather felt that way. How she detested it all! It wasn't marriage itself that she was opposed to but rather being married only for the wealth she could bring. Surely, if she were to tie herself to a man for the entirety of her life, she

deserved to have someone who actually saw her value as a person rather than just as a walking, talking bank note.

Most of the guests gathered for the morning meal were single young women and bachelors. Married ladies had the prerogative of taking a breakfast tray in their rooms. Why they should be afforded such a luxury when it was denied everyone else was simply a mystery to her. She wanted a tray in her room, to be served in privacy and to enjoy the morning meal without having to first don her stays and several layers of clothing. But no. She'd have to eat her eggs and kippers while staring at men who stared at her and saw only a stack of sovereigns.

Ignoring the gentlemen (though she doubted most of them deserved that title), she smiled at a few acquaintances as she filled her plate. Once she had selected servings from a few of the many dishes that had been set out, she took a seat at the table between Miss Winnie Melton and Miss Georgiana Cole. They were all well acquainted with one another and friendly enough, if not bosom companions.

Miss Cole was giggling behind her hand. Lucy looked at her in surprise, "What ever is so amusing, Miss Cole?"

"Viscount Harcourt and his cousin, Mr. Warfield, have not taken their eyes off you since you entered this room, Miss Dawes," Miss Cole whispered. "I cannot imagine what you have done to make such a conquest! The viscount and his cousin are both quite confirmed bachelors."

"Perhaps I have something on my face," she mused. "Regardless, it's terribly rude to stare, and I will not indulge in such behaviors myself. It would behoove you, Miss Cole, to remember that. You are rather gaping at them yourself."

Miss Cole blushed and immediately diverted her gaze to her plate. "Quite right, Miss Dawes. A lady never wishes to appear overly eager for a gentleman's attention. I do wonder, though, if it is the viscount who means to court you or Mr. Warfield."

"It does not matter. I have no wish to entertain a courtship form either of them," Lucy replied sharply. Even as she said it,

her gaze drifted down the table to where the two men sat shoulder to shoulder. They were both handsome, but it was the viscount who drew her attention most notably. With his dark hair and slashing brows, he was rather striking. But she was not interested in men who were only interested in her money, and given what most would consider her rather unfortunately plump figure, that seemed to be all of them.

For her part, Lucy had no problems with her figure. Yes, she was plump. But she was active. She went for long walks, she went horseback riding, and she swam in the summer months; she simply had a large frame and a body that seemed to want to hold onto every morsel she ate in the form of extra pounds. Much to her family's dismay, she was not inclined to starve herself to alter the matter. She was quite content with herself.

Another glance down the long expanse of the table, and her gaze collided with that of the viscount. A frisson of something she could not name ran through her then, snaking along her spine and leaving her entire body tingling in its wake. It was a discomfiting situation, though not precisely an unpleasant one. Still, it left her rather unnerved. Those sorts of feelings always did, though she'd encountered them very infrequently. In fact, only one man, other than the viscount, had ever made her feel so strange and jittery inside. He was the reason she was now so terribly wary of all other would-be suitors.

Abruptly, she tore her gaze away from the viscount's and determined that she would not look his way again. Her past lessons in love had been hard won and hard learned. It didn't matter how handsome he was. She'd not risk making that mistake again.



“THERE SHE IS! THE OBJECT OF YOUR AFFECTIONS. WELL, OF your campaign, at any rate,” Barton offered as he chortled in a very self-satisfied manner.

With an aching head, a queasy stomach, and eyes that felt as if he'd rubbed sand in them, War was in no mood for his

cousin's antics. "What the devil are you taking about?"

"Our wager, cousin. Do you not remember?"

No, as a matter of fact, he did not remember. "What wager?"

Barton smiled like a cat who'd wolfed down a canary. "Stonecrest against Craddock Hall...if you can woo and win Miss Dawes's hand."

War was horrified. "I would never have made such an ungentlemanly wager. A betrothal is a serious matter, and a lady's affections are not to be toyed with in such a manner!"

Barton's smile only widened, his eyes filling with malicious glee, "I should have mentioned that the brandy you were consuming so freely last night was from Osgood's personal supply—two parts brandy to one part absinthe."

It was no bloody wonder he felt like death had chewed him up and spat him out. "Good God! That could be a potentially lethal combination. Why on earth did you not warn me?"

"I'm your heir, cousin," Barton offered with a smile that made it impossible to tell whether or not he was serious. "It's to my benefit if you shuffle off the mortal coil. Not that I would wish for you to, of course."

"The wager is moot at this point," War said. "I was clearly not in my right mind when I accepted it!"

"What a pity it is, then, that I have it in writing." Barton pulled a piece of folded parchment paper from inside his coat. "Signed by you and witnessed by both Osgood and Whitton."

Unease settled over War as he noted his cousin's calculating gaze. "Who suggested this wager?"

"Does it matter?" Barton asked. "Your agreement to it is in writing. If you forfeit, then Stonecrest is mine."

"You would really hold me to this wager knowing that it would involve lying to and manipulating a young woman who has done nothing to warrant such treatment?"



Barton shrugged. "I've always admired Stonecrest, and you have repeatedly refused to sell it. I cannot let an opportunity to possess it pass by without making every attempt to win it. In short, yes, cousin, I most certainly would. Pursue and win Miss Dawes, or the estate is mine. You have until the end of this house party to secure her hand."

War looked at the document—at his scrawling signature across the bottom of it—and felt a sinking feeling in his gut. He could either act against every scruple he possessed or lose the most valuable property in his possession. It would remove any semblance of security. One poor season for his tenant farmers, one year where rents could not be paid, and he would be ruined. He would not propose to her and then renege. If he pursued her and won her hand, he would marry her. To do less would be the height of dishonor.

"She can never know about the wager," War insisted. "There is no need to cause her that sort of humiliation or shame."

Barton nodded. "Of course, cousin. I am not a monster. Miss Dawes is a perfectly lovely person, and I would never dream of causing her unnecessary difficulty."

"Then, the wager stands," War agreed against every instinct he possessed.

# CHAPTER TWO

## CHAPTER TWO



Lady Pandora Osbourne was propped up in the bed in her assigned chamber at the latest house party. She was tired. More than tired, in fact. She was utterly exhausted. There was nothing she wanted more than to be resting in her own bed, in her own home, and not feeling so put upon to continue being a delightful house guest while plotting to craft yet another society marriage. Thus far, she was having great success in her little endeavor. If she could maintain it, she would win the wager with her cousin. The stakes of the wager were less important to her than simply wiping the smug look from Octavia's face.

Her maid bustled in, a bright smile on her face and excitement lighting her eyes as she placed a breakfast tray on the bed before her mistress. "Oh, my lady, it's excellent news I have."

"Oh?"

The maid nodded enthusiastically. "It seems that two of the gentlemen have engaged in a private wager, and per the terms of that wager, Viscount Harcourt must win the hand of Miss Lucy Dawes."

"How is that excellent news? Miss Dawes is well known to be adamantly opposed to marriage. The viscount's wager is of no significance!"

The maid gaped. "Begging your pardon, my lady, but have you seen the viscount? I daresay that even the most determined of spinsters would be hard pressed to resist him! If he already wishes to marry the woman you've chosen to match him with, then half the battle is won!"

Pandora blinked in surprise. Oh, she was well aware that the viscount was handsome enough. But was she really so old that she had forgotten just how much sway a handsome face

could hold over a woman as strong willed as Miss Dawes? After a moment's reflection, she was forced to admit that she was, in fact, that old.

“Quite right. I stand corrected. So, I have one eager participant for a match and one ambivalent but potentially persuadable member,” Pandora mused. “I’ve certainly faced worse odds. Talk to Miss Dawes’s maid. Find out everything you can about her and how we can help the viscount in his quest. And, Collins?”

“Yes, m’lady?”

Pandora poured herself a cup of chocolate, stirring it with elegantly idle motion. “I’ve heard unfortunate things about Mr. Barton Warfield. This wager of theirs is concerning to me. I want to be certain that the viscount is not cut from the same cloth.”

Collins nodded. “I’ll find out what you need, my lady.”



SHE WAS WALKING IN THE GARDEN WHEN HE FOUND HER. IT hadn't taken a great deal of effort to locate her. A coin or two slipped into the palm of a helpful servant and he'd been told exactly where she was. He had to marry at some point or other, he reasoned. Miss Dawes was an excellent prospect. Some found her to be a bit strange, with her penchant for books and her seeming disinterest in the elaborate dance that was the marriage mart. Indeed, no one seemed to know what to make of a young woman who was not eager to accept the first proposal of marriage that came her way. In point of fact, Miss Dawes had turned down more offers than many young women ever received.

War spotted her heading for the folly. It was built in the style of a Grecian temple. Many such structures dotted the elaborate gardens of the estate. They provided ample opportunities for trysts and clandestine meetings.

As he neared the folly, Miss Dawes looked up from her book. She did not acknowledge him in any way. Just looked at him and then returned to her book immediately.

“Good afternoon, Miss Dawes,” he said.

“Have we been introduced?” she asked, still not looking up.

“Many times,” he answered. “At Almack’s last year. At the Cavendish ball, and we met again at Herrington’s house party last year.”

At that she did look up. “I see. Well, you certainly have an excellent memory, my lord.”

“So do you,” he answered. “Since you are apparently well aware of my title.”

A blush stole over her, climbing up her neck and into her cheeks, coloring them a pretty shade of pink that was a perfect foil against her dark hair and pale skin. “I’m well aware of your identity, Viscount Harcourt. After all, this is a very small party. The guest list has been of much discussion by the young ladies gathered.”

He stepped up into the folly and seated himself on the bench opposite her. “But not you. You, Miss Dawes, would never be so undignified. Your behavior is always above reproach.”

Miss Dawes closed her book then, heaving a heavy sigh as she did so. A sigh which caused her rather impressive bosom to rise and fall in a manner that a man would have to be dead not to notice. He was suffering for his unintended excesses of the night before, but he was far, far from dead.

“Is there some point to this, my lord? We have apparently met on numerous occasions, and I cannot recall that we engaged in conversation beyond introductions and simple hellos on any of them.”

“That isn’t true,” he countered. “We danced at the Herringtons’. And you dance quite well.”

“I dance passably well,” she denied quickly. “My point, my lord, is that there must be a reason for your sudden insistence that we communicate in a more in-depth fashion.”

It was a valid question and one that he would have to answer with, at best, a half truth. “It is time for me to take a wife, Miss Dawes...to seriously pursue marriage with a suitable prospect. I have elected to pursue you for that purpose.”

For a moment she simply blinked at him. Then she began to laugh. She laughed and laughed until he wasn't certain she would ever stop. Then, when she could finally speak, she said, “I've no interest in having a husband, Viscount Harcourt. Not you. Not any man of my acquaintance. I am afraid you will have to revise your plans.”

War had expected that response. After all, Miss Dawes's reluctance to entertain any suitor had become almost a thing of legend. “What would it hurt, Miss Dawes, to permit a certain amount of flirtation and courtship while we are here? You needn't make any decisions about whether or not to entertain my interest seriously until we are ready to depart.”

“Why would I do that?”

He shrugged. “Because there will be a cadre of bachelors descending upon this house party over the next few days—many of them with pockets to let. If nothing else, you can be certain that I am not after you for your fortune. If we appear to be on the verge of an understanding, it will keep the others at bay until you are ready to leave.”

