



The Secrets of Wiscombe Chase (Harlequin Historical)

By Christine Merrill

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Lillian has endured all she can to protect her beloved son, until the arrival of her war-hero husband. Now, not only is Lily faced with revealing terrible secrets she has hidden for years, but also an attraction that bewitches her beyond her senses...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Christine Merrill wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember. During a stint as a stay-at-home-mother, she decided it was time to “write that book.” She could set her own hours and would never have to wear pantyhose to work! It was a slow start but she slogged onward and seven years later, she got the thrill of seeing her first book hit the bookstores. Christine lives in Wisconsin with her family. Visit her website at: www.christine-merrill.com

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'Miss North, would you do me the honour of accepting my hand in holy matrimony?'

Lillian North did her best to smile at the unfortunate boy kneeling before her on the parlour rug and readied herself for the only answer she would be permitted to give.

Once, she had harboured illusions about love and romance. Most young girls did. But they had been left in the nursery, along with the other spectacular fictions about fairy princesses and brave knights riding to their rescue. When she'd made her come-out, Father and Ronald had explained the way the world truly worked.

It was her job to be pretty, pleasant and biddable, and attract what offers she could from gentlemen of the *ton*. In the end, she would marry and marry well. But it would be to a man of Father's choosing and she was not to question the choice.

She had been in London for months, both this year and last. She had danced at Almack's until her slippers were near to worn through. She had smiled until her cheeks ached with it and been so agreeable that people must think her simple in the head. It felt as if she had been introduced to every eligible man in Britain. While she'd her favourites, she had not allowed herself to form an attachment to any of them. She must never forget that the final choice would not be hers.

She had done as she was told and cast the properly baited net as wide as possible. When the time was right, her father and brother would draw it in to evaluate the catch. They would throw back the unworthy and keep no more than two or three of the very best. Then, the serious negotiating would begin. In the end, she would be decked in flowers and sent up the aisle of St George's to stand at the side of a scion of the nobility. Father had assured her that he would settle for nothing less than a London cathedral and a groom that would leave other girls green at her success.

But now, all the plans and the manoeuvring of a season and a half were for naught. Without warning, she had been hauled out of town and informed that the choice had been made. She was to marry Gerald Wiscombe.

And who was he? It was as if she had cast her net and brought in a dark horse. Her metaphors were as muddled as her thoughts, but she could hardly be blamed for confusion. Mr Wiscombe was a total stranger to her. Although he was not a particularly memorable fellow, she was sure she'd have recalled meeting him, if only because he was unlike any of the men who'd courted her in London.

Lily had prayed each night that her future husband would have admirable qualities beyond wealth and station. Perhaps a love match was unrealistic. But, her future would be happier if it was, at least, founded on mutual respect. When she had taken the time to search for them, she had found good qualities in each of the men who had escorted her. Why, then, could she find nothing to recommend her father's final choice?

To begin with, Mr Wiscombe was too young to be taken seriously. He was barely into his majority, only a year or so older than her. He was not even out of university and more interested in his impending Tripos in Mathematics than wedding her. In fact, he'd refused to come to London and court her. She had been expected to go to Cambridge to see him, so that the burden of this proposal would not interrupt his studies.

It did Mr Wiscombe no credit that he augmented his youth and uninterest with a lack of fashion and an awkwardness of address. Where was the evidence of his precious education? There was no sign on his soft, round face that he was destined to be a wit or a wag. When he smiled, the gap in his front teeth made him look as simple as she felt.

Looks were not important, she reminded herself. After dancing with men old enough to sire her, she had steeled herself to ignore appearances. Brains were not necessary if one had rank or money.

But that still did not explain Gerald Wiscombe. A few short weeks ago, Father had turned up his nose at an interested baronet as being too low-born to qualify as son-in-law. But now, there was nothing more than a 'mister' rocking uneasily on his knees in the parlour of a roadside inn, awaiting the answer.

He must be quite wealthy to make up for the lack of a title. But Mr Wiscombe had not bought so much as a bottle of wine to celebrate this day, nor had he visited a tailor to impress her. The cuffs of his coat were worn and one of the unpolished buttons clung to the garment by its last thread.

'I do not have much,' he said, affirming her worst fears. 'I have no family to speak of. None at all, actually. I am the last of the Wiscombes. And the family fortune was gone a generation ago.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' she said, not so much sorry as totally perplexed.

'Of course, Wiscombe Chase is lovely.'

A country manor? She smiled encouragingly.

'Was lovely,' he corrected with a shrug and a frown, as though he'd meant to lie and could not quite get it to stick. 'It needs much work and the loving hand of a woman.'

Which probably meant it was a mouldering ruin and he was seeking a rich wife to repair it for him. This man was the polar opposite of the one she had been sent out to catch.

At some point, Father's agenda had changed and she had not been informed. But when was Father not hatching a plan of some kind? His schemes invariably left him better off than he had been, while those who had dealings with him always seemed surprised to be poorer and less successful. Even so, few of them would have called him swindler. Those who lost to him preferred to think of him as that dashed, lucky Mr North.

She had always been inside the invisible boundary that separated her family from the rest of the world. No matter how precarious things might seem, everything would go well for her in the end. Because she was a North.

Until today, at least.

Did her father not understand that a young lady's reputation was a fragile thing? Marriage was a permanent and nigh unbreakable contract. He could not barter her out of the family only to pull her back on some tenuous legal string, like the Bolivian emerald mine she'd seen him sell at a profit some three times already.

Worse yet, she was alone in her ignorance. Her brother, Ronald, had balked when forced to escort her about London on the hunt for a suitable match. But he had been the one to introduce Mr Wiscombe and seemed as eager to see her married as Father did.

