

Beyond the Maze



CANICE BROWN-PORTER

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by

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Dedication

To my husband, Larry. The only man who understands me better than I understand myself. For his love, support, patience, and faith in my writing capability. For always being there whenever my world got crazy and I needed a place to hide.

Thanks to my family and friends for their support and love.

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The last rays of sunshine cast shadows along the myriad of evergreen paths. Aubrianna knew the paths well. Stepping into the inner circle sanctuary, she chose the one that led to the peaceful seating area at the center of the Chadwick Manor Maze.

She sat on the wood and iron bench under an arbor that dripped wisteria blooms. Birds chirped, and butterflies glided on colorful wings around her. A contented sigh whispered past her lips at the pale blue cloudless sky overhead. The fountain, with its wide based pool, gurgled and splashed. It added to the refreshing solitude. This had become her favorite place to escape from the rest of the world.

She glanced at her watch and started on her way back to the house. Still dressed in her 19th century attire, she walked along the path she had taken. Her shoe caught on the hem of her gown, and she pitched forward. She threw her hands out to break her fall and tumbled unladylike onto the ground. Her fingers gripped the rich carpet of grass and curled around cold metal.

She lay motionless on the wet ground to gather her wits before sitting up. Aubrianna raised her hand and stared at the two skeleton keys on a simple silver ring. *Strange. Who carries skeleton keys?* She slipped the key ring onto her index finger and struggled amidst her many layers of petticoats to stand. She straightened and glanced around her. Total silence. *How odd,* she mused. *Even the birds and butterflies have disappeared?* Sunlight vanished, and she looked skyward. Dark, angry clouds rolled across the sky. A loud crash of thunder startled her, and she jumped. Light rain pelted her face. *Great! I'll be soaked by the time I reach the house.*

Aubrianna cast a quick glance down to her feet while retracing her footsteps along the familiar path. Fog crept along the ground, swirling and wrapping its damp blanket around her. She quickened her pace. The fog thickened and raced ahead, creating an opaque gray wall.

"Crazy weather," she mumbled, turning a sharp corner. Her hand stretched out in front of her, she blindly found her way.

She stepped headlong into a solid, dark mass. A scream emanated from deep in her throat when two strong hands gripped her shoulders to steady her. A sharp tingle of awareness radiated down to the knot forming in her stomach.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" A deep baritone voice soothed her frayed nerves, easing the tension in her body.

"I should ask you the same, sir." She steadied herself and wiggled her way out of his grasp. "We are closed for the day. Now, move out of my way. I'm getting soaked to the skin."

"Allow me." His fingers curled around her forearm and pulled her resisting body behind him. She struggled to free herself from the tall masculine figure.

Who the hell does he think he is?

They emerged into the clearing, and he led her up to the back of the manor. Aubrianna stumbled along behind in an effort to keep pace with his long strides. He pulled her up the stair and dragged her across the veranda. Yanking open one of the four glass-paned doors, he shoved her over the threshold.

How dare he just open my door, waltz in like he owns the place, and manhandle me!

Aubrianna jerked free of his grasp and whirled around to confront him. "What are you doing here? Who are you?"

"You should be answering to me, wench." His lips curled in a sardonic smile.

"I happen to live here. This is my home."

His cavernous laughter rumbled, reverberating through the room. "Madam, permit me to introduce myself. I am Lord Keane Hamilton Chadwick IV. This is my home. It has been in my family for more than one hundred and fifty years. Now, explain why *you* are on my estate."

She raised her chin, her eyes meeting his dark amber gaze. She felt a shiver travel down her spine, prickling the fine hairs on the nape of her neck. She opened her mouth to argue, but was struck by the sheer beauty of the man who stood dripping water onto her polished floors. He could certainly be mistaken for the former lord, had the man not lived over a hundred and fifty years ago. His tanned skin contrasted sharply against the white cravat knotted under his chin. The material tucked under a white ruffled shirt, and his navy blue vest and jacket hugged his upper torso. Matching leggings emphasized muscular legs and disappeared beneath black leather knee-high riding boots.

She clutched the key ring with the two skeleton keys tighter in her fist and straightened her back. "You can not be the owner because I am," she argued. "I inherited this estate from my mother's aunt, sir. Now, kindly leave before I call the police."

"You obviously have suffered a bump to your head, Madam." His amusement vanished, and his gaze turned cold. "Now, again, for the last time...who are you? And, what are you doing on my property?"

"I am Aubrianna Sheffield and I own this property." *Enough! Has he wandered away from a mental institution?* "Now, get out of my home!"

She turned, walked to the small mahogany table, and reached for the telephone. Her hand grasped empty air. She stared at her curled fingers, her gaze drifted to where her phone had once sat on the tabletop. A beautifully hand painted oil lantern burned softly where once her antique brass lamp had sat.

Aubrianna spun around on her heels to find the handsome dark stranger staring at her. Her gown rustled around her ankles. "What have you done with my telephone and lamp?"

"And, what might this *telephone* be?"

She hissed between clenched teeth, her confusion replaced by annoyance.