Lucy stared at him, taking in his slightly worse-for-wear appearance. He was still unnaturally attractive despite clearly having indulged to excess. Surely the good Lord had never seen fit to bestow such magnificence on one creature! But it was quite obvious to her, given that he had been imbibing a bit too freely, that he had little to no appreciation for the many gifts that had been bestowed upon him. Still, there was something to be said for the points he had just made.

“If I understand this correctly, you are suggesting that we engage publicly in a fake courtship to stave off would be fortune-hunters while you try to convince me that the fake courtship should become a genuine one?” she queried.

“Quite right, “ he concurred. “But I will benefit as well. Most of the young women attending this event, Miss Dawes, are silly young girls without a brain in their head for anything more than pretty dresses and gossip. I have no desire to take such a silly creature as my wife. We will be protecting one another from unwanted...entanglements, while determining if we are suited to one another.”

It was an interesting prospect. If he weren't so distractingly handsome, if her pulse didn't skitter wildly beneath her skin whenever she looked at him, then she'd likely agree on the spot. But, as it was, she felt a bit uncertain. “How do I know that this is not simply a ploy to claim my fortune for yourself?”

“I'm not the wealthiest peer, Miss Dawes, but I'm far from impoverished. My title is old and distinguished. If I wanted a fortune, there are countless young women amongst the Ton whose fortunes eclipse even your own. And they have been paraded before me endlessly. Not only that, but they would be far more inclined to greet my suit more enthusiastically.”

That was all true. She was well aware of all the pertinent facts he had just stated. That he was so forthcoming was a point in his favor. “Very well, my lord, I agree to your proposal—well, your proposal of a fake courtship, at any rate. But I would be very surprised if I change my mind on whether or not I would permit a real courtship.”

“Time will tell, Miss Dawes,” he said with a grin that nearly took her breath away. “Time will tell. I'll bid you good day for now and leave you to enjoy your book. But I will look forward to paying you particular attentions in the drawing room before dinner. How the tongues will wag!”

Lucy watched him walk away, taking in his long legs and loose-limbed stride. He moved with an unaccountable grace. He'd said she was an excellent dancer, a point she had denied. Indeed, it was true. She was a passable dancer, but he was an excellent one, and dancing with him had been easy. It had been like floating on air. *And he'd smelled divine.* Hushing that unhelpful and quite scandalous inner voice, Lucy picked up her novel once more. But as she stared at the pages, the words

simply blurred into illegible scribbles as her mind was consumed with Lord Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt.





# CHAPTER THREE



**B**y the dinner hour, War was feeling somewhat better. The last bit of grogginess had fled along with the feeling that he would cast up his accounts at the slightest provocation. After a bath, a shave, and fresh clothes, he was as good as could be expected after having inadvertently consumed absinthe—a substance he had avoided previously in his life. He had no interest in playing so recklessly with his sanity.

As War opened the door to head down for dinner, Barton ambushed him in the corridor. “I saw you talking with her in the garden,” his cousin said eagerly. “Did she turn you down flat?”

“Not exactly,” War replied cagily. He wasn’t entirely certain he trusted his cousin, at present. It was clear that Barton had known he was not in full charge of his faculties when the wager had been made, yet he’d had no qualms about enforcing it. He still had no notion of how the wager had been initiated, and that bothered him far more than he wanted to admit. There was something terribly underhanded in all of it, and yet, as a gentleman, War had no choice but to abide by it. Still, he would not just readily offer up information to him.

“What does that mean? Either she said no or she did not,” Barton insisted.

“Miss Dawes has agreed to allow me to keep company with her while we are here at the party. What ultimately will come from that is, as yet, unknown,” War explained as vaguely as possible. “Now, as I’m not entirely pleased with you, cousin, and want nothing more than to plant my first directly in your face, I’d suggest you leave my company and avoid me for a good long while.”

“Oh, cousin! There’s no need to be such a bad sport about it. We all wager stupidly when we are drunk,” Barton replied dismissively.

“Yes, and most of us have the decency to warn a person when they are drinking something more than just brandy! You knew what was in that decanter, and you purposely allowed me to ingest it so that I would be both more gullible and more reckless. I’m on to you, Barton. And this is not a slight I will forgive any time soon.” With that, War pushed past his cousin and made for the stairs. He had a reluctant woman to woo, after all. He’d need all the time with her he could get.

Entering the drawing room, he spotted her rather quickly. With her dark hair and her refusal to bow to convention and wear the limpid pastels that most unmarried women were forced into, she certainly made an impression. It wasn’t as if he’d never noticed her before. He had always thought her quite pretty, if not exactly beautiful in the fashionable sense. Blonde, blue eyed, and doll-like: that was what all the men seemed to want and all the women aspired to. Miss Lucy Dawes seemed to be above all that somehow, as if she saw through all the ridiculous posturing that was so much a part of the Ton.

There were worse fates than courting a woman who had superior intelligence and was far more than simply tolerable in appearance, he reflected. The truth was, he’d never expected more than that out of a marriage and had been prepared to settle for far less. Love had never been part of the equation for him. He wasn’t even certain it existed, in all honesty. It had

always seemed to him to be something made up by poets as an excuse for bad behavior.

*Bad behavior...like courting a woman on the basis of a wager.*

That ugly truth kept rearing its head in his mind. He could not ignore it, nor could he ignore the continued pangs of his conscience. But if he told her, there would be no hope for them. And if he didn't, he would be no worse than the fortune hunters she disdained.

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Lucy watched him surreptitiously. With a glass of ratafia in one hand and her fan in the other, it was easy enough to conceal her perusal. In his dark evening clothes, with his black hair swept back from his forehead, he was even more handsome. It appeared that he had recovered from whatever excesses he'd indulged the night before that had left him so peaked earlier in the day.

Only moments later, his cousin, Mr. Barton Warfield, entered the drawing room. She'd never cared for him. They'd been introduced in the past and had crossed paths numerous times over the years. He had always struck her as being rather too charming, too insincere. Like the barkers at a fair who wished to sell you something, she thought, feeling somewhat guilty for the unkind comparison.

It was true that Mr. Warfield had never done anything to her. Not personally, at any rate. But she knew from a trusted friend that he'd behaved dishonorably with several young ladies. And, yet, in all her many seasons avoiding the fortune hunters, she'd never heard a single negative thing about Viscount Harcourt. Was Mr. Barton truly the bad seed of the family? Or was the viscount simply better at hiding his faults? Either way, it was too late to question his character now that she'd agreed to a false courtship with him. It had been an impulse; a decision made in haste because she was discomfited in his presence. Every time they had met, he'd made her unaccountably nervous. It was unlike her to be so affected by any gentleman. In truth, most of them annoyed her. Their false

compliments and obvious nefarious schemes had never appealed to her. So why did he? Was she so shallow that his handsomeness truly swayed her?

There was no more time to consider it. He was approaching her quickly. Attempting to scroll her features into an expression of impassivity and disinterest, she looked away, scanning the gathered crowd in a casual manner. And yet, inside her gloves, her palms were sweating, and it felt as if hundreds of butterflies were taking flight in her stomach.

“Good evening, Miss Dawes,” he said quietly as he came to stand near her. “I would offer to get some refreshment for you, but I see that someone else has already beaten me to it.”

“I retrieved my own refreshment, my lord. Like most ladies, I am oddly self sufficient when gentlemen are not present,” she replied.

His lips curved upward in a slightly crooked (and all the more charming for it) smile. “A sad fact for us, Miss Dawes. You all can do quite well without us, but we are utterly lost without you.”

“You seem to have been doing particularly well on your own, Viscount Harcourt,” she observed. At her comment, his smile broadened into an actual grin. It was positively devastating. So devastating that she had to look away.

“Nothing more than a brave front,” he denied. The dinner gong sounded then. He offered her his arm. “We are not seated near one another, but may I escort you in to dinner?”

With trepidation, she placed her gloved hand on his proffered arm. It rocked her to her core. She could feel the heat of him—and the firmness of his muscles—through the layers of cloth. Nothing had ever unsettled her so.

As she seated herself at the dinner table, her shawl slipped from one shoulder. He stooped to retrieve it, draping it over her arm once more. She turned to thank him, but their faces were terribly close together. Only inches apart, in fact. Her breath caught. Their gazes collided. And she saw something in

his eyes, an awareness—a hunger, even—that she had not anticipated.

“Might we take a walk after dinner?” he asked. “A stroll in the garden. Well within sight of the house and with an appropriate chaperone, of course.”

She couldn't form an answer. Literally, she was robbed of the ability to speak. Instead, she offered up a simple nod for her answer.

“Until then, Miss Dawes.” Then he was gone, striding along the length of the table to his position near the head, as a privilege of his rank.

Around her, the other young ladies were all looking at her with a mixture of envy and curiosity. She focused on the place setting before her, trying desperately to calm her racing pulse.

# CHAPTER FOUR



**H**e found himself shockingly eager for the dinner to be at an end. That moment, after he'd assisted her with her shawl, he'd been charged with a kind of sensual promise that had him wondering exactly what it would be like to kiss Miss Lucy Dawes's cupid's-bow lips. When the last course was cleared away, and the ladies and gentleman separated to go to their respective gathering spots, he rose quickly. Rather than retreating to the billiard room or the library with the other gentlemen, he made straight for the drawing room. Miss Dawes was already there with her aunt.

Moving toward them purposefully, he halted before them. "Our walk, Miss Dawes?"

"I'm not certain this is proper, young man," her aunt stated.

"I assure you, Mrs. Wilson, it will be all that's proper. We will stay in full view of the terrace at all times," he promised. That was a disappointing prospect for him, of course. Having an opportunity to steal a kiss, assuming such an act would be permitted by Miss Dawes, would help him to sway her into viewing him as an actual suitor rather than merely a pretend suitor.

“It’s fine, Aunt,” Miss Dawes offered.

The aunt was still clearly not convinced. She was shaking her head, hem-hawing with uncertainty. “What would your mother have said?”

“If my mother, during her too-short life, had known any eligible young man wished to spend time with me, she would always have said yes,” Miss Dawes replied with dry humor. “And if you look, Aunt, there are other couples taking walks in the garden, even without the benefit of a chaperone.”

The elderly woman glanced in the direction of the terrace doors, where several couples were making their way out for evening walks in the moonlight. “I suppose it will not be too risqué, then.”

“There are comfortable chairs on the terrace and lap robes as well to ward off any chill,” he explained, proffering his arm once more. When Miss Dawes placed her hand on his forearm, he felt that same strange tingle of awareness that he’d experienced in the dining room.

Immediately, he felt the thrill of her touch—that little spark of awareness, the first stirrings of desire that took him slightly by surprise. Was it just because the wager had suddenly made him view Miss Dawes in a different light? No. When he’d danced with her before, he’d been just as taken with her then. He’d thought her charming and remarkably pretty, and he’d even, for just a moment, wished that she wasn’t a perfectly respectable young woman and that he was not a gentleman bound by honor. He’d put that from his mind, for obvious reasons. With no intent to marry, such thoughts would have been pointless. Now, he could indulge in them freely—assuming he could persuade her to accept his courtship genuinely rather than simply as a charade.

War led her to the terrace doors, open to the unseasonably warm evening air, with her aunt following close behind. Once he had seen to the elderly woman’s comfort, getting her settled into one of the chairs with a lap robe, he led Miss Dawes down the steps and onto the graveled path that would wind its way through the garden.

When they were far enough away that their conversation would not be overheard, Miss Dawes broke the silence. “What are we really doing out here, my lord? A fake courtship does not necessitate engaging in very real courtship rituals.”