'Miss North?' Mr Wiscombe prompted, noticing the long and doubtful silence that had followed his offer.

She looked down at what was likely to be her future husband. He was staring up at her, mouth gaping slightly. He reminded her of a barely formed chick, unfledged, inexperienced and waiting to be fed. She feared the young *avis Wiscombe* was about to be pushed early from the nest and gobbled by waiting predators, *genus North*.

It made his next statement all the more worrying.

'I wouldn't bother you, if that's what you are afraid of.' Now he was blushing. 'We need time to get to know each other, before that. Your father has promised to buy me a commission so I might make my fortune. I will be gone for some years. When I am returned there will be enough money for the two of us to live quite well. And then...'

The mystery deepened. First off, he'd said the word *bother* with such significance that she assumed he meant something. And he assumed she understood. She supposed she did, after a fashion. He must be talking about what occurred between a husband and wife. She had no mother to explain details to her and was far too afraid and embarrassed to ask Father. If it was bothersome, she was not sure she wished to know the specifics.

But if he meant to join the army at her father's bequest and be gone for several years? That was simply laughable. She doubted Gerald Wiscombe would last several minutes before the French, much less several years. Did her father mean to send this poor boy to his doom?

She did not want to believe it. While her father was somewhat less than honest, she had never known him to be brutal. But the harder she tried to reject it the more her mind filled with the icy certainty that this was precisely what Phineas North intended. If he was willing to sacrifice his own daughter like a chess piece, what hope did this poor young man have to survive until checkmate?

If that was the game, then she refused to play her part in it. It would be a lie to say that she felt affection for the man in front of her. But neither did she wish him ill. Even if she felt nothing at all, how could she live with herself if the marriage was little more than a death sentence for her husband? She would not be permitted to refuse. But perhaps if she could get Mr Wiscombe to withdraw the offer, the matter would settle itself.

Lily wet her lips. 'Are you sure that is wise?'

He was blinking at her as if he had no idea what she meant. Perhaps he was not quite right in the head.

'The army will be very dangerous.' She spoke slowly, so he could understand. When this did not seem to make an impression, she added, with additional emphasis, 'There is no guarantee that you will return in a few years with a fortune. In fact, there is no guarantee that you will return at all.'

In response, he blinked the watery grey eyes in his round face and gave her another foolish grin.

'You might be killed,' she said. Now her voice sounded testy. She did not wish to be cross with him, but he needn't be so stupid, either. She shouldn't have to spell out the trap he was walking into.

Finally, one doughy hand reached out to cover hers. 'You need not worry about that. It is a possibility, of course. But there are many others equally grim. I might fall off my horse and break my neck before we can even say the vows. Or get struck by lightning while picking flowers in the garden. Or I might survive the battle and live to a ripe old age.' He blinked again. 'You are not afraid of that, are you?'

Afraid? Why should she be afraid of such an unlikely possibility?

Now he was looking at her as though she were the one who did not understand the gravity of the situation. Suddenly, she was sure that, all this time, he had been measuring her just as she had measured him. 'You do understand, if you are to marry me, it will be till death us do part,' he said and paused to let the words sink in. 'Although you obviously assume otherwise, my death may be a long time in coming.'

Did he think her so stupid that she did not understand the basic vows she would be taking? Or had he just insulted her, hinting that she was marrying him in the hopes that he would die? It would be too horrible, if there weren't some truth to it.

He was still blinking at her with those innocent, wet eyes. There was something hiding deep within them and it was not the eagerness of a bridegroom. The light shining there was like the sun reflected off cold iron. What he felt when he looked at her was not passion, or even affection. It was grim resolve.

His words had been a last attempt to make her prove her worth and admit that she had no desire to marry him. If she said yes to his proposal, he would assume she was as grasping and sly as the rest of her family, and meant to lure him into a marriage with the hope of imminent widowhood.

She stiffened. Any other girl would have withdrawn her hand and rejected his suit without another thought. She'd have cut him dead, had there been any chance that they would ever meet again, which they would not. If he liked his mathematics books so well, he could marry them. She would go back to the handsome, titled men of Almack's and forget him utterly. He could return to his ruin of a house. Once there, he could lick his wounds and brood upon this day with the embarrassment it deserved.

But she was not any other girl. She was the daughter of Phineas North. If she left the room after refusing Mr Wiscombe, Father would turn her back at the doorstep to hear him again. Should she manage to escape to her room, she would be locked there until she came to her senses and did as she was told. If the current plan fell through and she was able to divest herself of Gerald Wiscombe, there was no guarantee that the next choice she was offered would be any better. In fact, it could be much, much worse.

She was as trapped and doomed as the boy on his knees before her. So she looked down at him with what she hoped was an aloof, but ultimately benevolent stare. 'I am well aware of the words of the marriage ceremony, Mr Wiscombe, and have enough wit to understand their meaning. If we marry, it is for life. However long—' she gave him another probing, significant look '—or short that might be. I am also aware that it gives you the

right to, as you put it earlier, bother me whenever you so choose to do so. But if you do not have the sense to be afraid of Napoleon, than why should I be afraid of marrying you?'

For a moment, everything changed and not for the better. He favoured her with the gap-toothed grin of an idiot. Then he rose to his feet. Rather than attempting to kiss her, he clasped her hand in a firm, manly shake. 'Very well. It is a bargain, then. We will be married as soon as your father can arrange for the licence.

When I return from the Peninsula, we will begin our future together.'

The poor fool. What else could she do but nod in agreement? Once he was gone, perhaps she could persuade Ronald to tell her what was really going on. But there was one thing that she already knew. If Gerald Wiscombe had chosen to make a bargain with her father, his future and fortune were decided and fate was laughing in his face.

Users Review

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