Aubrianna turned and marched through the room to the front of the house. His footsteps followed at a steady pace. Standing in the center of the foyer, she spun in a slow circle, taking in her surroundings. Flickering gold flames danced along the walls atop thick white candles cradled in ornate sconces. Heavy drapes of burgundy framed the ceiling to floor windows, while the settee and tables sat rearranged about the room.

She touched a hand to her clammy forehead. Her limbs shook uncontrollably, and the room began to spin around her. *I must be in a coma and hallucinating.* She felt nauseated. Every nerve from head to toe buzzed in competition with the roaring in her ears. She swayed. Keane stepped closer. Her head spun and darkness enveloped her.

* * *

She moaned; her head turned towards the sound of the same resonant voice. Her eyes fluttered open. His face sharpened the longer she focused on his features.

Panic seized her, and she bolted upright from the pillows. She felt the immediate tingle of color flood her cheeks, no doubt turning them a bright pink. "What are you doing?"

Keane straightened. "You swooned, Mistress Sheffield. I have sent for my doctor. He will be here shortly to care for you."

"I don't need a doctor. I'm a nurse."

"You will stay in bed. Other than to get out of these wet clothes, you are not to get up," he stated.

"Thank you for your help, but you may leave my home now."

"We will discuss this illusion of yours once you have had food and rest."

"Illusion? Let's talk about who is having the illusions..."

"Be quiet, woman!" His jawline tightened, his voice rising in anger. "I will hear no more of this nonsense. We will discuss this later."

"How dare you..."

Unable to move, she watched him lean closer, his gaze full of fire. Large hands gripped her forearms and pulled her within an inch of the bed's edge. She held his glare with one of her own.

"How dare *you* to question me, wench."

Her eyes widened in surprise and her mouth dropped open. Her heart hammered against her chest, and little spikes of pleasure danced along her skin. She watched his eyes turn dark and his face contort with confusion. She could hear the rapid beating of his heart. No. Maybe it was her own because she was sure it would fly from her chest at any moment.

Keane released her, his gaze drilled into her. He turned on his heels and walked to the door. He glanced towards the maid. "Her food will be here shortly. See that she is dressed in dry warm night clothes," he said, before he stepped out of the room and slammed the door shut behind him.

Aubrianna jumped, staring at the large oak door. She turned to watch the maidservant place a comfortable long nightgown at the foot of the bed.

Aubrianna scooted to the edge and threw her legs over the side. She stood; her gaze followed the young girl's nervous glance to the door. "What is your name?"

"Ella, Miss." She curtsied a quick bob.

"Ella, where am I?"

"You are in Lord Chadwick's home, Mistress. Chadwick Manor Estates."

Aubrianna watched Ella bob another quick curtsy and then drop her eyes to the floor. She felt faint. *What is going on?*

"Ella?" She swallowed hard, afraid to ask the question but knowing she had no choice.

"What year is this?"

Ella raised her chin. "1857, Miss."

Aubrianna stumbled back; her mind reeled with the implication. She sat down hard on the bed, staring at the keys still clutched in her hand. "How can this be?"

"Are you okay, Mistress?"

She raised her eyes to meet the confused stare of the maid. "No, I'm not okay. How did I get here?"

"I don't know, Mistress. Lord Chadwick found you wandering through the maze in the rain and fog. Where are you from?"

"Chadwick, London. I own Chadwick Estates, which is called Chadwick Manor Gardens and Maze."

She watched the maid take several steps away from her.

"I inherited it upon the death of my mother's last living relative." Aubrianna frowned when Ella backed further away. "I'm not crazy. Ella, I don't know how to explain what has happened. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe when I fell, I bumped my head and I'm in a coma. It's the only thing that makes any sense."

"Mistress, you need to change your clothes before you catch your death. If milord returns to find you still in those clothes, he will be very angry with me."

Ella looked as if she were about to cry. Or flee. Or maybe both. Aubrianna rose from the bed, her legs shaking, and laid the keys on the bedside table. She then presented her back to the maid. "I'll need your assistance with the buttons, Ella."

Several seconds passed before she heard the light padding of the maid's reluctant footsteps across the carpeted floor. Ella's fingers nimbly unbuttoned the dress. Aubrianna reached to slip the dress from her shoulders, and the maid jumped out of arms' reach.

Aubrianna turned and smiled at her. "I promise you I will not hurt you, Ella. I am as confused as you are scared. But, I will make the best of this until I can figure out what is going on."

A knock sounded at the door, and another maid entered carrying a tray laden with meats, cheeses, fruit, a silver pitcher and cup. Without speaking, she sat the tray on the dresser. Aubrianna's stomach rumbled.

"Lord Chadwick wishes you to join him in his study once you have eaten and rested. He said you should come prepared to tell him the truth. He wishes not to hear anymore of your ridiculous claims to his estate."

"Oh, does he now?" Aubrianna fixed the middle-aged woman with a defiant stare. "You tell Keane I'm just as tired of his games. And, that I will be down promptly once I have eaten."

"I will be sure to tell him, Mistress Sheffield. However, he will not be amused by your continued obstinacy. You will surely be the victim of his ire and find yourself in the streets." The woman seemed to be enjoying herself.