“A fake courtship must still be a convincing courtship, Miss Dawes, and I have not given up on the idea of courting you, in truth. After all, you were supposed to entertain the notion of permitting it, were you not?” He uttered the reminder gently, keeping his voice pitched low enough that it necessitated leaning in to speak to her. Because he was leaning in so closely, and because one of the many torches lining the garden path was directly beside them, he could see the gooseflesh rise on her skin. And he caught the unmistakable shiver that afflicted her. Neither was from the cold. A slow smile spread across his lips. “You are attracted to me, Miss Dawes. You need not deny it.”

“Your vanity and conceit, my lord, are beyond measure,” she snapped.

“It is not vanity, Miss Dawes. No is it conceit. It is simply awareness. And that awareness is borne of the fact that I, Miss Dawes, am also very attracted to you.”

She stopped walking so abruptly that she nearly stumbled. Grasping her arm to steady her, once she was no longer in danger of falling, he realized that they were now standing face to face and very, very close to one another. So much so that he spared a quick glance at the terrace and noted that Miss Dawes’s aunt had already nodded off. Tucked beneath the lap robe, she had her head laid back, and the elderly woman appeared to be snoring. So much for chaperonage.

“You are rather alarmingly direct, Viscount Harcourt.” There was a slight tremor in her voice and a breathlessness that made him want to push her further.

“Then it will come as no surprise when I tell you, Miss Dawes, that I mean to kiss you...and if you do not wish for that to happen, you must say so now.”

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She should tell him no. Lucy knew that. It was at the forefront of her mind. And yet, try as she might to utter that word, she could not bring herself to do so. Curiosity had warred with caution and won. In all her interactions with other gentlemen, she had never actually desired their attentions.

When he pulled her around a corner of the hedge, concealing them from view, she didn't protest. And when he leaned in, his lips brushing softly over hers, the most natural thing in the world was to close her eyes and fall into him. That gentle brush, juxtaposed against the slight rasp of his evening beard, was unlike anything she could have imagined. Soft, gentle, with incredible tenderness and yet with a hint of danger and a wealth of heat, it rocked her to her toes.

But nothing could have prepared her for the sensual onslaught when that gentle brush gave way to the full, firm pressure of his mouth settling fully over hers, of the soft nip of his teeth at her lower lip, or the sweep of his tongue over that tender flesh. When she gasped in shock, his tongue slipped past her lips, entering her mouth to slide languorously against hers in a way that left her trembling and breathless.

It wasn't until she felt the bark of the tree against her back that she realized he'd backed her away from the hedge and into the small grotto—one of the many such spaces dotted throughout the garden for trysts. She could have protested. Indeed, she should have. But she did not. It was no longer curiosity that prompted her actions, though. It was desire. She wanted his kiss, she wanted the strength of his arms around her, the firmness of his body against hers, and the sweet, perfect heat of that kiss.

It might have been minutes or it could have been hours. Time had no meaning for her. She only knew that she had no desire to end that kiss or to let him go. Then, abruptly, he stepped back from her.

Blinking in confusion, Lucy looked up at him, noting the taut line of his jaw, the tension that seemed to emanate from him. And then she heard it. The call of her aunt's voice uttering her name in what sounded like panic. Abruptly, he reached out and snagged her shawl, tugging it from shoulder

and dropping it so that it tangled on the lower branches of the hedge. She knew, of course, what he was about. There had to be a justifiable reason for them to have deviated from the well lit path. A snagged shawl would suffice.

“I’m here, Aunt,” Lucy called. “I’m afraid I have ruined my shawl.”

Her aunt appeared around the corner of the hedge even as the viscount stooped in an attempt to free the delicate fabric from the thorny vegetation. “It isn’t as bad as all that, Miss Dawes. Nothing is beyond repair.”

Those words were an assurance about much more than just her shawl. *It was only a kiss.* Even uttering that assurance to herself, she felt like a fraud. It had been much more than just a kiss. In fact, she would daresay that it had altered everything about her.

“Well, never mind the shawl,” her aunt insisted. “Leave it to the viscount and come with me. This is terribly improper.”

“Of course,” Lucy agreed, and immediately slipped the shawl from her shoulder and stepped away from it.

“I will see it returned to you after it has been mended,” the viscount stated.

It was another excuse to see him—to be close to him. And she was unwisely eager for it. “Thank you, my lord. You are too kind.”

“Come along,” her aunt insisted in a disapproving tone.

Lucy did as she had been bade, following her aunt back toward the house. But, as she neared the terrace steps, she couldn’t resist a look back. He stood there still, next to the neatly manicured hedge, watching her, with her shawl clutched in his hands. A shiver raced through her that had nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with the man. She’d agreed to his terms, and she recognized that she had made a terrible mistake in doing so. He tempted her where no one else ever had, and that made him dangerous.

# CHAPTER FIVE



**I**t had been a long and sleepless night. Recalling the kiss, something that should have been innocent but had quickly spiraled into something else altogether, War had been plagued by his own desires throughout the night. He'd wanted far more than a kiss. Had they not been interrupted, he wasn't entirely certain what liberties he would have taken. The uncomfortable truth was that he would likely have taken any she would have permitted. For a man of the world, a man who understood precisely how innocent Miss Lucy Dawes was, it was a lowering admission—a stain upon his honor to go along with all the others he was amassing during the accursed house party. He almost wished he had stayed home. But then he wouldn't know the taste of her lips, the sweetness of having her soft body pressed against his.

Tossing back the covers, and sporting an unfortunately stubborn erection, he made his way to the wash stand to see to his morning ablutions. Washed and shaved, with his hair restored to some degree of order, he dressed quickly. When he was ready to brave the other guests, he retrieved the damaged shawl from the dressing table. Unable to resist, he raised it to his face, burying his nose in the paisley-print cloth. It smelled of lemons and of something far sweeter. It smelled of her, and

he wanted nothing more than to hold her in his arms again and to not stop with a mere kiss.

Clutching the shawl in his hand, he left his chambers and made his way down toward the kitchens. There he found one of the maids and made inquiries about having the snags repaired. From there, he made his way to the breakfast room, hoping that Miss Dawes—*Lucy*—would be there.

He was destined for more than simply disappointment, it seemed. No only was she not present, but Barton was there, gleefully waiting for him.

“Good morning, cousin,” Barton crowed. “You were certainly very cozy with Miss Dawes last evening.”

“Do not bandy her name about, Barton. At the very least, you should pretend to be a gentleman,” War admonished. They were alone in the breakfast room, at least, but there was still the risk of being overheard.

Barton continued to grin, but War noted something about his cousin that he’d not really considered before. There was malice in what should have been a friendly expression. Barton was enjoying all of it—the risk, the potential catastrophe that loomed over them, possibly even the threat to Miss Dawes’s reputation. Barton had always been one to skate around the edges of propriety, but this was something altogether different. “You planned all of this, didn’t you? From the absinthe-laced brandy to the wager... All of it was carefully orchestrated, wasn’t it?”

“Wild accusations will not release you from the wager, cousin,” Barton replied coldly. “Also, does it matter? You have just over one week to win her hand. You might be off to a good start, but Miss Dawes is no one’s fool. She’ll see through you before it’s over with. And then Stonecrest will be mine.”

War watched his cousin walk angrily away. But he was not concerned about Barton’s hurt feelings. He was more concerned about the fact that he’d been manipulated into an untenable situation where the risks were so great. And despite the rather glorious kiss he’d shared with Miss Dawes the night

before, there was still no guarantee that he was any closer to obtaining her agreement to his courtship than before.

Taking a deep breath, War attempted to exhale his frustration, but there was too much of it to be dealt with in such a weak fashion. Had he been in London, he would have taken himself to Gentleman Jackson's. Or, if he'd had a mistress, he might have availed himself of her charms. But he'd not had such an arrangement in quite some time, and there was no way to alleviate such urges in his present situation.

As if the fates themselves were laughing at him, the breakfast room door opened, and Miss Dawes entered. When she saw him, her chin came up and her shoulders stiffened. She was clearly feeling discomfited by the events of the night before.

"Good morning, my lord," Miss Dawes said coolly.

"Good morning, Miss Dawes," he replied. "Did you sleep well?"

"Quite well, my lord," she answered.

It was a lie. He knew that instantly. She had dark circles under her eyes, deep hollows that were the hallmark of a lack of sleep. Was he responsible for it? Perversely, he hoped so. "I did not sleep well, Miss Dawes. I was plagued by intense dreams—pleasant ones, to be sure, but intense none the less. Would you care to hazard a guess as to what those dreams were about?"

Her blush told the truth of it. She did not need to guess. Since the room was empty but for the two of them and a single footman who stood sentry near the door, she walked away from the sideboard laden with breakfast dishes and approached him cautiously. "My lord—"

"War," he said. "Or Harrison, if you prefer, though I fear I may not always recognize that you are speaking to me if you use that moniker. At least, when we are alone, we could dispense with the formality...couldn't we, Lucy?"

She glanced over her shoulder, looking at the door and the footman who was ignoring them entirely. They were still

along. Still private. “That isn’t wise. Nothing that has occurred between us thus far has been wise.”

“Perhaps it is not. But it is pleasurable. I want to kiss you again, Lucy. I want to kiss you as I did in the garden last night...but I want to do so when and where there is no chance of interruption. I want, more than anything, Lucy, to taste the sweetness of your lips again.”

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Lucy clenched her trembling hands together in front of her, a pitiful attempt to camouflage exactly how unsettled his words had left her. But it wasn’t simply his words. What unsettled her more than anything was her response to them. She wanted it, too. She wanted to be kissed by him again, to feel his arms around her and his lips pressed to hers. Those desires were the very reason she needed to shore up her defenses and to keep him at arm’s length.

“Do not speak to me of such things,” she whispered hotly. “It is terribly improper.”

“Not as improper as I would like to be with you,” he stated. “Meet me in the garden. There’s a secluded spot just off the path down by the lake. A folly in the same of a ruined Saxon tower. Do you know it?”

“I do know it,” she said. “But this...it cannot happen.”

“It can,” he said. “My intentions are entirely honorable, Lucy.”

“Seduction is honorable?” She scoffed.

“I only want you to see that there are benefits to marriage between us that you may not have considered before. I promise that nothing will happen you do not wish to. And your virtue is in no danger from me.”

“Only a kiss?”

“A kiss to start... Please?”

Someone else entered the breakfast room then. “I will see you there at noon,” she whispered and then abruptly turned away. She couldn’t continue to face him, not when her face

was flaming with both embarrassment and something else that she dared not name.

She had lied when she told him she had slept well. The truth was that she had spent the entire night lying awake, thinking of their kiss in the garden. Lord Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt, had made her feel things that she had never experienced in her life. It had left her shaken, left her trembling with embarrassment and need. Now he'd asked her to meet him in the garden, to indulge in those same scandalous behaviors again. And, against all sense and reason, she had agreed. For the first time in her life, she was actively seeking her own ruin.

# CHAPTER SIX



**B**arton Warfield watched Miss Lucy Dawes leave the drawing room with a book in her hand and make for the garden. Most would assume she was going to read in the weak winter sunlight and enjoy what was a relatively mild day. Of course, he knew better. He'd seen Miss Dawes heading into the breakfast room as he left. It had taken only a coin slipped to the stoic footman who'd stood sentry in that room to determine that an assignation between the spinster and his cousin had been arranged for later that day—precisely at the noon hour.

