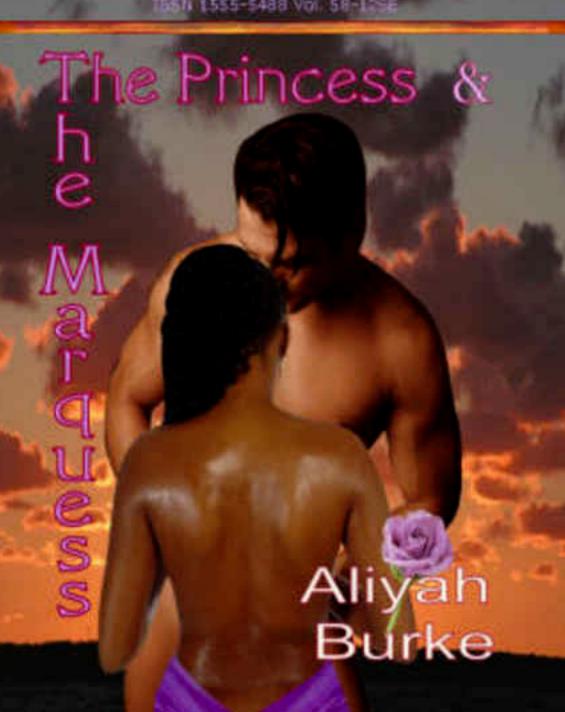
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CONTENTS

|--|

Dedication:

The Princess And The Marquess

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven

* * * *

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The Princess and The Marquess

Ву

Aliyah Burke

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[Back to Table of Contents]

The Princess and The Marquess

Ву

Aliyah Burke

LUCIEN ST. MARTIN, Marquess of Heartstone, is ordered to travel to the "the uncivilized" part of the world. The untamed wilds of America. How was he to know everything was about to shift on its axis.

CIARA MCKAY is known as "The Heart of the Mountain." She lives near a town but chooses to remain alone up in the mountains. Her world is changed the day she encounters a man being tossed about by an enraged mother bear. Long winter nights lead to explosive passions. Seven years pass before they meet again.

Can they overcome the "accepted" rules of society? Or will "the heart of the mountain" cease to be? Is it possible that Lucien can convince her to give them another chance? Will Ciara accept her destiny that *together* is the only way for them to be, as...?

The Princess and the Marquess?
[Back to Table of Contents]

Dedication:

To all my angels. Thank you for doing what you do so well. www.aliyah-burke.com

aliyahburke.blogspot.com/

groups.yahoo.com/group/aliyahburke/

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[Back to Table of Contents]

The Princess And The Marquess

Ву

Aliyah Burke

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter One

Somewhere west of the Rockies, 1820

Ciara Malika McKay swore to herself as she fought and strained against the winds whipping through the mountains. With every struggling step forward, the winds knocked her back at least five. It was hard to catch her breath. *At least it isn't snowing yet.* Regardless of that fact, it was still miserable out. Ciara hoped the woodland animals she'd befriended found shelter.

She cursed again as the wind blew off her hood. Ciara jerked it back up, squinting through rain that pelted everything with a never-ending force. The inky blackness of night made it impossible to see far. Her calculations said she might not be far from her small cabin, but a wrong direction now could be fatal. The vital herbs she set out to get were safely strapped at her waist. She'd been taught the importance of having them on hand. During the cold winter months, it was better to have an excess of medicinal herbs than need them and not have them. Unfortunately, it had taken her longer than expected to find and collect them.

The mud quickly reached her knees, sucked hard at her legs, making movement almost impossible. She growled to herself and knew anyone in her shape would find the going difficult now. A shape materialized through the driving downpour. Despite her current situation, she smiled at her friend, Faolan.

A large wolf, Faolan's coat was blacker than the darkest night. He was her friend, almost like a dog. She had saved him from a trap when he was a pup, a little over five years ago, and he just never left. To anyone else he remained the dangerous killer his species was erroneously rumored to be.

He stood before her, close enough so Ciara could see the glow of his amber eyes. The wolf turned and moved forward a little then looked back at her. She followed as best she could, content in the knowledge he would lead her safely through the night.

Why isn't he sinking in this mud? Ciara groaned with relief when she saw her cabin outlined in the flashes of lightning. Now back on semi-solid ground, and with a renewed energy, she hastened her step.