"The only one who will be out in the streets will be your haughty lord."

The woman left the room in a huff. Aubrianna turned back to undressing and found terror-stricken eyes focused on her.

"Ella? What's wrong?"

"She will go back and tell Lord Chadwick what you have said," the girl replied, her voice quivering.

"So?"

"He will be extremely upset, Mistress."

"You talk as if he is a cruel person, Ella. Does he beat you?" Aubrianna removed the hoop petticoat, dropped it to the floor and watched her. "If he does, I'll be sure to address the issue with him."

"Oh, no, Mistress. He has never laid a hand or crop to any of us, but he does not tolerate insolence."

"When he is wrong, Ella, he is wrong and should be corrected."

"I do not wish to see you punished, 'tis all." Ella stepped behind her and untied the drawstring to her corset.

"I'll be just fine, Ella. You'll see. Where I'm from, women are a bit more equipped to deal with men who flex their muscles."

"Excuse me, Mistress?"

Aubrianna smiled and patted Ella's arm. "Never mind. I can handle your lord."

* * *

The door burst open and slammed back against the wall. Keane stomped into the room. Aubrianna whirled around to meet the ominous storm of masculine anger coming towards her. Her heart slammed against her chest. Her pulse quickened. She stumbled over the breath caught in her throat at the pure virility of the man.

No way can I be attracted to such a Neanderthal. Yet, the man appeared to be tormented by unknown demons. He exuded an aura of control and respect, but there was something in the lines around his eyes. Keane Chadwick dealt with an internal conflict that was quite obviously keeping him from restful sleep. A dark secret he was apparently loathed to share with anyone. His dark hair, still damp from the rain, clung to his head and neck. Dark eyes were leveled on her without so much as a blink.

“Leave us, Ella!” He stopped only mere inches away. “Now!”

I will not be intimidated. She nailed him with her own adamant glare. Aubrianna stood rigid, her back straight, wearing nothing more than her under petticoat and drawers.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing bursting into my room?”

His fingers wrapped around her upper arm, and he yanked her closer until they stood toe-to-toe. “This is my room, in my house, and I will burst into any room whenever I damn well please!”

“Well, I beg to differ,” she said, her chin raised, her gaze melded to his. Her voice sounded relaxed and confident to her own ears, but her insides jiggled like Jell-O. “No gentleman would enter a lady’s bed chamber uninvited.”

She watched Keane’s eyes travel down between them. Perspiration beaded across his forehead and upper lip before he exhaled a heated breath that feathered over her bare shoulders. He swung his eyes back to meet hers. She inhaled sharply. The thin white petticoat did little to shield her aroused nipples from his open gaze. He smelled of leather. His gaze drifted along the curve of her chin to her mouth. Feathery gasps escaped from her lips. The tip of her tongue slipped across her lower lip.

Smoldering heat ignited in the pit of her stomach, radiating outwards to consume her body. Her skin flushed from her cheeks to her toes.

She gulped a jagged breath when her body met the hard wall of his chest, and his lips crushed hers. His tongue licked along her lower lip. Her breasts pressed against his chest, her nipples hardened into turgid little beads. She struggled to free herself.

His tongue swept into her mouth and sent sparks of desire skipping down her spine. Delicious excitement built in the pit of her stomach. She whimpered, relaxing into him. Her hands, once flattened against his chest to push him away, now grasped his shirt. Aubrianna leaned into his kiss, deepening it. Passion licked every nerve, setting her on fire at the thought of Keane’s naked body against hers.

Their tongues tangled. Desire spiraled and exploded into molten heat that raced through her veins at breakneck speed. He reached for her hair and twisted it into a ball around his fist, holding her to him. She molded her slender figure to his large frame in perfect unity. His hard cock pressed against her belly, and a guttural groan escaped from the depths of his chest.

He released her, stepping away. Her lashes fluttered, and her eyes focused on his. Passion raged in his dark gaze. He stared transfixed, and she watched while reality began its slow descent. His body trembled. Or, was it her own?

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“Get dressed and eat, then have Ella show you to my study.” He turned and left the room.

* * *

Aubrianna stared in silence, her fingertips pressed against her lips. *What the hell had just happened?* Shaking herself mentally, she turned towards the bed and finished undressing. She reached for the nightgown, slipped it over her head, and let it flutter down over her body, teasing her sensitive skin like a caress. Sitting on the edge of the bed, her mind attempted to make sense of what had transpired between them.

A sigh echoed from her lips. *Why can't I find the ones with perfect looks, perfect bodies, and perfect personalities?* She halted her thoughts, contemplating her assessment of Keane. *Well, maybe two out of three isn't bad. Arrrgh. Men! If he'd just work with me here!* Whenever he touched her, or turned those dark smoldering eyes on her, she melted just a little more. *You big dolt!* she berated him. “For crissakes! Even if he fell in love with me, it wouldn't work. I need to go back home.”

Ella walked into the room just as she moved to the table where the food sat waiting for her. She turned to the maid and smiled.