When choosing Miss Dawes for his cousin, he thought she'd been perfect. After all, she'd refused everyone. He had foolishly assumed that she would be as impervious to War's charm as she had been to every other would-be suitor who had made a play for her fortune. It seemed even the icy Miss Dawes, plump and perpetual spinster, was unable to resist his cousin. It was yet another reason to despise him. War didn't deserve the title.

Barton's own estates were profitable but small. They were all recently acquired, as well, through marriages to unfortunate connections in trade. There was nothing that would truly wash away the taint of being a cit... Except a title. And the only



way to get a title was for his cousin to die. He'd hoped the wager would be enough to prompt a challenge from him. Duels were frowned upon but not entirely beyond the pale. But, no, not his cousin. Of course not. War had simply done the honorable thing and elected to pursue Miss Dawes for marriage. Like everything else about his cousin, it was a terrible nuisance.

There was only one possible solution. He'd have to court her himself. After all, it wasn't as if he lacked his own brand of charm. If he could manage to make Miss Dawes fall in love with him, or at the very least prevent her from falling in love with his cousin, then he could secure one part of his future. He needed Stonecrest. Without it, his cousin would be too impoverished to marry, and that would leave him in line to inherit the title.

And, Barton thought, if Miss Dawes was unwilling to accept him as a suitor, there was always abduction. If he ruined her, she'd have no choice.

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Lucy stared at the pages of her book, yet again not reading a word of it. She had no ability to focus. The small folly that she'd come to for her afternoon *assignation* was shielded from the slightly chilly breeze, yet her skin tingled with anticipation as she waited for the viscount. A dozen times since their conversation that morning, she had regretted her impulsive acceptance of his proposition—his very improper proposition. But a traitorous part of her mind always demanded to know which she would regret more: allowing him to kiss her again or missing an opportunity to feel that thrill once more?

She had never been so reckless in her life. In fact, one could argue that she had never been reckless *at all*. Her refusal to consider any of the men who had attempted to court her in the past had certainly been looked at as eccentric—foolish, even. After all, she was not a great beauty. Too tall, too plump, with unfashionably dark hair and eyes... She was as far from the ideal beauty of the day as one woman could be. But it wasn't simply principle that had kept her from accepting those offers of courtship.

No man whom she had ever encountered had made her feel the way that Viscount Harcourt did. Even in their previous interactions at various society events, when he'd danced with her out of nothing more than politeness, she had felt strangely discomfited by his touch. They had waltzed. The spot on her back where his hand had rested had tingled, not unpleasantly, but certainly unnervingly. She'd been acutely aware of the strength in his hand as he'd clutched hers to lead her in that still slightly scandalous dance. But she'd ignored all of those things because he had not pursued her after.

Lucy wasn't a fool. Not by any stretch of the imagination. So why the sudden desire to marry when he'd previously shown no inclination toward such a state? It wasn't simply that he'd decided. If that was the case, then it would have been put out by the gossips long before any of them had left London. When a peer decided to marry, society mamas knew so before the man ever did!

A set of approaching footsteps prompted her to look up. But it was not the viscount who stood between the heavy arches of the false ruins. It was his cousin, Mr. Barton Warfield. A frisson of unease snaked down Lucy's spine. He was not a man to be trusted, after all. Whatever the viscount's motives, she knew that if she asked him not to touch her, he would comply. She had the feeling that his cousin simply did not hear the word *no*, regardless of how loudly or how forcefully it might be shouted at him.

"Miss Dawes," he said, his voice dripping with false warmth. "What a pleasant surprise to find you here. I do not think we have had nearly enough time to acquaint ourselves with one another."

"I hardly think this is the time, Mr. Warfield. We are barely acquainted, as you said," she stated firmly. "We shall chat in the drawing room...with an appropriate chaperone."

He smiled, his expression quite reptilian. "Nonsense, Miss Dawes. There is no time like the present, after all. What is it you are reading?"

She had been attempting to read some hideous, gothic novel about a hero who suddenly seemed quite villainous, given that his behavior was so very similar to that of the man before her. The book was thoroughly ruined for her at that point. “It’s of no consequence. In fact, I think I am finished reading for the day. The air is much cooler than I had anticipated, and I should return to the house.”

“If you permit me, Miss Dawes, I would certainly help to keep you warm,” he offered.

There was no mistaking his offer as anything more than innuendo. His intent was perfectly clear—as hers would be. “A return to the house will provide all the warmth I wish for.”

His smile faded, and when he spoke, there was a snap to his voice that had not been there previously. “Perhaps, Miss Dawes, it isn’t the air that is cold.” There would be no further attempts at charm. It was clear that he was angry and that his temper was directed at her.

Rather than engage in verbal sparring, Lucy snapped her book closed and rose to her feet. “I’m certain my aunt will be wondering where I’ve been.” That was a lie. Her aunt had taken a sleeping draught the night before, pleading terrible migraines and fatigue. In her opinion, the sleeping draughts were the cause of the migraines and fatigue. “If you will excuse me, Mr. Warfield.”

Her intent was to sweep past him and return to the house, subsequently missing her assignation with the viscount. But he stood up, no longer leaning nonchalantly in the arch. Now, he blocked it entirely, preventing her passage. “We have more to discuss, Miss Dawes.”

“No,” Lucy replied. “We do not. Let me pass.”

“My cousin has been paying particular attention to you. Would you like to know why?”

Yes. She did want to know, but could she trust anything he said to her? The answer was obviously no. “Let me pass,” she stated again, more firmly this time.

“It was a wager, you see? My Craddock Hall against his Stonecrest. If he could win your hand by the end of this house party, both would be his.”

Oh, how it stung. It hurt the most because she could see the truth in it. “As I have no intention of marrying anyone, that hardly signifies one way or another. Again, let me pass!”

“I can’t risk it,” he said. “I need Stonecrest. Craddock Hall is profitable, but it’s such a small estate that it will never bring me more than a pittance. Of course, Stonecrest neighbors it. If I had both estates... Well, you see, Miss Dawes, I need them. Of course, if I had your dowry to go along with it, I’d never have to worry about being poor again. As an added benefit, if my cousin loses Stonecrest, then he will be too poor to marry. Even a viscounty cannot alleviate the stain of that sort of pauperdom.”

“How does his poverty benefit you?” Lucy was at the end of her patience with him.

“No wife means no heir, and eventually, the title would be mine,” Warfield explained. “So, you see, Miss Dawes, your little trysts with my cousin cannot continue.”

“I am having trysts, as you put it, with no one! And even if I were, Mr. Warfield, you have no right to dictate any aspect of my behavior,” she said, her temper piqued by his arrogance and high handedness.

“I will soon enough, because I mean to be certain, Miss Dawes, that you do not marry my cousin. The best way to do that is to marry you myself!”

She laughed bitterly. “As if I would ever agree.”

“As if I would give you a choice!”

That statement was her only warning. He snatched her close to him, hauling her against his chest as he pressed his mouth to hers. It was not at all the sort of kiss she’d received from the viscount. This was violent and ugly, bruising her lips as they were mashed against her teeth. And, struggle as she might, she could not break free of his hold.

It was a terrifying experience for her. No one had ever touched her against her will. She was alone, and it was still some time before the viscount was due to meet her. And it was quickly becoming clear to her that she was physically no match for Mr. Warfield. He had already overpowered her. But Lucy didn't have it in her to simply give in. She fought as hard as she could, struggling against him—kicking, clawing, and biting.

When her nails sank into the tender flesh of his neck just above his stock and cravat, he jerked away from her. He bit out an ugly curse as he clapped one hand over the wound. But it was not the opportunity for escape that she had hoped. His other hand came up and then flew forcefully in her direction. The backhanded slap sent her sprawling to the leave-strewn floor of the folly. The sleeve of her morning dress snagged on the jagged edge of a rock, ripping it even as the stone gouged her skin and drew blood.

Before she could scramble to her feet and get away, he was on her, pressing her down onto the stone floor, bits of dirt and leaves biting into her skin.

“Bitch!” he hissed at her.

Lucy saw him draw back his hand once more, his intent clear. Her ears were still ringing from the first slap, her entire face aching from the force of it. She feared that if he struck her again, she might well lose consciousness—then he would be able to do whatever he wished. She squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the impact. But the blow never came. His weight was simply gone from her. And when she managed to open her eyes, she knew why. The viscount had come for her earlier than anticipated, and whatever else he might have done, she was beyond grateful to see him in that moment.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



**H**e'd been so eager to see her again, to kiss her again, that he had left the house early, hoping she might have done the same. As he'd approached the folly, he'd heard the sounds of a struggle, of angry, raised voices. Muffled by the trees and hedges, it had never occurred to him that one of those voices might be his cousin's. What he'd seen upon entering the folly had made his blood grow cold. But only for a moment. Then his pulse had begun to race, fueled by a fury unlike anything he'd ever known. He lunged forward, grasping Barton's arm and hauling him backward, pulling him off Lucy and sending the other man sprawling into the dirt and leaves.

"How dare you ever treat a lady in such a manner!" War snapped, his words clipped and angry. "I should call you out!"

"Do not! Please!"

That impassioned cry had come from Miss Dawes. She had managed to get to a seated position, but there was blood running down her arm from the tear in her sleeve, and a bruise was already beginning to form on her cheekbone, where Barton had struck her. She was thoroughly disheveled but remarkably calm, all things considered.

“You cannot possibly have any concern for him,” War stated stiffly.

“I have concern for my reputation, my lord. No woman has ever benefitted by men fighting a duel for her honor. It only serves to spread gossip farther and wider than it would have traveled otherwise,” she replied, her voice slightly tremulous as she climbed to her feet.

Glancing constantly between her and Barton, who was also getting to his feet, War knew that his battle with his cousin was far from over. Whatever Barton’s crimes, the man’s pride would not let him simply walk away, no matter that he’d clearly behaved in a heinous manner.

“Miss Dawes,” War said, “You should return to the house at once. I shall seek you out there after my cousin has been dealt with.”

Miss Dawes stared out through the arches of the folly and then looked back at him with an expression that was utterly forlorn. “It’s too late for that.”

As Barton’s attention appeared to have been drawn by something else, War risked a glance over his shoulder to see what had caused the sudden shift. Several of the guests stood there, all of them gaping at the tableaux they created: Miss Dawes, bloodied and battered in her torn clothing, and he and Barton, ready to pulverize one another like prize fighters at a fair. Their discovery in that situation was nothing short of disastrous.

With so many witnesses, he had to trust that Barton would not attack—at least for the moment. Removing his coat, he draped the garment over Miss Dawes shoulders. “I will escort you back to the house. We have much to discuss.”

“Such as your wager?” she snapped.

War sighed. “Yes. Amongst other things. And it is clearly not safe for you to walk alone. My cousin cannot be trusted.”

“That appears to be a trait you share, my lord. But, yes, I will accept your accompaniment for the walk, though I feel there is naught left to be said between us,” she agreed quietly.

War disagreed. Given the number of witnesses that had just observed her in her present state of dishabille as he and Barton prepared to fight for her honor, there was a great deal left to be said. Though, in truth, it could be summed up in a very short question: He would be asking Miss Dawes to be his wife.

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Lucy was still shaken, her trembling knees concealed by her skirts and her hands clasped tightly in front of her to halt their quaking, or at least to prevent others from seeing it. She could hear the whispers of the gathered crowd as they watched her walk past, the viscount at her side. It was beyond humiliating. The attack from Mr. Warfield was bad enough, but the humiliation if anyone had heard his statements about the wager that had prompted the viscount's attentions...she couldn't bear that. Having never been a great beauty and only pursued by gentlemen for the sake of her fortune, the idea that his pseudo courtship was simply for the sake of a wager was utterly mortifying.