A push opened the door, and she stood dripping on her wooden floor. Faolan streaked past to shake dry and lay by the stove. Taking off her sodden cloak, she shivered and took Faolan's hint as she started a fire. The dry sticks and small wood she kept inside crackled to life. The flames added some light as Ciara lit a tallow lamp. When the room felt warm, she quickly stripped and put on some dry clothes. Then turning her attention to the herbs she had gathered, she laid them out to dry as well.

Warm, dry and safe from the storm, that seemed to have worsened if that was at all possible, Ciara set to her next task. Food. A simple meal of soup and bread satisfied her hunger.

She could have died out there, she admitted if only to herself. And who would have found her, who would have

cared? Instinctively she touched Faolan on the head, grateful for his companionship. Ciara kept to herself, since her parents had died ten years earlier one warm summer night. She had no wish to get close to anyone. But she did miss having someone to care whether she came home safe or who might even shed a tear at her burial.

The product of a fierce love between a migrating Irishman and a black slave woman, Ciara could take care of herself. Born in these mountains, she belonged to them. Since the age of fourteen, everything she'd learned from her parents she put into practice, surviving out here alone—for that's what she was. Totally alone. What use was speaking English, Irish and African with no one else to speak to? But the hunting, carving and herbal healing skills she would be eternally grateful for.

No use thinking about how things used to be when her parents were alive. No point thinking how things might be with someone to share her life. She chose to be alone, having declined to move into Paradise Cove after her parents died. She knew she frightened the members of town. Perhaps it was more that she confused them, choosing to live how she did as opposed to in town. But Ciara was confident enough to know she liked it that way; it ensured she was left alone for the most part.

* * * *

Lucien St. Martin, the eighth Marquess of Heartstone, smothered a groan. Out the window of the rattling coach he looked across the endless miles of dust and dirt. This vast

country was definitely not where he had wanted to be. However, his father had dictated he come here for a horse. So here he was. Turning to his companion, he asked, "How much longer? I wish to get out and get cleaned up."

The man, presented to him as Trent Blake, looked him directly in the eye "We are almost there. The town will have a place for you to stay. In the morning, you can speak to the elders about how to find the horse."

"Not until morning? I have had enough of this. I wish to get the horse and leave immediately. I thought this was understood."

"With all due respect, sir, we are at the base of three mountains here in Paradise Cove, and the horse could be on any one of them. These horses don't appear out of nowhere. You can't just snap your fingers and get whatever you want here. The horse will be worth the wait."

Lucien didn't care for the tone, no respect whatsoever. "I realize that this is a big place. No doubt filled with thieves and scoundrels of the worst kind. However, I am the Marquess of Heartstone ... and I have been promised the horse would be ready for me."

The carriage jolted to a stop next to an older building, and Blake jumped down. "This is our land. We don't have titles out here. They mean nothing special to us. You'll get treated the same way you treat people. As for the promise, you are two weeks late. The horse was here on time. Now you need to wait. Watch your attitude, or you'll get nowhere in this town, *my lord*."

Lucien watched in silence as the rude man disappeared into the dusk then climbed out of the carriage and managed to keep his temper, despite the insolence. The purchase of the horse could not fail. His father would never forgive him, and it did not pay to upset the duke. A small town, but clean at least, the streets were well lit. He straightened his clothes, to regain his impeccable appearance, and looked over the building. Momma Marie's.

He swung open the door then stepped inside. A tall distinguished-looking black man stood behind the counter. He spoke with a cultured voice, "Good eve, sir. Are you looking for a room to rent?"

Lucien gave a brusque nod in answer. He strode to the counter and slapped his leather gloves down, trying to make his impatience and disapproval clear. A few patrons ate dinner at tables placed along a walkway; otherwise it seemed quiet.

"For how long will you be staying, sir?"

Lucien was not sure how to respond to the blatant disregard for his title. "Not sure. Where can I find M. Thomson?" Immediately the man's eyes shuttered. Lucien thought the reaction strange.

"I can have someone show you. Your key, sir. You are in room four. Upstairs and to the left. Dinner is usually served at six. I will send someone to your room to escort you to the Thomson residence."

"My bags? Who shall fetch them?" For some reason these people were determined not to be impressed, and that bothered him. Surely they would be civilized enough to

understand the difference between his upper class and their own status.

"The coachman put them inside the door. They are right behind you, sir. Paul shall be to your room shortly."

Understand the difference between classes? Apparently not. Smothering his growing ire, he hefted his bags and headed up the stairs. The room, although small by his standards, was clean and neat. Cleaner than some of the inns he had stayed at in England. Lucien cursed this place and his father while he waited for Paul. A few more moments passed before a tentative knock came at the door. When he opened it, he looked down at the freckled face of a young lad.