“Are you okay, Miss?” She stepped closer to Aubrianna, twisting her apron in her hands.

“I'm fine, Ella. I'll be going to Keane's study after I've eaten. He asked that you show me the way.”

“Of course.”

“Would you like something to eat? I can't eat all of this,” Aubrianna asked, turning back to the food. She picked up an apple and took a bite. “I really don't have an appetite.”

“Oh no, I couldn't. Lord Chadwick would be furious if he found out I had eaten your food.”

“And who would tell him, Ella?” She slid the tray towards Ella and smiled. “It's a shame to waste all this food.”

* * *

Aubrianna slipped a wrapper over her nightgown, tied the sash about her waist, and followed Ella out of her room and down the hall. Flames flickered from candles perched on tabletops and wall sconces. She didn't see any electric light fixtures anywhere. Huge oil paintings of Chadwick patriarchs lined the walls.

They descended the stairway. She studied the hallway, noting every small detail. The subtle, and not so subtle, differences in décor now evident, she wondered again if she was dreaming. *His kiss had felt real enough.*

Ella's knock on the study door was timid and she jumped when Keane's voice boomed. Ella opened the door, stepped inside then curtsied while moving to allow Aubrianna to enter. The maid left. The door latching behind her alerted Aubrianna to Ella's departure. She stood facing the imposing masculine figure across the room. Standing near a window, his back to her, she did a leisurely appraisal of this man who seemed so comfortable in her home.

“Mistress Sheffield, please have a seat,” he said without turning away from the window.

“I prefer to stand. Thank you.” Her back rigid, she refused to place herself in a subordinate position. This was her home.

Aubrianna watched him turn with determined ease and fix his gaze on her. His bold perusal traveled the length of her body and back to her face. “As you wish.”

He stepped towards her. She stood still, a tremor racing down her spine.

"Now, let's explore this preposterous claim of yours. How is it that you have come to believe you have ownership in my family's property?"

She lifted her chin, maintaining eye contact with him. He towered above her. Overwhelmed by the memory of his kiss, she stared at his lips. Sparks of desire flickered in the depths of her stomach, and tingles skipped over her skin, raising gooseflesh.

"There is no simple explanation, Keane. I'm not sure how to begin because it's going to sound insane to you. It even sounds insane to me."

"Proceed."

His expression told her any explanation she offered would sound insane to him. She forged ahead, determined to make him understand.

"I walked out through the maze, to the center where the fountain is located. It's my sanctuary at the end of each day. A place to unwind. It was a gorgeous afternoon." She paused, her gaze unwavering as he quietly watched her. She continued and prayed he would believe her.

He remained mute, a dark brow arching over one eye. *At least he is listening.*

"Keane..." Her voice faded away when her eyes landed on the small painting that sat on the corner of his desk. "Oh. My. God."

She rushed past him, picked up the framed miniature art, and stared at it. Her mouth gaped open.

"Is something amiss?"

His voice filtered through the drumming in her ears.

"It is you." She even sounded incredulous to herself, her eyes reaching up to meet the same dark gaze of the man in the painting. "You're him. You're Lord Chadwick."

"I didn't realize there was any doubt."

"But..."

"I believe you have taken quite a bump on your head. We shall have the doctor examine you thoroughly." He stepped away from her and reached for his glass on the desk behind him.

"Perhaps you should rest now."

Desperation seized her. "I'm not from this century, Keane! I own this house and the property in the year 2006," she blurted out.

He whirled around to face her, his glare ominous. "You are daft, woman! You expect me to believe this tale you have concocted?"

Aubrianna marched forward and stood toe-to-toe with him. "I am not *daft*, sir. It is you who needs to consider what I am telling you. My only explanation that even I can fathom is that the keys somehow opened a portal and I traveled through time to this moment. Granted, you, being the pigheaded male that you are, refuse to attempt to consider the only feasible explanation there is for this...this...screw up!"

"Screw up?"

"Yes, screw up. Misunderstanding. Confusion. Whatever!"

Keane stared at her. Silence lingered between them. How could he irritate and arouse her at the same time? He appeared unaffected by what had happened earlier.

"Okay. Say I believe you. What gives you the right to claim ownership today? Here, in 1857?"

"I don't claim ownership to it in your time. Well, I did, but I don't now. However, I will become the owner in 2006."

"That's almost one hundred and fifty years from now, Mistress Sheffield. Are you telling me this house will still be standing then?"

"I most certainly am, sir. The botanical gardens and the maze open to the public every spring, and people walk through the grounds after paying a fee to enter. It's how I make a living now...uh...in my time."

"People pay to enter my property and stroll the grounds? To look at the flowers?"

She almost laughed at the shocked expression on his face. "Yes, the property and the structures have all been maintained by its successive owners. There are many improvements. Such as electric heat and air conditioning in the house. You don't have to chop wood and use the fireplaces to keep the house warm in the winter."

Aubrianna paused and realized he was trying to visualize what she was telling him. "Oh, Keane. Life is so much easier in my time. We only ride horses for pleasure. We have horseless vehicles that run on fuel. Streets are paved with black tar called asphalt. So many diseases, such as cholera and smallpox, have all been cured or at least a vaccine invented."

