

Chapter One

The Williams Estate of Ambrosia Kisses at Twilight's Pond

Suffolk, England

1871

Being the 34th year of the reign of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria of England

“Mother! Do come quick! Percy has returned from the war!”

Madam Williams turned to her jubilant daughter with tired eyes. Fanning her bosom, she sat, too short of breath to even sigh with exasperation. “Such shame has fallen upon us. What am I ever to do, and what did I ever do to deserve such slanderous children, who seek and delight only in ruining my good name, the Ponticar name? My father, your grandfather, would be so ashamed of you, of me.”

“Mother?!” piped her exuberant teenage daughter, Mary. “I am not sure what that has to do with Percy coming home. He is a war hero.”

“It has everything to do with Percy coming home. No noble family wants a war hero. That is only for barbarians and democrats.”

“What is a democrat?”

“Oh Mary, you do so try me at times with your ignorance,” said Madam Williams as her voice breathed raspy. She tried to feign indifference to the current situation by looking at the bust of her late father.

“Mother, surely-”

“Alright, but you must help me change into my outdoor attire, it just would not be appropriate for me to just simply walk out as I am now.”

An hour later, once Madam Williams was fully clothed in her black mourning attire, she grabbed her umbrella and allowed Mary to escort her to the lawn.

The timing was perfect as the horse carriage, with its high strewn wheels and chippery geldings slowed to a halt at the steps of the Williams estate, Ambrosia Kisses. The door opened and Colonel Percy William the XIX stepped out from the carriage, at last returning home from the Franco-Prussian war. (Not being French, nor of German descent, it remains a mystery why Percy fought in this continental war, but he did, and the timing of his arrival home could not have been more convenient for this story.)

A shockingly handsome and charming man, standing with a lean, yet hawk-like 6'1 inch frame, Percy walked up to his mother and bowed, taking her hand.

“Mother. It is good to be home to return to you, under your maternal care and lessons that have carried me so far in my times of trial.” Percy wanted to bite his tongue. He hated his mother. She was a bitch.

She really was.

But etiquette being what it was, he was obligated.

“Oh my Dear Percy,” his mother responded, taking both his hands. “It so does joy me to

have you home. I only wish your brother was here to greet you.”

Percy dropped his head in reverence.

“Yes, poor Wallace. I shall hate myself for all days, for not being here for his funeral and burial. I would like much to visit his grave within these first few days back.”

Percy knew not to push his hopes, knowing it took most people of high esteem a week’s time to travel from one estate to the next. Tea stops and unexpected visits coinciding with your usual illogical, Victorian, feminine panic attacks made it difficult to travel in this day and age.

“What funeral?” Madame William responded.

“Wallace's, mother. Your son. My brother.” Percy was perplexed and looked to his sister Mary for some sort of cue, who quickly motioned with a throat slash to halt the chain of conversation then and there. But it was too late.

“Wallace is dead?” Madame Williams eked out, fanned herself quickly, growing red with worry. “Oh dear. What will this look like to the Comptons? Our family name has once again been besmirched!”

“Mother!” Percy interjected. “How does Wallace's death have any negative bearing on our family name?”

His mother did not answer but continued on in dismal rhetoric, “Oh, your grandfather would be so ashamed.” She put a hand up to her forehead. “Oh what am I ever to do with you incorrigible children? What did I ever do to deserve this fate?”

And with that last question, Madame Williams returned inside.

Percy sighed remembering why he had delayed coming home and had committed to another campaign in Europe. But he was not going to let his mother ruin his big day!

He turned to his sister Mary and gave her a hug. He enjoyed her. A few years younger, only 15, Mary was very smart and intuitive for her age. Really mature for her lack in years. The good kind of mature which doesn't really exist but is rather conjured when a guy is trying to justify to his friends why he would subject himself to the torture of dating a 21 year old girl.

Just really mature, ya know? She gets it.

Percy wished he could say that about the other Mary. And with that thought Percy turned to the other Mary, an ugly redhead, who was also mute, and hugged her as well, but with a strained countenance.

“My sisters. It so delights me to see you again. You have both grown and matured pleasantly. I am sure I will be fighting the suitors off by the dozens in the times to come.”

The Marys laughed, both in awe and admiration, in the weird, but not quite-incestual little sister crush on an older brother syndrome. (Is there such a clinical, diagnosed state? I don't know, just kind of threw that one in there.)