"Good evening, sir. I'm Paul. I'll take you to the Thomson place."

Gritting his teeth, Lucien followed the boy down the stairs. Outside it had darkened somewhat. The wind picked up and plucked at his cloak like a young debutante picking the petals off a flower. A number of people milled around, apparently unaffected by the brewing storm.

"This way, my lord."

Arching his brow, he looked at the lad. "How is it you know my title?"

"Everyone knows. It's not often anyone with a title comes through. It's just that titles don't mean much here. We're all equals."

Lucien hid his surprise at that statement. As he looked around, he noticed many different shades of skin color in the town, from the palest white, to mahogany, to a deep coal black. No one but him seemed to notice any difference.

Children played happily. The adults spoke to each other regardless of sex and color. Very different from England.

Lucien noticed the stares as people stepped out of his path. Still, that happened everywhere because his height always drew attention and intimidated people. Finally, Paul stopped at a small house located on the edge of town. On Lucien's vast estates, it would be considered a crofter's hut. Paul knocked, and Lucien wondered how long he would be stuck in this place. Lucien followed the boy into the house.

Two ladies sat smiling at him. One of them spoke. "I'm Missus Thomson. Please come in and sit down."

Lucien eyed a chair that looked too fragile to support his body. "Where is the gentleman with whom I was corresponding? Mister M. Thomson?"

The little lady with the gray hair smiled at him. She reminded him of someone he had not thought about in a long time, his grandmother. "I am the one you need to deal with. Now, about the stallion. We expected you earlier, and for that reason, the horse is not here today, but we can have him here tomorrow."

"How is it that I was dealing with you and not your husband?"

"Mind your tongue, boy. I am M. Thomson. This may not be England, but you can still show some respect." Her tone made him feel like he still belonged in the schoolroom.

"My apologies. I am just anxious to get the horse and leave."

"Very well." With a wave of her hand, she sent Paul on his way. "You are dealing with me because my husband is dead.

Not that it is any of your business. The stallion will be here in the morning, and then you can leave. Now we need to discuss payment."

"Payment will come after I inspect the horse." This was an area that he could handle well. He wasn't going to pay that much for an animal that might well be worthless. He had been against this transaction from the beginning. Who ever heard of traveling across the seas to get a horse when the finest examples of horseflesh were to be found in England anyway?

"You will want the horse, although you may not be able to handle him."

"Madam," he labored the word, "I have yet to meet a horse that I can't handle."

"Temper yourself, boy. You English sure are touchy. By the way, my name is Marie, and this one here is Angelique. She is deaf but not blind, so smile at her."

Colonials. They will be the death of me. This wasn't even in the colonies but in the untamed west. Worse. They were dreadful and wild. Even still, he did as she bade him and smiled at the one named Angelique.

"I shall bid you good night then and will see you in the morning." Lucien offered a slight bow to both women and he let himself out of the house. Striding up the street back to the hotel, he looked down as he saw Paul running up to him.

"Sir, what are the seas like?"

"Wet," Lucien snapped and strode on.

He felt little remorse for snapping at the boy. He'd no experience in dealing with children, and today's travel put him

on edge. His own father barely dealt with him as a child. Even now, any interest in Lucien was only to issue foolhardy commands, such as this one. Lucien always swore he'd never be so cold to any child of his own. Perhaps he'd acted a little hastily with the lad. He stopped and looked back. The boy scuffed the toe of his boot in the dirt. The pain of rejection made Lucien re-evaluate his manner.

"Come here. Paul, was it? What do you wish to know about the sea?" he called.

Grinning so widely his face must be about to split, the boy ran back up to him. "Everything. I want to go to sea so bad, but I can't. Have to take care of me ma. She's not been well for a long time." A wry smile crossed Paul's face. "We lost Pa, so now it's just us, and I can't leave her."

How old is this boy to have taken on such a responsibility? The tone of Paul's voice struck a chord deep in Lucien's heart. He knew what it was like to want to do something and not be able to. And as he looked down at the skinny lad he didn't see any spitefulness at his declaration of taking care of his mother. Only acceptance.

Before he knew what happened, Lucien asked, "Have you eaten?"

"No, sir. I was hopin' to get a coin for my service and take some bread home to Ma."

"Will your mother be upset if you eat with me?"

"No, sir ... but..."

"Come with me, and I will speak with you while we eat." Lucien wanted to talk to this young man some more.

For a moment, Paul looked excited then hung his head. "Best not, sir."