He raised his glass to his lips and swallowed the remainder of the amber liquid. She took the time to glance around the room. Original furnishings of his time were unlike the modern replicas in her home. She heard the rustle of his clothes and the splash of liquor poured into his glass and turned back to face him. Keane turned and leveled his gaze on her. His mouth a thin line, he studied her. She became uncomfortable under his direct scrutiny.

"You speak of things that are inconceivable as if they are real, Mistress Sheffield."

"Only because they are not inconceivable in my time, Keane. They exist. Go with me to the maze tomorrow afternoon at the same time as we met today. Perhaps, with the keys, I can take you to my time."

"You have lost your wits, Mistress! Do you think I am such a fool to believe this nonsense? Your *time* has no value to me. My doctor will examine..."

A knock at the door interrupted his argument. He didn't believe her. She had to convince him to go with her to the maze tomorrow. If not, she would have to travel back alone, and she had no desire to leave her heart behind. *What! My heart? Me? In love with him so soon? He's done nothing but antagonize.* The unsettling thoughts rattled her. Her gaze drifted over his body and took a languid stroll back to his chiseled features. The door opened, interrupting her sensual appraisal. A tall lanky gentleman stepped just inside the room.

"Sir, Doctor Beckly has arrived."

"Show him in, Patrick," Keane said, sitting down his drink and moving to the door.

"I'm not crazy, Keane. I know how this sounds, but I am not crazy." Aubrianna spun around on her heels to follow his path. She placed her hand on his arm. He glanced down at her fingers and then to her face. His eyes softened.

"We need to be sure you did not injure yourself when you fell, Mistress Sheffield."

My God, they will lock me away in some asylum if I can't convince him. This has got to be a nightmare.

She dropped her hand to her side and backed away from the door. An older gentleman entered, stopping long enough to shake Keane's hand and glance at her.

"Is this the patient I've come to visit, Lord Chadwick?"

"It is." Keane turned while his hand pushed the door shut. "She seems to be a bit delusional. Said she took a tumble out in the maze earlier."

"I'm not delusional," she stated, straightening her back. "I happen to be a nurse and know the symptoms."

“Perhaps just a quick exam to check your pupils and reflexes, Mistress...” The doctor paused, his eyes full of merriment and wisdom.

“Sheffield. Aubrianna Sheffield,” she supplied. She extended her hand in greeting. “Nice to meet you, Doctor Beckly.”

“Well, you certainly seem to be okay physically,” he stated, shaking her hand and releasing it. “Would you object to a short exam?”

“I’m fine, really. But perhaps Keane would feel better.”

She watched the doctor glance over his shoulder at Keane in response to her informal reference. Keane shrugged, and the doctor returned his attention to her.

“If you’ll have a seat there, Mistress Sheffield,” he said, pointing to a nearby chair.

Aubrianna sat and did as the doctor requested during the exam. She could feel Keane’s eyes on them while the tests were conducted. She heard him suck in his breath when she raised her nightgown above her knees for the doctor to check her reflexes. She smiled to herself, knowing the sight of her bare legs affected him. He crossed the room to his desk and retrieved his glass, downing half its contents.

The doctor patted her knee and stood to face Keane. “She appears to be perfectly fit, Sir. And, quite knowledgeable in the field of medicine, I might add. There is no indication of a bump to her head or a concussion.”

“Very well. You may go. Thank you for coming out so quickly.” Keane showed him to the door and motioned for the butler to show the doctor out. He turned and shut the door, his gaze slamming into her. She smirked.

Quick strides brought him to stand before her, and she sat spellbound by the intensity that burned in his amber gaze.

“You tempt me beyond reasonable thought, Mistress Sheffield.”

He reached out, taking her arms securely in his grasp, and in a single fluid motion, pulled her from the chair into his embrace. His mouth captured hers, his tongue plundering past her lips with delicious, tantalizing strokes.

Her fingers gripped the front of his shirt; the heat of his body stoked her own desire. She shuddered against him when his hands glided down her back to her buttocks and yanked her tight against his abdomen. She felt his hard throbbing length against her belly for the second time that evening. A moan escaped from her throat, absorbed through his probing lips, and vibrated against their tongues.

His hands moved across her hips and up along her sides until his thumbs strummed over her erect nipples. She arched into him, her hands sliding up to his shoulders and around his neck. She pulled him closer, his teeth grazing her lips in a moment of pain, which she forgot when his hands closed over her breasts and kneaded them. He groaned into her mouth. Releasing her lips, he bent down and scooped her into his arms.

Keane carried her to the door, opened it, and walked down the hall to the foyer. Her face burned with embarrassment at the confused and curious stares from his staff as they passed. He continued on to the stairway, oblivious to those around. Aubrianna clung to him, nipping at his neck, as her fingers unbuttoned his shirt while he climbed the stairs. They moved past the door to her room further down the hallway. He kicked open the door to the master bedroom. She knew this room well. It was hers in her time.