“Where is father, girls?”

Mary responded with a sigh, “He is getting his portrait done in his library.”

Percy rolled his eyes. His father did little else and was an avid collector of his own portraits. “Sure he has done something with his time since I have been gone.”

“Well, Father has been well gloomy since Gladstone become Prime Minister. He took it quite hard.”

“Aye?” Percy chirped. “Father longs for the days of Disraeli?”

“No, father felt him a socialist too, always trying to redistribute the wealth. Nay, he wants Reagan back.”

“Ah...” Percy conceded. “Indeed, those were good days. Life was simple then, when we had Reagan.”

“Yes! I just love watching Fox News and being reminded of those nostalgic days where we had all the answers, and there was no unemployment and jobs were safe from being outsourced.”

“I know! Remember how awesome the 80’s were and how small business was booming!”

“Of course! How could I forget.”

“Well a lot of people seem to, but then we have Fox News to remind us from time to time, and keep us on the right path.”

“Fox News is the best!”

“I know, right?”

“Ya!”

“Ya....”

“.....”

Percy held the obligatory smile a little too long but then felt more embarrassed for his sister as she was trying too hard to please. He broke the stare as he looked down and sheepishly kicked a pebble. “Well my sisters. If you could please, I never heard word of how our dear brother, Wallace, passed, but only that he did, and I was deeply saddened.”

The Marys looked at each before dropping their eyes. “Percy, we wish we could tell you what happened, but as of now, at this time, we cannot. We are not allowed to speak the incidents, nor do we wish to dampen your homecoming with such a sad tale.”

Percy was confused. “What could possibly keep you from telling me, your brother, of

how Wallace died? He was my brother as well, and as such, I am entitled to know.”

Mary grew impatient. “Please do not force this uncomfortable predicament upon me, Percy. I do not wish it.”

“But, I-”

“Percy, please, I am trying to build story line, to keep the reader interested. It’s called backstory, ok? Let it go and I will tell you about half way into the book.”

Percy acknowledged his understanding with an acquiescent nod and dropped the matter for the time being. “Then my dear sisters Mary, what shall your older brother delight you with?”

Mary had been hoping he would ask. “Oh dear Percy, the Comptons are holding a ball at their estate two nights from now. We do so wish to go. But mother will not have it as we are under age. But we know society would not frown upon us if we showed with you as our chaperone. Please, please Percy?!”

Percy beamed with pleasure, happy to help and fulfill his younger sister’s request. “Of course dear sister. If it pleases you. Heaven knows you should be out of this home more.”

Mary squealed with delight and hugged her brother. The other Mary by this time was chasing a toad.

Two evenings later, the Williams’ carriage pulled up to the Compton estate, to which a valet greeted them and opened their door. Percy stepped out first to help each of his sisters down from the carriage. They were dressed handsomely but sadly their dresses were somewhat wrinkled after the arduous two day trip of 5 miles by carriage around the grove. Travel was hard in those

days. They needed ample time to stop and calm their simple delicacies.

Percy removed his hat and gloves as he took both sisters' arms with his and escorted them up the steps to the door of the Compton estate home. It was a magnificent structure. After the bellman asked for their names, he greeted them in with a courteous smile.

The doors to the ballroom parted. The bustling noise from beyond went silent. All eyes of the social elite turned to the Williams trio. Politicians, musicians, scholars, royalty and a cricket star were in full force at the evening's gala. Percy was relieved when he soon realized that the silence and stares were not of disgust, but of respect and awe for the recently returned war hero (Himself). This he learned as there soon formed a line of well wishers once beyond his league, gathering to greet and welcome him home, congratulating him on his brilliant campaign.

He was a hero. His was indeed a name to be esteemed.

Sublime!

An hour or so into what was becoming a festive time for Percy, he caught the eye of a handsome and stunning brunette. He glared his eyes to better focus and ventured a guess for her to be a Compton.

And none other than *the* Lucy Compton. It had been so long since he last saw her, that he barely recognized her. She had grown into an astonishing sight of beauty. Percy estimated her around a slender 5'6", well proportioned, symmetrical and able to bench her own weight. He knew then and there, that he would have her.

"Mary?" Percy called to his sister, keeping his eyes on Lucy, who was now returning her own shy, intermittent glances. Mary came to Percy's side.