As they neared the house, there was a group of people gathered on the terrace, eagerly watching their approach. No doubt someone else had raced back to inform them of the entire debacle. It was the sort of salacious gossip that would spread far and wide. A prickling of unease settled over her as the implications of that began to sink in. *Ruin. Complete and utter ruin.*

They'd no more than reached the top of the terrace steps when her aunt came rushing through the French doors. "Lucy! Oh my heavens, what a morning this has been! Come inside at once!"

The command was punctuated with a hard glare from her aunt in the viscount's direction. Hoping to stave off any further unpleasantness, Lucy disentangled herself from him and hooked her arm through her aunt's. She didn't glance back at him. No matter how tempting it was to do so, she refused. Her pride wouldn't allow it.

Within minutes, she was in her chamber, a maid helping her to remove her ruined gown. Her cuts and scrapes were



treated with a salve, and her hair was tidied up. Though it all, her aunt was silent, and that silence hung heavily in the air. It was positively maddening.

“Yell. Scream. Shout. For pity’s sake, do something!” Lucy cried.

“There is naught to do at this point, Lucy, but pray—pray he is honorable enough on make an offer for you!”

“No! I will not marry that wretched man! All of this, Aunt, it was all—” Lucy stopped abruptly. She was unable to say it, unable to admit the truth of why he had been paying court to her.

“It doesn’t matter what was, Lucy, only what is...or what appears to be. You were unchaperoned in a garden with two men. You are bruised and bloodied, and they were brawling over you. You must marry one of them—the viscount or Mr. Warfield. Whichever of them comes up to snuff first, you will accept, girl. You’ve no other option. Your father would never permit you to remain under his roof with such scandal attached to your name!”

Her aunt spoke the truth. She knew that. Her father’s new wife and the child she carried were all he concerned himself with. It wasn’t jealousy or even self pity that made her think such a thing. It had been made abundantly clear that she was an unfortunate reminder to his new wife of her predecessor. And the means to see her banished had just been gifted to them in a pretty package. Not even her aunt would be able to save her from her father’s wrath, fueled by the whispered words of her stepmother.

Lucy wasn’t even aware that she was crying. The tears simply fell unheeded from her eyes, rolling over the fullness of her cheeks and dampening her already ruined gown. But her aunt offered no further scolding. Instead, she simply sat down beside her on the bed and wrapped Lucy in a warm and loving embrace, holding her gently as she cried. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Since her mother’s death when she was a girl of only fourteen, it had been her aunt who dried all of her tears. But this was a situation her aunt could not get her

out of. Widowed, the woman was dependent on her father's generosity, and if she were to offer Lucy aid against his will, he'd withdraw every last pence of support provided to her.

"I've made a mess of it all," Lucy sobbed woefully.

"I think it is fair to say that the viscount and his cousin made a mess of it all," her aunt stated pragmatically. "You are not the first woman to be charmed by a too-handsome man, and you will certainly not be the last. Regardless, we must simply hope that one of them will make you an offer."

Lucy shuddered. "Then, let us hope it is the viscount. He has behaved horribly, but at the very least, he is not cruel."

Her aunt only nodded, patting Lucy's hand. But the dread filling that room was palpable as they both waited to learn Lucy's unfortunate fate.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



Lady Pandora Osbourne raised her walking stick and tapped the silver handle against the door to one of the guest chambers. She didn't need the thing, but as an aging society matron, the affectation of it gave her a bit of gravitas that certainly helped on occasion. Given the events of the day, that sort of gravitas was certainly called for.

"Enter!"

The barked order from inside had her raising her eyebrows. Nonetheless, she opened the door and swept into the room, her maid right behind her. Given the nature of the scandalous events that had transpired, even a direct order would not have kept Collins from that room.

"Harcourt, I will have an accounting from you," she said.

The viscount looked up from the writing desk where he'd been seeing to correspondence and frowned. "Forgive me, Lady Pandora. I did not realize it was you."

"You were expecting someone else?"

"No, I... Well, it's been a trying day," he said.

Pandora arched her eyebrow imperiously. "Yes, I'm sure. Ruining young ladies of quality before luncheon is even

served must be utterly exhausting.”

“My intentions are honorable,” he protested. “Even now, I am writing to Mr. Dawes to inform him of my intent to seek her hand.”

Pandora was not entirely convinced of his honorable intentions. “And your wager with your cousin? Was that honorable, Viscount Harcourt? I have half a mind to try my hand at finding Miss Dawes another match!”

He looked at her in confusion. “You say that as if you were responsible for throwing us together to start!”

Pandora’s smirk faded. “Well, I was certainly responsible for having both of you invited here, wasn’t I? I will have an answer from you. Was all this engineered so that you might win this awful wager with your cousin? Will Miss Dawes be hurt by it any more than she already has?”

“No,” he agreed quickly. “Hurting Miss Dawes has never been my intent, even with the wager. The wager was a terrible mistake, fueled by an unfortunate encounter with Mr. Osgoode’s private stock of dosed brandy. Had I known it was laden with absinthe, I would never have partaken of it, and this dreadful wager would never have occurred.”

Pandora considered that briefly then gave a curt nod. “When you entered the billiard room that night, my lord, was the brandy already present? Had your cousin already produced it?”

His features hardened, firming into an expression of complete fury. “I’m well aware that my cousin has engineered all of this. I am also aware that his attack on Miss Dawes, for it could be called nothing less, was only committed because he feared that she would accept my suit. That wager painted a target on her, and I will never forgive myself for that.”

“The real question, my lord, is whether or not she will forgive you. But I will speak to her. It is to her benefit to accept your suit, and I will be certain that she is aware of the consequences of letting her pride dictate her actions. She will be awaiting you in the library at the top of the hour.”

“Whatever you can do to sway her to reason, I will be grateful for. This has naught to do with the wager and everything to do with making this situation right. I cannot allow her to be harmed by my cousin’s actions...or my own.”

Satisfied with his explanation and with his intent, Pandora nodded. “Very well. I shall expect to see your betrothal announced at dinner. You have a very short amount of time to make things right with her. After all, your cousin is still not to be trusted. She will not be safe from him until you are wed.” With that parting warning, Pandora turned and left.

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War watched Lady Osbourne depart, her silent but watchful maid following behind her. He was well aware that Miss Dawes would not be safe from Barton until they were married. If she accepted his offer, he intended for them to be married by common license by the end of the week. A special license would be better, always, in terms of how society viewed a hasty marriage. But under the circumstances, expedience was more important than social cache.

Completing the letter to her father, he dusted it with sand to set the ink before folding it and placing it in his pocket. A glance at the clock showed that he would need to hurry to reach the library on time. If Miss Dawes agreed, and he had to hope that she would, he would ask her to read it before sending it. After all, she was certainly entitled to be privy to whatever it contained.

Exiting his chamber, he made his way to the main level of the house and the library where he was to meet Miss Dawes. When he knocked upon the door, it was not Miss Dawes who answered but her aunt. She immediately turned her nose up, sniffed haughtily and then walked away. But she left the door open, so he knew that she expected him to enter. As he did so, he caught sight of Miss Dawes seated on a rather hard-looking chair before the window.

“Miss Dawes, if you’d permit me, I’d like to have a word about the events that transpired this morning,” he said.

“Do your words involve a proposal of marriage?” The question had not come from Miss Dawes but from her aunt, Mrs. Wilson.

“As a matter of fact, Mrs. Wilson, they do. Perhaps you might give us a moment’s privacy? You could step into the corridor but leave the door open... Under the circumstances, it can hardly make matters worse,” he said.

Mrs. Wilson looked toward her niece. Miss Dawes didn’t speak, simply gave a curt nod. Mrs. Wilson promptly turned on her heel and left, but the door remained open in her wake. There was little doubt that she hovered very close to it.

“Miss Dawes—”

She held up her hand. “You have a question to ask me, my lord. And I am in such an untenable situation that there is only one answer I can give you. Nothing else is of significance.”

“I owe you an apology, Miss Dawes. Is that of no significance?”

“No,” she said, finally turning to look at him, her gaze hard and cold. Her anger was palpable. “You may be as sorry as you like for what has occurred, but it cannot be undone. Your pretty words about deducing it was time to take a wife and choosing to pursue me for that purpose will still be a lie. But I am no longer in a position to be choosy. My aunt and Lady Pandora, who left only moments before you arrived, have made my lack of options abundantly clear.”

“Very well, Miss Dawes, would you do me the estimable honor of becoming my wife?”

“Yes, Viscount Harcourt. I will become your wife,” she replied. There was no joy in her acceptance. It was clear from the flatness of her tone and the tightness of her expression that she was not at all happy about the solution to their problem.

“If you would like to read it, I have composed a letter to your father...assuring him that there was no intended impropriety on your part and that you were, unfortunately, the victim of my cousin’s envious nature.”

“There’s no need,” she said. “My father will simply be relieved to see me married. He no longer cares whom I marry or under what circumstances, so long as the deed is done.”

“Very well. I will obtain a common license, and we will be wed before the week is out,” he stated. “Assuming you are in agreement.”

She’d returned to looking out the window to the parkland beyond. “I’m certain any arrangements you make will be perfectly agreeable. If that is all, my lord, I find I am very tired and would like to rest before dinner.”

“There is one more thing, Miss Dawes.” War removed the signet ring from his pinky and approached her. “It will have to do until I can retrieve some of the more suitable family jewels from the vaults. May I?”

She held her hand out to him, and it trembled ever so slightly. War slipped the signet ring onto her finger, hating the entire situation. Not that he would be married to her, but that she so clearly had no wish to be married to him.

“Whatever happens, Miss Dawes—Lucy—and however it may have come to pass, I will make every effort to be the best husband to you that I can and to make amends for all that has transpired to now.”

“There is much to make amends for,” she stated bitterly. “I have been made a fool of, and now every gossiping guest at this party will think me a fallen woman. I need not tell you how quickly such gossip will spread. Married or not, the scandal will linger for some time.”

“Then I shall endeavor to provide you with ample distraction from such unpleasantness.”

She said nothing to that. The silence grew until it became unbearable. Realizing that the best course of action was a strategic retreat, War offered, “I shall see you at dinner, Miss Dawes, and will arrange for our host to make a congratulatory announcement for our betrothal. Good afternoon.”

With a stiff bow, he quickly exited the room, passing Mrs. Wilson in the corridor. He’d wronged Lucy Dawes terribly,

even if it had not been his intent to do so. It would take time to come back from that and an infinite amount of patience. But already he missed her wit and her innate warmth. He missed the promise of heated, drugging kisses and forbidden stolen moments. The iciness that existed between them at that moment was a terrible omen for what their future held.



# CHAPTER NINE



**T**hey were married on Friday morning, the day before the house party was to end and everyone was to depart. In light of their nuptials, Mr. and Mrs. Osgoode hosted a wedding breakfast in their honor. It was a disaster. Everyone in attendance simply stared at the pair of them and whispered behind their hands.

Halfway through, Mrs. Osgoode, seated to Lucy's right, realized that she'd made a terrible mistake in putting the pair of them on display and that it would only serve to make the gossip worse. "Oh, dear. Oh, heavens. What a muddle all this is!"

"I would call it an utter catastrophe, Evelyn," Lady Pandora, seated just on the other side of Mrs. Osgoode, stated. "A muddle can be repaired."