He placed her feet on the floor in front of him, his gaze held hers for a long moment. His fingers untied the sash of her wrapper. Her heart skipped a beat when he slid his fingers along the edges of her covering and brushed over her nipples. The wrap pooled at their feet as tingles

of longing ran through her. Keane's hands grasped her nightgown at her hips, and he pulled it up over her head, tossing it to the floor.

She stood completely bare before him, her breath hitched at the desire that burned in his dark eyes. His gaze touched every inch of her body, every curve and back again. His breath ragged, Aubrianna reached out and unbuttoned his breeches, her fingers sliding to his hips and then down along strong muscled thighs, freeing his swollen cock. She continued to push the fabric further down his sculpted, hair-roughened legs. Her tongue flicked across her lips. His erection protruded under his shirt.

She dropped to her knees, her gaze never leaving his. He raised a foot, and she pulled off his boot then the other. Her vision traveled over his tight, flat stomach, and the rugged contours of his chest. His male scent was intoxicating, and she inhaled deeply before curling her fingers around him.

Guiding him into her mouth, she licked the rigid flesh, heat radiating from him. His sharp intake of breath when her lips closed around him encouraged her to continue. Keane's hands grasped her hair in his fists and assisted her in stroking him.

He pulled away, dragging her up from the floor by her hair. Her tongue glided over the dark mat of hair on his belly, upwards across his chest, until she sucked his nipple into her mouth. She felt his knees buckle before he pulled her down beneath him on the bed.

His hands roamed her body; his mouth teased and tasted her. His fingers delved deep into her heated core, stroking in and out. Aubrianna moaned, her buttocks rising from the bed to meet his plunges.

He reclaimed her mouth as he rose above her and settled between her open thighs. He withdrew his hard fingers and entered her fully in one profound thrust. She moaned in satisfaction, throwing her legs around his hips meeting each plunge until she cried out. Great shuddering, clenching spasms exploded in exquisite sensations that flooded her body. He drove one final penetrating thrust, spilling his seed, his cock throbbing with release.

Their hearts beat in a hard, steady rhythm. For several minutes, their heavy breathing filled the silence of the room. His fingers filtered through her hair and around her ear.

"You have bewitched me, woman," he mumbled against her head. "Wherever you are from... whatever your reason for being here... I can not allow you to leave my side."

Tears of joy trickled from the corner of her eyes and disappeared into the hair at her temples. "I do not wish to leave you, Keane. But I must go..."

He placed his fingertips against her lips, silencing her.

"You belong here, my love. In our home, with me."

The Lord of Chadwick

by Canice Brown-Porter

1857

He watched the gray light of dawn spread across his room, content with her curled against him. He had never known such peace. This woman who materialized from his dreams out of the fog, who spoke of machines and a time so far into the future, he could never begin to comprehend.

His fingers drifted through the strands of her hair, her head cradled in the crook of his elbow. Her even breaths whispered across his chest. A smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

She mentioned that she had found keys in the maze, slid them on her finger just before the storm, and fog had rolled in so unexpected. *Could they have been the keys I had lost and been searching for when the weather changed? Dear God, is she telling me the truth? Has she traveled from my dreams... from another time?*

Aubrianna stirred, and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. *I can't let you leave. Destiny has delivered you to me, love. I must make you understand.*

* * *

Keane knew she was near before he lifted his eyes to see her enter. She strolled into the dining room, donned in a pale green muslin day dress. A single matching ribbon tied around her head. Her pale hair framed her face in a golden mane.

"Good morning, Bri," he said, rising from his chair at the table. Her lithe body moved in graceful, regal strides. "I trust you slept well."

She flashed a brilliant white smile, her eyes sparkling. "Quite well, Keane. And you?"

He chuckled. "Very well."

She certainly was not prone to protocol as young ladies were in present time. Not even a pale blush had colored her cheeks at his brazen inquiry. He seated himself again once she sat to his right.

"What would you like for breakfast?"

"Fruit and coffee will be fine."

Keane motioned for the servant to prepare her plate.

"What would you like to do today?" he asked once her plate had been set on the table before her.

"I'd love to take you to the maze..."

He frowned. *Did she still wish to leave him after the night they had shared?* "I would enjoy talking to you about your...um...travel. Perhaps during a ride through the park," he interrupted.

He watched her pick up a strawberry with her fingers and place the end between her luscious pink lips. His body reacted to the innocent action. Memories of her mouth on him surfaced. He swallowed hard, clearing his throat, her gaze steady on him.

She smiled, removing the strawberry, and placed a fingertip near her mouth. Her tongue slipped out to lick the juice from the digit. "That sounds lovely, Keane."

Gritting his teeth, he attempted to smile while his groin tightened even more against the restricting fabric of his breeches. He willed himself to relax.

“Then, we shall leave after breakfast.” The tension in his body eased with her acceptance of his invitation.

“Keane?”

“Yes?”

“Do you believe me?”

She turned inquisitive eyes towards him. His stomach lurched, his heart pounded in his chest.

“I have considered your explanation thoroughly. I do not discount your claims, Bri. There are things that have occurred prior to your arrival yesterday that I need to discuss with you. Perhaps, between the two of us, we will understand what has transpired here.” He grinned and reached over to place his hand over hers. “I want to understand as much as you, my dear.”