He spoke, "Who is this lovely flower that mine eyes do so struggle to conceive? You

must arrange an introduction.”

“.....”

Breaking his gaze upon Lucy, Percy turned his eyes to realize he was talking to the wrong Mary, and sent her to fetch the more socially adept Mary.

And to his delight the functional Mary did know Lucy, but only in a catty, arch-rival sort of way that had been consummated 7 years earlier when Lucy had bested Mary at tetherball. But in the name of love and for her brother, she was happy to let bygones be bygones and took Percy's arm and led him across the dance floor towards Lucy, who was now awaiting his approach. She smiled.

“Lucy, darling.”

“Mary.” They kissed cheeks.

“Lucy, I have someone I would like you to meet: my brother, Percy Williams the XIX.”

Lucy held out her hand, allowing Percy to take and kiss it. “The war hero, of course. Everyone has been speaking of you this evening, but I was embarrassed that I did not remember you clearly, until now. You are the boy, who so many years ago, saved my cat from drowning.”

Percy smiled, for he had forgotten the kind act. His smile was one out of humility but also inner delight knowing his past kindness had planted him a foot into the doorway of Lucy's heart. Karma.

“Well then, my lady, I believe you owe me a dance in recompense.”

“I don't think that is the proper context for recompense, but close enough, and yes, certainly. I would love to.”

So unaware had they been, trapped in each other's snare, they had failed to notice the

entire ballroom had gone silent, watching the two coerce with great interest. The crowd immediately cleared way on the dance floor, eager to watch these two social elites begin their long task towards unison.

Cued to begin, the orchestra light up softly with a rendition of “Almost Paradise” (from the Footloose soundtrack) in C-minor. Percy led Lucy in a powerful, yet gentle waltz- a german waltz; one he had learned on the mainland during the war.

Their hands struggled to hold each other, wishing to grasp tighter, oh so tighter, but could not, as the physical limitations of their body could give way no more. Percy looked into her eyes, seeing all of his unborn children, and at that moment, knew that at last, his war-torn soul had been redeemed. He wanted to kiss her in a deep embrace, but such public display would ruin the social standing he had so long worked for.

The pain of not being able to take her closer, smell her, adore her was near too much, yet thankfully the orchestra took mercy as the song came to closure with the saxophone carrying that final, tearful high C-note.

Percy slowly dipped Lucy over his knee and held her there for applause. When adulation ended, Percy brought Lucy back to her feet, but only physically, as she was emotionally still in the clouds.

They were a match. They both knew this truth and could not deny, nor could any other who had witnessed. And so it was time to begin phase one of the Victorian customs of courtship: the trading of insults and banter of wits.

The Victorians were very adamant about making the courtship process and the road to marriage as painfully long and arduous as possible. The courtship had to be extended,

gratification delayed, in anyway possible, so that the story could be carried on far too long, as to fit into a seven part PBS series that commandeered televisions and divided homes on holiday weekends; as well delude young women into thinking that such romance actually exists.

It was an unwritten rule that once a courtship had been made, the two sides were to hurt each other's feelings as much as feasibly possible. It was petty and silly, but necessary and more importantly, essential, to the success of a couple's chances in the long run of being successfully celibate and loveless.

Percy stepped away and bowed to the crowd, and gestured to Lucy, as if to say she was the true inspiration behind their tantalizing dance. They turned to one another once more, sighing as they gazed into each other's star struck eyes. It was time.

Lucy was glowing, her smile echoing eternally. "It is no surprise your brother is dead: you are a terrible dancer."

Percy cocked his head, and made sure he fully processed. Yep, she had just said that. He was taken aback. Usually in the courtship process, the insults started innocently and small, with just a hint of malice, but mostly teasing. A shot across the bow if you will. Yet Lucy, as Percy soon realized, was experienced in the art of love and courtship and had foregone all pretenses of courtesy and had immediately gone for the jugular, aiming for blood before war had even been declared.

Yet the aggression which Percy had just witnessed was not what troubled him most. Rather, it was the complete lack of cohesion in Lucy's opening attack which caught him off guard.

No stranger to war, having conquered many battlefields, Percy was now facing his

greatest opponent, one that had bested him so many times before, the one which he could never tame- the battlefield of love.