"This is your doing," Mrs. Osgoode stated. "Every house party you attend, some scandalous match occurs. I know you had a hand in it!"

"You are the one who invited Mr. Barton Warfield. He is the instigator in all of it."

Mrs. Osgoode harrumphed. "Well, he's gone now, isn't he? I've seen the error of my ways on that front. Though, I would

like to remind you, Pansy, you were the one who instructed me to invite a plethora of eligible ineligibles! For what reason you could possibly have wanted spinsters and confirmed bachelors in attendance at a house party is simply beyond me! And I heard from Lady Montford that you made the same request of her for the house party she is hosting for you!”

“That’s a bit curious, don’t you think?”

That question, whispered close to her ear, had come from the viscount. *Her husband*. “Perhaps you are not the only one who likes to make wagers that impact the very lives of others,” she replied sharply—certainly more sharply than a happy bride would on her wedding day.

Lady Pandora’s head whipped around, her rather alarmed gaze settling on Lucy. Just as quickly, the elderly woman covered her alarm with a polite smile and resumed small talk.

Mrs. Osgoode was having none of it, however. “Tell the truth, Pandora! What sort of scheme are you up to? You’re facilitating matches left and right for people who are, at best, distant connections. There must be a reason.”

Lady Pandora’s polite smile never wavered, but it did not reach her eyes. “There is only the satisfaction of seeing matches well made, Evelyn. Now, do not let your suspicions ruin the day for our young couple.”

“It was a wager,” Lucy muttered under her breath. “Lady Pandora, my new husband...both have wagered in ways that will alter my life irrevocably, and I have no notion yet if it is for better or worse.”

“It will be better from here,” he vowed quietly, clearly having overheard her as she talked to herself. “I cannot change what I did, Lucy, but I can promise you that it was out of character and is not a true representation of who I am. I only ask, for the sake of both our future happiness, that you provide an opportunity for me to show you that.”

It was a reasonable request. Under the circumstances, it was foolish to spite herself by continuing the animosity between them. But her wounded pride was still stinging. Had

it all been an act? Had the kisses which had rocked her to her very core been nothing more than subterfuge? For the first time in her life, she'd been tempted by a man. She'd believed him to be different and had allowed herself to consider the possibilities before them, and it felt like such a betrayal to find out it had all been for the sake of a wager. Not because he truly desired her, but because he desired something else. It made him no better than the men who had attempted to court her solely to get their hands on her fortune. And, yet, there was a ring of truth to his words. What she knew of him indicated it was out of character.

“Never lie to me again,” she said. “I can forgive almost anything but dishonesty.”

“I would give you my word, but I fear it has very little worth for you at the moment,” he said.

Lucy met his gaze and saw something in his eyes that, while it certainly didn't take away the humiliating facts surrounding their marriage, it bolstered her belief in him. “If you promise, I will accept it. But only this once. If you do not keep this vow, how can I ever trust you to keep others?”

“I will never lie to you,” he said. “Not again.”

“Your estate is only a day's ride from here?” Lucy asked.

“Yes. We might be there by nightfall. At worst, we'd have to stop at an inn for the night and could be there by midmorning tomorrow”

She nodded. “I don't wish to stay here and be gossiped about further. As soon as possible, let us depart and try to begin anew.”

He sighed with relief. “I would like nothing better. As soon as possible, I'll slip away and have the servants ready our things.”

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Barton was swilling ale despite the fact that it was early morning. As he had actually begun his drinking the night before, it hardly mattered. Drinking and brooding and fuming. God, how he detested his cousin! It was unfair that Lord

Harrison Warfield, Viscount Harcourt, should have everything. He had the title. He had the best of the estates, including Craddock Hall, now. And with Craddock Hall, which neighbored Stonecrest, he'd be the largest landowner in the county. *With a plump heiress with an even plumper purse.*

Of course, if War and his lovely bride were to perish unexpectedly, then it all would be his anyway. Perhaps letting his cousin have the girl wasn't the worst thing to happen to him after all.

Barton smiled as the plan began to unfold. Oh, yes.

"You look lonely, love."

Barton looked up to see a winsome tavern maid leaning over the table he occupied. She was certainly doing her best to display her most appealing assets. But he was in no mood for that. "I'm not lonely. I don't need your kind of company. I do need someone who can do a bit of dirty work, however. Do you know anyone who might be willing to get his hands dirty?"

She grinned. "I got a brother who don't much care what he has to do so long as he's paid. And for a coin or two, I'll introduce you to him."

"Excellent. Maybe, after that introduction, I'll be more inclined for a bit of company," Barton offered suggestively. "Business first. Get your brother, darling, and then we'll have time to play."

She tossed him a saucy wink and then wandered off. Yes. A bit of dirty work and then it would all be his. And he'd be holed up at the inn, perfectly alibied, with a lusty tavern maid in his bed. It would work out perfectly.

Lifting the tankard of ale once more, he took a long swig, draining it entirely. He'd need to be marginally sober for what was to come.

# CHAPTER TEN



**T**here was no conversation, only the sound of carriage wheels and hoofbeats. In the silence, War had an opportunity to study his bride. Away from the prying eyes and the reminder of the embarrassments she had suffered courtesy of his cousin (and himself), Lucy had relaxed somewhat. The tension that tightened her normally full lips and that caused a furrow between her brows had eased.

They would not reach Stonecrest by nightfall. It had taken far longer to escape the effusive well wishes of Mrs. Osgoode than anyone could have anticipated. He dreaded telling her that bit of bad news, but he also knew that his promise to her was one he could not break. He had to be honest—about everything.

“Our delayed departure has left us in a quandary. There are more inns along the road closer to our destination, but they are not the sort of places a lady could stay in comfortably. The Monk’s Head is just a short distance from here, and it is the best and cleanest inn along our route,” he explained. “I think we should stop there for the night, if you are amenable.”

She blinked in surprise. “Oh. Well, certainly, if you think the other establishments are unsafe.”

“They are. Many of them cater to a more criminal element.” And he would guess that Barton was holed up in one of them. He had the distinct feeling that he had not yet heard the last from his cousin. Despite now being in possession of a signed and witnessed document that gave him ownership of Craddock Hall, he had no intention of enforcing it. To do so would only further antagonize his cousin. He could handle Barton, but he very much feared that he would not be Barton’s only target.

“I owe you another apology,” he said, after a long pause.

“No, you do not. We cannot put it behind us if you continue to bring it up,” she stated. “If we are to do anything more than make one another miserable, we must concern ourselves more with how we begin than why we have begun.”

“It isn’t that. I underestimated Barton. I knew he was envious, but I didn’t anticipate the degree to which that envy has poisoned his mind and his heart. At one time, he was like a brother to me. And now, I fear what he will do.”

If possible, Lucy’s face paled even more. “You think he means you harm?”

“I think he means us harm,” War answered dismally. “If you see him, I do not care what the circumstances, run. Scream. Do whatever you must, but not allow him to get you alone. And until we are safely ensconced at Stonecrest, we should both keep our guard up.”

Lucy nodded. “Yes. I think you are quite right about that. I never trusted him, you know? There are things he has done of which you may not be aware. There are several young ladies whom he has thoroughly ruined and has offered no honorable recourse. They are from lower gentry, like myself. One has no father, no brothers. It is only herself, her mother, and a sister. There is no one to stand for her. And, if her account was accurate, then it was not a seduction at all but an act of violence against her.”

“I shall find out and, if possible, do what I can to make it right. He is not who I thought he was—who I wanted him to be.”

“Few people are.”

The silence stretched once more inside the carriage. Some of the tension between them had dissipated, but War was aware that it would take little enough to reignite it. Still, he had some hope that they would not forever be at odds.

They traveled for another hour until the carriage began to slow, easing into the inn yard of The Monk’s Head. The Tudor-style building, with its cantilevered upper floor and dark wooden beams, was well maintained. Everything was crisp, clean and well kept. As soon as the wheels stopped turning, the hostler was there, opening the door and offering to help with their bags.

War helped Lucy to disembark, and they walked into the darkened common room together. Lanterns blazed on the tables, but with the dark, wood-paneled walls, the dimness of the room was impenetrable. Seeking the innkeeper, a portly man standing behind a counter, he set about procuring a room and supper for them both.

Minutes later, they were taking the stairs up to the largest room the innkeeper had. There was already a fire laid in the hearth and an ewer of water warming before it.

Taking the pitcher, he poured some of the warm water into the basin. “I’ll leave you to freshen up. I’ll return in ten minutes.”

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Lucy watched him walk out, noting that the door closed and locked behind him. He wasn’t locking her in so much as locking out everyone else. She understood all too well that his cousin was dangerous and that, until Barton Warfield could be located, they had to be extremely cautious. But it wasn’t thoughts of his cousin which prompted her nervousness. It was her wedding night.

They were alone in a bedchamber that they would share. One bed. Two of them. And she hadn’t entirely forgiven him yet, try as she might. Would he demand his husbandly rights? She hoped not. She wasn’t entirely certain she was ready for

that. But if he kissed her, would she have the strength to refuse him? *No*. She knew that without question. When he kissed her, she lost all sense. Nothing existed but the two of them. It was maddening and infuriating and also the most glorious thing she'd ever experienced.

Shaking off those thoughts, she attended to her most pressing needs first and then washed up, taking off as much of the dust and dirt of the road as possible without a proper bath. Stepping behind the dressing screen that had been provided, she removed her gown and donned her nightgown and a very sturdy and warm wrapper. In truth, despite the somewhat intimate nature of the garments, they covered her more modestly than many of her gowns. But she still felt exposed in them, vulnerable in a way that she did not when clothed to be in company.

She had just tidied up when she heard a soft knock and the snick of the key in the door. He had returned.

"May I enter?" he asked, the door only slightly ajar.

"Yes," she replied quickly, though she had been tempted to deny him for the sake of a few moments' reprieve.

The viscount, her husband, stepped into the room and immediately moved to the washstand where he quickly stripped off his coat and cravat. His waistcoat came next. But when he tugged his shirt free of his breeches, Lucy turned away. Of course, it was a small room. And the windows that had been meticulously cleaned offered a clear reflection of his nakedness behind her. Distorted by the imperfections of the glass, she still had the impression of strong muscles and sun-bronzed skin. She could see the light dusting of hair on his chest. It left her rather breathless and, though not precisely uncomfortable, definitely discomfited.

As if he'd sensed her unease, he turned. She could see in the reflection on the wavy planes of glass that he was looking at her rigid back. A smile tugged at his lips, but it didn't appear to be unkind. He wasn't laughing at her, at least.

"I've no intention of pouncing on you, Lucy. A loud, crowded public inn is no place for our wedding night. I will



not force myself on you. Not now. Not even when we reach Stonecrest. Make no mistake, however, our marriage will be consummated. And sooner rather than later. But when that occurs, it will be because you want it to happen.”

Lucy felt her face flaming with embarrassment. “You should not say such things. It’s terribly improper.”

He was walking toward her then, stopping only when he was directly behind her—close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. Compulsively, Lucy swallowed, suddenly a bundle of nerves.

“Propriety,” he said, “has no place in any bedchamber we share. Marriage isn’t about being proper. It’s about passion and affection...respect. All of those things come in to play, Lucy. But this will not be some bloodless union between us. Perhaps I should have spoke to you of this before. Alas, I did not. And now we find ourselves embarking on a life together with no notion what to expect from one another.”