* * *

Their ride was quiet and peaceful, his driver maintaining a leisurely pace. Aubrianna sat next to him on the rear seat in the open carriage while birds chirped overhead, swooping down around them. Sunshine and blue skies met deep green hills in the distance. Azaleas, rhododendron, and wild flowers stood erect, their blossoms adding whiffs of fragrance as they passed.

Keane reached for her hand, entwining his fingers with hers. She glanced up meeting his gaze.

“Bri, I want you to know that I had lost a set of two keys in the maze yesterday. My reason for being there was to try to find them. Then, the weather took on a sudden change. The storm and the thick fog. I had turned to go back to the house when I heard someone behind me.” He paused; a smile tilted his lips upward. “You.”

She returned his smile with one of her own. “You gave me quite a scare. I had been alone in the maze, and no one ever disturbs me while I am there.”

“I can imagine. Anyway, the keys you found were the ones I was in search of.”

“Why didn’t you say so yesterday?”

“Because you came to me,” he paused again, “out of a dream I’ve been having for weeks now.”

She stared at him, amazement clearly visible on her delicate features. “You recognized me from a dream?”

“I know it sounds as ridiculous to you as your story did to me yesterday. Bri,” he said and then continued before he lost his courage to say the words. “I have never put a lot of credibility in dreams until yesterday. And, I was so flustered, so confused to have found you there that I refused to believe it possible.”

Their gazes locked on one another, neither spoke. His knuckles brushed along her cheek before he lowered his head and his lips tenderly grazed hers. He pulled away, his eyes followed the path his hand took back through her hair. He returned his gaze to her. “This is meant to be, Bri. We are meant to live our lives together.”

He waited for her to respond to his declaration. She did not speak, and he shifted in his seat. Would she reject him?

She placed her palm against his cheek and smiled. She closed the small distance between their lips; her fingers glided back through his hair. Her hand cupped the back of his head, and he pulled her against him, deepening their kiss.

* * *

He heard his name through the fog. Someone called to him. The fog. The dense fog made it difficult to hear. To understand. But the voice was familiar. He tried to reach out to grasp the owner, but his arms would not move. He was damp. His body drenched. He felt so hot.

“Keane?”

Someone’s body brushed against his. He struggled to open his eyes, but failed.

“Keane?”

Fingertips nudged his shoulder. The female voice had taken on a shrill tone. He drifted further into the fog, battling against the overwhelming weakness in his muscles.

Whoever was there, crawled out of bed and scurried around in the thick, oppressive fog. He could hear material rustling and what sounded like footsteps cushioned by grass. *No! Not grass! Carpet!* Cool air rushed over his heated body, and he shivered.

“Patrick! Ella! Somebody, help!”

The panicked cry that rang out further away was almost inaudible. He strained to hear. His stomach knotted, and a muffled groan vibrated within his lungs. He teetered on the edge of a black abyss until he felt a cold, wet cloth glide over his face and neck. Subdued rustling and footsteps neared him. His heart beat in rapid response to the unknown intruders. “He’s ill. I need cold water for bathing and for him to drink once he is awake. Hurry!”

“I’ll send for Doctor Beckly,” his man, Patrick, stated.

Strange voices spoke, mumbling around him, and he struggled to understand their words.

Water stung his chest and stomach. His muscles contracted painfully under the frigid moisture.

“Damn you, Keane. How dare you get sick like this on me,” the female voice muttered above him. “Wake up, love. Oh God, please, wake up.”

“Ella, bring in his bathing tub and fill it with cold water. I’ve got to break his fever. Have all the staff bring water quickly. Patrick, I’ll need your assistance once the tub is ready. We’ll need to get him into it.”

“He will catch his death if you put him in cold water,” a gruff female voice declared from far away through the fog.

Keane winced.

“He’ll die if we don’t! If you don’t want to help, then stay the hell out of the way!”

He heard the splash of water at regular intervals. Muscular arms slid under his shoulders while strong hands clamped around his ankles. Pain screamed in every nerve as he was lifted. Each movement brought unrelenting agony to his muscles and joints. Keane fought against the blackness enveloping him. He knew he had to stay awake.

Freezing, knife-stabbing pain swallowed him alive, and he succumbed to the dark empty space of unconsciousness.

She spoke in soothing tones next to his ear. The wretched pain and inferno he had suffered now only teased the back of his mind. He shivered.

Keane reached up, pushing her hand away, and lifted heavy lids to find her smiling at him. She dropped the cloth, flinging her arms around his neck, hugging him tight to her breasts.

“Keane. Oh thank God. I was so scared.” Tears streamed down her face, and he slid his arm around her waist.

“I’m freezing to death here,” he mumbled against her ear.

She laughed and withdrew from him. Keane noticed her wet nightgown clinging to her heaving breasts. Although he was shivering, he hungered for her at the sight of the perky buds protruding against the fabric.

“Patrick, help him out. Ella, hand me that blanket, please.”