She whirled then, her eyes wide and her expression very animated as she nearly shouted at him. “It isn’t that I don’t know what to expect. Well, it is. When you are a woman in this world, you are expected to spend the entirety of your existence in a state of ignorance! We are never told what wifely duties entail until we are expected to perform them! I am out of my depth, with no notion of what to say or do in our current situation.”

“Did you like it when I kissed you?”

“What?” She gaped at him.

“When I kissed you in the garden...did you enjoy it?”

If it was possible for one’s flesh to catch fire from the heat of a blush, she surely would have been consumed by the flames already. “That is not a question—”

“No. It isn’t a question,” he said. “Because I know the answer. I know that you enjoyed when I kissed you. And I enjoyed kissing you, Lucy. Very much. And while I will make no further demands of you tonight, I would have a kiss. I would at least have that pleasure.”

She could hardly deny him that. They were married, after all. It was their wedding night. *You don't want to deny him.*

It was true. She didn't wish to deny him. There was an insatiable curiosity inside her—a need to know if it would have the same effect on her this time as it did before. That first kiss they'd shared in the garden had left her unsettled and desperate to feel that kind of madness again.

“One kiss,” she agreed cautiously. “That is all.”

He smiled a devastating and all-too-tempting smile. “Until you ask for more.”

There was no chance to respond. His arms closed around her, hauling her against the broad and very naked expanse of his chest. She had the quick impression of warmth and skin that was like velvet over steel. Then his lips were on hers, teasing and coaxing as he'd done before, and thought simply fled. It was all dizzying heat and the undeniable yearning to be closer to him still. Even when their bodies were pressed so firmly together not even air could pass between them, that was not close enough. The layers of her clothing were no longer protection but a hindrance.

Clinging to him, pressing herself against him, Lucy was swept up in the heat of his kiss, in the play of his lips over hers. And when his tongue swept into her mouth, a soft and sensual glide, she couldn't stop the desperate moan that escaped her. How could anything feel so good? How could anything possibly rob her of every shred of dignity she possessed until she wanted nothing more than to twine her body around him and hold him as close to her as possible?

At some point, they shifted. He'd walked her backward until she was pressed against the wall, trapped there by his body. And that kiss shifted as well. It had started gently, but it changed into something darker, something more needful and dangerous. It was a clash of lips, teeth, and tongues. She was suffused with it, her skin flushing from it. The fabric of her nightgown brushed the taut peaks of her breasts, making that tender flesh ache with need for something she could not name. He nipped at her lips, his teeth scraping the full curve of her

lower lip. Then his hands covered her breasts, his palms coasting over those curves in such a way that made her head spin and her breath hitch. His thumb circled one taut peak, eliciting a moan from her. Heat raced through her body, arrowing to the very center of her and then spreading outward.

“Lucy,” he breathed against her lips, a desperate plea. “If I am to stop, it must be now. A man only has so much control.”

She didn’t want it to stop. But she wasn’t certain she was ready for what came next. “I’m sorry.”

He laughed, a slightly pained sound. “God above, do not apologize. There is no greater pleasure than watching your passion ignite when I kiss you. Knowing that you desire my touch, after everything... It is something I am incredibly grateful for. But this is no place for the things I want to do with you.”

She had no notion what that meant, but she had to accept that his level of knowledge and experience made him more qualified to make that decision. “I... Yes, of course. We should go to bed. To sleep. We should sleep.”

He grinned down at her. “Have I told you that I find you utterly charming? My courtship might have been prompted by a wager, Lucy, but the attraction was there long before. When we danced at that ball so long ago, I wished that you were not an innocent that night—that you were the sort of woman whom I could tempt into a dalliance. Because I wanted you even then.”

Lucy said nothing. In her mind, she was transported back to that night when they had waltzed together. She’d felt it too. The strange attraction, the same heat, it had been there from the beginning. *But she would never have thought he felt such a thing for her.* After years and years of only ever being courted for her fortune, of having her father and stepmother bemoan her unfortunate figure and her unfashionable appearance, it had never occurred to her that someone would ever truly desire her. For that someone to be a man as beautiful as Viscount Harcourt was simply unimaginable.

He stepped back from her, his breathing labored and his gaze heated as it moved over her. “Get into the bed, Lucy. Pull the covers up and go to sleep. I will sit up for a while.”

“You must be tired,” she protested. “You have had a long day of traveling, as have I!”

His eyes glittered with something she could not name. “I am strangely invigorated, Lucy. And if I get into that bed with you right now, I assure you that neither of us will sleep.”

It was as much a promise as a warning. Lucy heeded it and moved quickly to the bed, sliding beneath the covers, all the while acknowledging her own cowardice.

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The carriage had been easy enough to spot on the road. The viscount’s distinctive crest emblazoned on the doors marked it clearly enough. With the coin from the other gent heavy in his pocket, Ethan Maines settled into the stables to wait for the sun to come up. There were too many witnesses at the inn. Better to follow them on the road the following day, and then when they stopped for a rest, he’d see them both dead and claim the rest of his prize for the work.

He took no pleasure in killing and even less in the notion of killing a woman. But he did love money, and if he were to ever get back to London and out of the miserable countryside, then the debts he owed in that city would have to be paid. It was a necessity, unpleasant and unavoidable.

As for the gentleman who’d hired him, whatever it was that had transpired between himself and viscount, there was true hatred there. The man had no compunction about ordering the death of the newly married couple. In fact, he’d seemed almost gleeful at the prospect. So long as his lack of honor didn’t extend to a refusal to pay his debts, however, it was of no matter.

Settling into the bed of straw that would be his bower for the night, he fell into the light sleep of an army man—what he had once been, and what, if he could gather the funds, he would be again.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



**I**t was just after dawn when Lucy awoke. For the longest time, she'd lain awake, huddled beneath the covers, pretending to sleep, while her husband rested in a chair before the fire. But the wasn't her husband yet, not fully, at any rate. He would not be until their marriage was consummated. And that thought took her right back to the moment of their kiss the night before—and his touch. She knew that men had an obsession with breasts. Given her abundant figure, she'd suffered impertinent glances enough to know it without question. But it had never occurred to her that she might benefit from that obsession in some way. The pleasure it had brought her, and the yearning it had awakened inside her, was not something she could have anticipated.

“Good morning.”

He was already up, dressed, and ready for the day. She had to wonder if he had slept at all. “How did you know I was awake?”

He chuckled softly. “You think very loudly. And you snore, very softly, but still.”

Mortification had her bolting upright in the bed. Somehow, during the night, her wrapper had become untied and her

nightrail had shifted. It dipped dangerously low in front, revealing an expanse of flesh that she would not normally display. Hastily, she grabbed at the covers. "I most certainly do not!"

"You do. It's charming," he said, but there was a tightness in his tone and a fire in his eyes. "Now, I will go downstairs and see about procuring us something with which to break our fast. While I am gone, you should dress. If we get an early start, we can be at Stonecrest before noon."

"Of course," she agreed. "I will make myself ready."

He nodded then turned on his heel and made for the door.

As soon as the door shut behind him, she rose and discarded her wrapper and nightdress. Clad only in her chemise, she struggled into her stays and stockings before once more donning her traveling gown. Once she was decent, she began to tackle the mess of her hair. She'd left it pinned up from the day before, and now it was a tangled mass of knots. With the brush from her traveling case, she set to work on it and then put it in a simple braid. As thick as it was, and without her maid's assistance, that was the best she could do on her own.

She had just completed the task when the door opened once more and the viscount returned. War. That was what others called him. "My lord, I am almost ready," she explained as she hastily returned her items to her traveling case.

"I am your husband. Surely we can dispense with such formality, Lucy."

"I am uncertain what you wish to be called," she admitted ruefully. "Indeed, there is a great deal we do not know about one another."

He stepped forward, taking her hand in his, the pad of his thumb caressing the signet ring which rested on her finger. "We have all the time in the world to learn what we need to about one another. And you may call me War, as others do. Or Warfield. Or even Harrison. Now, if your bag is ready, we shall depart."

“Harrison,” she said. “I do not wish to call you what others call you.”

He kissed her cheek gently. “As I will never be to others what I am to you, I think that is grand.”

Those gentle gestures left her even more unsettled than the passionate kisses. They spoke of a kind of affection between them that she desperately wanted but was afraid to believe could be possible. But there was no time to ponder it further, as they were heading down the stairs. A servant met them at the bottom with a hamper of food. The carriage was already waiting just beyond the doors. Within minutes, they were both seated inside, and the carriage was rolling forward, toward her new home.

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Ethan waited until the carriage had pulled away, giving it space but not letting it fully out of sight. He'd overtake them before the next coaching inn, two hours or so to the north. They had only a driver and a footman. He had a brace of pistols and a musket. Those would allow him to take out the men easily enough. The woman would be last. She posed the least threat.

With his weapons all at the ready, he mounted his horse and nudged it out onto the road, keeping a steady and plodding pace. The carriage was no more than a dot on the road ahead of him, but it was close enough for his purposes. It was easier to kill when one's prey did not seem human and when you didn't have to look them in the eye. Another lesson he'd learned in his army years. It was a matter of just biding his time and finding the right moment for his attack. He would overtake the carriage on a deserted stretch of road and position himself to have a clean shot at the driver with the musket. Then the footman would be next.

Strategizing how to eliminate all threats, he kept his eye on the horizon and the swaying carriage that held his prey.

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War couldn't shake the feeling of unease. It had begun the moment he left their chamber. In the taproom, while he'd been procuring their provisions for the journey, he'd had the uncomfortable sensation of being watched. He hadn't been able to pinpoint precisely from whence it originated. But he wasn't so foolish as to ignore it. That sort of persistent sensation of danger had assailed him in the past, and attending to it had saved his life.

"You are preoccupied," she noted.

"An overabundance of caution," he offered. A glance at his watch showed they had ridden in silence for almost an hour. What miserable company he was! "The road can be a dangerous place. There are all manner of brigands who roam this stretch of highway."

"We are not well armed," she noted. "We have only two servants with us."

"We are armed enough," he stated. "I have a multitude of weapons in this carriage. Always readied. Always primed. In my younger days, I did a bit of clandestine work for Whitehall—before I came into the title and such things were frowned upon. It's a long habit. One I shall likely never break."

Her eyes had widened with alarm. "You were a spy?"

"Hardly that. I was a courier, nothing more. I carried information that others gleaned back to the powers that be. It was not a particularly dashing or dangerous occupation. Still, I took all the precautions possible."

"I suppose this is us getting to know one another, isn't it? Learning facts about one another that are surprising and sometimes even alarming," Lucy observed.

"Tell me something about you that I do not know," he urged her. "I know you love to read. I know you waltz beautifully. I know that you have little tolerance for fools. Beyond that, I am at a loss."

"I do not just love to read. I have always wanted to write my own novel. Even if it is never published, even if it is never



read by another soul. I have countless stories tossing about inside my mind. Like a stormy sea at times.”

War blinked, taking it in. And then he offered, “Then you should. You should write your novel. You will have time. My housekeeper is quite excellent. The household practically runs itself at this point. You must follow this dream of yours, Lucy.”

“You don’t think it’s foolish?”

“I daresay it’s less foolish than the only son and heir of a viscount playing at being a spy,” he laughed. “It’s a much safer dream to have and I would want you to have all that you dream of...all that you desire.”

That statement was laden with meaning. Meaning he had not intended to infuse into the conversation. And, yet, when he saw her cheeks flush and her pupils dilate, he did not regret it. The attraction between them held the possibility of growing into something more—something he had not anticipated having in his life. Surely such desire would lay the foundation for better and more lasting things to come. It was a romantic notion, one quite unlike him, but he rather liked the notion.

But his pleasant musings were cut abruptly short. The crack of gunfire echoed from outside. Then the carriage began to careen wildly, the horses apparently having been spooked.

“The driver, m’lord! He’s been shot.”

That warning had been called out by the footman on the outboard.

Biting out a curse, he rose from his seat and opened the carriage door. It slapped against the body of the vehicle with a loud bang. Then he was grasping the door frame to haul himself up.

“What are you doing?” Lucy cried. “You’ll be killed!”

“If those horses aren’t slowed or stopped,” War answered firmly, “we will both die.” With that, he levered himself up and onto the roof of the vehicle, crawling forward until he could reach the reins that were looped around the hands of the obviously dead servant.

Another shot rang out. It was coming from the trees up ahead on the left. That shot was wide. The next one was not. The pistol ball gouged the wood of the carriage, only inches from him. They needed off the road. There was a break in the hedgerow ahead, a gate for the sheep herders to use. With the reins in hand, he pulled back, slowing the team and then easing them and the carriage through that opening. Once the carriage came to a halt, He jumped down on the opposite side of the carriage and yanked the door open. Shoving Lucy's skirts aside, he opened the panel there and grabbed a brace of pistols as well as a blade.

“Get down on the floor of the coach! Lay flat. If there are any stray shots, you'll be less likely to be injured,” he instructed.

Eyes wide, she simply nodded and then did as he asked.

“No matter what you hear, stay in the coach until I come back for you.” Then he was running for the trees, concealing himself within the small wooded area as he watched the opposite side of the road for even a hint of the person: the flash of sunlight on a pistol barrel, movement in the bushes... anything.

He did not have long to wait. A man emerged from the foliage, moving quietly, pistols at the ready. Taking aim, War fired the shot. It struck the other man in the shoulder, sending him the ground. One pistol discharged, but he raised the other one in his left hand. It was wavering and unsteady but still deadly.

Picking up a stone at his feet. War tossed it in the opposite direction. When it landed, snapping a twig, the brigand swung his pistol round and fired in the direction of the sound. Without giving the man a chance to reload, War charged forward, out of the bushes, and leveled his second pistol directly at him. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I was hired to kill you and the woman,” he said. “It's not personal.”

War's expression hardened, and he answered grimly, “When someone tries to commit murder, it is always personal.”

Who hired you?”

“Some gent. Looked like you, to be honest. At an inn outside of Bramford,” the man admitted, holding his wounded shoulder. “If you mean to kill me, have on with it. I’d rather die from another pistol ball than slowly bleed to death in the road.”

Barton. Barton had hired a man to kill him. And to kill Lucy. There was only one reason for him to have done so. *The title.*

“If you will testify to the fact that my cousin attempted to hire you to murder us, I will swear that you sought us out only to warn us,” War offered. “And you will be compensated for your troubles—double what my cousin offered to pay you.”

The man’s eyebrows lifted in shock. “And how will I explain to the magistrate that I have a pistol ball in my shoulder?”

“What pistol ball? You fell from your horse and injured your shoulder as you pursued our carriage,” War countered. “I am a viscount, sir. You would be surprised at what will be accepted simply because I say it is so.”

The man smirked. “I wouldn’t, actually. I know exactly what men of your standing can get away with. He after the title, then?”

“Indeed. But I will not allow him to get away with this. It is one thing to threaten me. It is quite another to threaten my bride.”

“Then, help me up, unless you’re too high in the instep to do it.”

# CHAPTER TWELVE



**B**arton pasted a carefree smile on his face as he stood in the massive entry hall of Stonecrest. He'd been summoned. There was no other word for it. The estate steward had sent for him. He could only assume it was to inform him of his cousin's untimely passing as a result of a brigand's attack on the road. It wouldn't do to go in with a hangdog expression and give himself away.

"This way, Mr. Warfield," the butler said as he ushered him toward the study. But when the door opened, it was not the steward who greeted him. It was his cousin—the viscount—and the local magistrate, along with several armed constables.

"Ah, cousin. You are just in time," War said. There was something in his tone that hinted at anger, though it was well controlled.

"In time for what?"

"Your arrest," War said. "For attempted murder. The man you hired to kill me and my wife took the coin you gave him, and when he caught up to us, rather than carry out your dastardly plan, he warned us of your plots and schemes. I

thought your attempt to dishonor Lucy was the lowest point to which you would sink. Clearly I was wrong.”

“You cannot do this. Think of the scandal!” Barton protested.

War stared at him with cold, hard eyes. “I’d rather have a scandal than a pistol ball in my back. I’ll not leave it to chance.”

“Begging your pardon, my lord, but there is another option. One that wouldn’t involve a trial. Mr. Warfield could sign a confession and be placed on a transport ship as early as tomorrow morning,” the magistrate offered. “It’d spare the scandal and offer you a bit of peace of mind. With his confession and the sworn testimony of that fellow he hired, he’ll never be able to step foot on English soil again without facing the hangman.”

“I hate you,” Barton whispered. “You have everything, don’t you? The title and the estate and now the rich bride. I hope you choke on her money.”

“I didn’t marry Lucy for her money,” War stated. “I married her because, despite the underhanded way you engineered things, I wanted to marry her—just her. It will pain you to know that you are responsible for putting me on the path of my future happiness. May that thought be cold comfort to you.”

War turned to the magistrate. “Take your men and get him out of here. I can’t abide the sight of him.”

“Yes, my lord. I’ll escort him to the jail myself and take care of it all,” the magistrate stated.

Barton wasn’t done. If he was already facing the ruin and exile, he had nothing left to lose. When the constable approached him, Barton slammed his shoulder into the man’s gut and took the pistol from him. But he never had the chance to fire. War held a smoking pistol in his hand. And as he faced him, Barton felt the fire spreading through his chest. In its wake, nothing but ice. A glance down at his shirtfront showed

a spreading red stain. He staggered and fell backward, slumping to the floor.

“You had no choice, my lord,” the magistrate said. “He’d have never quit. Envy can make a monster of even the best of men.”

Those were the last words Barton heard.

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Lucy was waiting in their bedchamber. She’d had no notion what to make of it when Harrison had informed the butler that her bags were to be placed in his chamber. Her parents, prior to her mother’s death, had never shared a room. Her father and stepmother certainly didn’t. But then she hardly wanted a marriage that in any way resembled either of those relationships, so perhaps he knew best.

When the door opened, she rose. A servant had already informed her of what had occurred—that Mr. Barton Warfield had been shot dead. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Better than I ought to be, quite honestly,” he replied. “I have no notion who that man was, but he wasn’t the cousin I grew up with. He wasn’t the man I knew. His jealousy and greed twisted him into something I no longer recognized.”

It was the most natural thing in the world to approach him, to wrap her arms around him. It wasn’t about heat and passion so much as comfort. “I am sorry. I know it hurts you.”

His arms closed about her, pressing her against him until she had to stand on her tiptoes. “Nothing hurts me right now. I have you with me. That’s all that matters...and our wedding night has been delayed long enough.”

On that point, she was in complete agreement. “Then make me your wife...in every way.”

She was not prepared for what he did next. War simply scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the bed. It took her breath away. “I’m too heavy.”

“You’re perfect,” he insisted.

When he deposited her on the bed, coming down on top of her, she didn't have to breathe to utter another protest. He'd robbed her of it with his nearness, with the firm press of his body and the heated gaze which traveled over her like a caress. Then he kissed her, his mouth moving over hers with a kind of sensual promise that left her trembling.

He continued to kiss her in that way. She was so distracted by it, she hardly noticed when he removed her clothes. One item at a time, he stripped them from her until she wore only her thin shift. Then his hands were moving over her, tracing the curves of her body in a way that made her feel as if she were floating. It was all languid heat and pleasure...and the anticipation of more.

“Is it all like this?” she asked.

“It only gets better,” he vowed.

“Show me.”

And he did.

# EPILOGUE

*Three Months Later*



They were in London for The Season. It was an entirely new experience for Lucy to be choosing from all the many invitations that had already descended upon them. Apparently, her newly married status to a man who had been reported to be a confirmed bachelor had dramatically increased the social demand for her presence.

“We’ve been invited to a ball by Lady Pandora,” she said, as Harrison entered the morning room where she was sorting through her correspondence.

“That makes the gift I have for you even more perfect,” he replied, placing a velvet box before her.

Lucy’s eyebrows raise, and a delighted smile spread across her lips. “You are spoiling me.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You are very easy to spoil, Viscountess Harcourt, and I thoroughly enjoy it. Now, open the box.”

Lucy freed the latch on the box and lifted the lid. Nestled inside was a parure of delicately etched gold set with sapphires. It was beyond beautiful. “This is too much!”



“It isn’t. The necklace is a family piece. We’ve had it for ages. The others I commissioned to match, and they will look stunning on you,” he said. “Now, leave those invitations for later and come upstairs with me so you may thank me properly.”

She laughed. “Since when do we need to go upstairs for that? Just yesterday we did unspeakable things on your desk in the study.”

He eyed the dainty writing table. “My desk is a bit sturdier. That one will not survive the things I want to do to you.”

“There’s always the settee,” she offered with a sly and seductive smile. Their mutual desire for one another, along with his unwavering attentions, had given her a kind of confidence she had never known until he came into her life. He made her feel beautiful. But she had no chance to reflect on it further. He had grasped her hand and was pulling her toward the aforementioned piece of furniture with single-minded determination.

Once there, he seated himself and then pulled her down on top of him until she was sprawled inelegantly and very intimately across his lap. The position put them eye to eye and very nearly lip to lip. But before it went any further, she had to say it. The words had been weighing heavily on her. A dozen times they’d been on the tip of her tongue, and she’d bitten them back. But it was time. Surely, if she could bare her body to him without qualm, it shouldn’t be so difficult to bare her heart?

“I love you,” she blurted out.

Harrison smiled at her, his hands gently cupping her face. “I know. I have known for some time. Just as I hope you know how much I love you. And how much I desire you.”

“Now, as I believe I’ve told you in the past, show me.”

His gaze heated. “That wager was the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“To us,” she corrected, even as she reached for his elegantly tied cravat. She slipped it free and dropped it to the

floor. As buttons were freed and clothing was rearranged, there was no longer a need for words. They could communicate everything they needed through touch, through the giving and receiving of pleasure.

And when it was done, when they were breathless and replete, Lucy snuggled against his chest and wondered how it was that she'd inadvertently gotten everything she had ever wanted... all because of one foolishly undertaken private wager.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Best Seller, Winner of the 2019 Romance Through the Ages Award for Georgian/Regency Romance, 2020 RONE Award winner, 2021 RONE Award Winner, 2021 Raven Award Winner, and 2021 Imadjinn Award for Best Romance Novel, Chasity Bowlin is the author multiple bestselling historical romance novels, both independently and with Dragonblade Publishing. She lives in central Kentucky with her husband, their adorable son, and a menagerie of animals. She loves writing, loves traveling and enjoys incorporating tidbits of her actual vacations into her books. She is an avid Anglophile, loving all things British, but specifically all things Regency.

Growing up in Tennessee, spending as much time as possible with her doting grandparents, soap operas were a part of her daily existence, followed by back to back episodes of Scooby Doo. Her path to becoming a romance novelist was set when, rather than simply have her Barbie dolls cruise around in a pink convertible, they time traveled, hosted lavish dinner parties and one even had an evil twin locked in the attic.

If you'd like to know more, please sign up for Chasity's newsletter at the link below:

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