Keane climbed from the tub aided by his servants. Aubrianna threw a blanket around his shoulders, smothering him in its warmth. He stumbled back to the bed and stretched out bundled in the cocoon of blankets she heaped on top of him.

“What seems to be the problem?” Doctor Beckly asked, stepping into the room and moving to stand next to Aubrianna. His keen eyes took in Keane’s condition. “Everyone must leave the room, please. I need to examine him.”

“Not Bri,” Keane mumbled.

“I’m right here, love. I won’t leave you.”

He watched her kneel next to the bed while her fingers brushed his hair from his forehead.

After several minutes, Keane watched Doctor Beckly straighten and cast a grave look towards her.

“What’s your diagnosis?” she asked, standing and stepping away from the bed. She followed the doctor across the room to the dresser.

Keane strained to hear their lowered voices.

“I’m afraid he has contracted Ague.”

“Ague? What is that?”

“He will suffer with severe fever, chills, aches and pains, nosebleeds and a cough. There is no medicine other than to keep him comfortable. Be sure he drinks plenty of fluids,” Beckly said turning to face her. “He will suffer these attacks the rest of his life.”

Her face contorted with frown lines marking her forehead. “Malaria,” Aubrianna stated in the silent room. She turned then to look at him. She smiled weakly in his direction before turning back to Doctor Beckly. “Thank you, doctor. I’ll see that he is well cared for. Ella, please show the good doctor to the door.”

She glanced once again at Keane and then turned her gaze to Patrick. “You will stay with him, won’t you?”

“Of course, Miss Aubrianna.”

“I know I can help him, if I go to the maze for awhile. I shouldn’t be gone long.” She walked over to the bed and leaned down, placing a kiss on his forehead. “I’ll be back, darling.”

“No, Bri. I want you to stay here.” The determined look on her face worried him. She was going to leave. “I forbid you to go, Aubrianna.”

“I have to do this, Keane. I’ll be back, I swear.” She paused, taking his hand in hers, and kissed his fingers. “I love you.”

“Aubrianna,” his voice weak and gruff. “Do not go.”

“I’ll return.”

She turned and rushed out of the room.

* * *

“Help me, Patrick,” Keane demanded as he pulled on his breeches. “My boots, man! Hurry! I’ve got to stop her.”

He grabbed his shirt and thrust one arm into a sleeve while stumbling towards the door. Grabbing the doorjamb, he swung out into the hall searching for her. Keane staggered along the

hallway to the stairs with Patrick right beside him. His body rebelled at each downward step. He lost his footing, and his manservant grabbed him before he could plummet headlong down the stairs.

Upon reaching the foot of the stairway, his unsteady gait took him to the rear of his home. He struggled to put one foot in front of the other, and pure determination drove him onward. He noticed the concerned stares of his staff. So what if they thought him mad with the fever. He didn't care. "Where is Aubrianna?"

"The maze, my lord."

"Oh damnation! Help me, Patrick. Hurry."

Panic seized him. He had to reach her. His man opened the back door, and they stepped onto the veranda. A flash of her green muslin dress disappeared into the maze. His heart pounded in thunderous beats. *I can't lose her.*

"Bri! No!" he yelled and darted down the steps to follow her. Patrick held fast to Keane's arm and fought to keep him from falling.

When Keane reached the maze, dark storm clouds rolled and crashed above him. The first drops of rain began to fall. A renewed sense of urgency and the pain of losing her struck him full force in his chest. He pushed Patrick away and rushed into the maze, stumbling and weaving his way to the center.

"Bri!" he called out, his heart aching. He gasped for breath. Fear enveloped him as a thick gray carpet of fog crept along the ground around his feet. He ran blindly, his shirt hanging from one arm. "Aubrianna, no!"

She stood just a few steps away, drenched from head to toe in the rain. The keys dangled from her fingers. She turned to watch his approach, and a faint smile touched her lips. Fog swirled obscuring her, leaving only a vague outline.

"No!" Keane lunged, his arms wrapped tightly around her. His lips claimed hers in a savage, desperate kiss. She clung to him. Thunder boomed and echoed over their heads. "I love you, Bri."

The sky cleared, and birds glided overhead. They held each other, their eyes locked. Their hearts thundered in their chests.

Keane flinched at the sudden blare of a horn from the street, his startled gaze finding hers.

"Horseless carriages," she said, a grin spreading across her lips. "Now, let's get you back into bed."



CANICE BROWN-PORTER

At the age of 14, Canice Brown-Porter wrote her first romantic full-length novel. That novel is now the basis of a five book series, which she is in the process of polishing. Growing up on the west-end of Richmond, Virginia, Canice lived on a farm with her parents and five siblings. She has lived in upstate New York near the Vermont and Canadian borders on beautiful Lake Champlain. Later, she moved to Ohio and then on to South Carolina. She now makes her home, once again, in Virginia with the Blue Ridge Mountains as a backdrop for inspiration. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two adult sons. They are constantly entertained by their pets, a cat and a dachshund.

Canice is the former owner/publisher/editor of a weekly newspaper and successfully operated a graphic design business. She now devotes her energies to caring for her husband and her passion of writing.

This is her first published work.

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