"It's okay Paul. You'll be safe. I'll even escort you home if that is troubling you."

"It's not that. Wouldn't be fittin' for me to be eating with a lord when me ma waits for her dinner."

"You mean the bread would be your dinner. What if you couldn't get any?"

"Be going hungry. Nuthin new that, sir."

"I see. Well, I shall pay for some food from the guesthouse for you to take home. Come," Lucien commanded.

The glow that crossed Paul's face made Lucien feel even worse for the way he had treated the boy earlier, but good he could help now. Especially with something as simple as a meal. There were poor people in England, but Lucien had been taught to never look at them, let alone speak with them. But here in Paradise Cove that obviously was impossible. Anyway, who here would report back to his father that he'd entertained commoners? It had been his father, after all, who'd sent him here in the first place.

By the time Lucien St. Martin finished his dinner, four boys and two girls sat around him as they listened to tales of his travels from England. He had purchased food for all of them. They ate, and grinned from ear to ear, reveling in the food and the attention.

One of the boys asked, "Are you getting the big bay stallion that runs these mountains?"

"What do you know of this stallion?" Lucien wondered if he was going to have to deal with people trying to steal it from him.

"Everyone knows about him. His sire is the best horse around, but since there is no way you could have him, it is easy to guess you would be after the son."

"His sire? There is another stallion?" Yet another blow about him not being able to handle a horse. And in spite of that, he was intrigued, for the sire of this horse could be his personal ticket to the racing circles in England. "I would like to meet his owner, so we could discuss my purchase of the horse.

Paul broke in. "You may as well forget the sire. You will have enough trouble with the bay. You couldn't handle the black."

Insulted beyond words, Lucien bit back a retort as he asked his next question, the steel underlay to his tone the only hint at his displeasure. "Why do you say that? And who owns this black?"

One of the girls spoke up. "Paul don't mean no harm by it. It's just a fact. No one but *her* could handle a horse like that. Besides, that stallion isn't around on this mountain anymore. So it don't matter none anyway. She wouldn't let you take him, if he was still up there..." The girl glowed full of life as she spoke, looking straight into Lucien's eyes.

"This her who can handle such a horse, who is she? Are you telling me a woman owns this horse?" The words slipped out before he could stop them. Did any men do business in this town? Or was everything left to the women?

"Children, enough!" The black man behind the counter of the hotel interrupted them with a stern voice. "There is no need to bother him with stories. Especially ones that are none of his concern." His eyes sent a silent message to the children. "He will get his horse in the morn and be gone. Ya'll need to get home before that storm hits."

None of children argued. It was as if someone had removed their tongues. All of them nodded at the black man as they disappeared out the door into the night, after thanking Lucien for dinner. Paul also thanked him repeatedly for the dinner Lucien had purchased for his mother.

"What were they talking about, a black stallion?" Lucien asked the unsmiling black man.

"Nothin'. Children like to tell stories. That is all. Nothin' more, nothin' less. Your horse is here, and you can see him in the morning. Will there be anything else that I can get for you tonight?"

"No. Thank you. That will be all."

"Goodnight then." The man left as silently as the children had, leaving Lucien to digest what he had heard. The kitchen maid came and took his dishes, and Lucien went up to his room.

The bed was big enough for him, just barely. This is a strange town. It was like they have a secret to protect.

Secrets had always intrigued Lucien, and his juices flowed. Perhaps they are hiding something. Trying to cheat me, no doubt.

He heard footsteps and whispers.

"They spoke of the black stallion. He wanted to know more. The children also mentioned ... her. I know when a man is curious. Should we warn her?" The black man's voice reached Lucien through the thin walls.

"She can handle herself. There's nothing we could do for her at the moment. You know how special she is. Besides she isn't over here, but on her mountain. My guess is the black will be over there. I don't think this one will try to go and find the 'heart of the mountain.' You stopped the kids before they could say anything else." This time it was a woman that spoke.

Heart of the mountain? What were they speaking about? Her mountain?

"Besides, once he sees the bay, he will leave. The money from the horse will help out for the families coming in. She will make sure that Marie sees to that. Don't worry so, Abe. Come to bed." The voice seemed a bit strained.

"Yes, dear. It's just that she is all alone, and I worry about her."

"She is better protected than we are here in town, and you know it."

The voices faded as he heard a door shut.

Outside a wild storm raged. It may be a small bed but better in here than out there, he thought. Tomorrow he might explore this mountain a little. If a woman could get about up there, he surely could.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Two

The next morning, Lucien, anxious to see this horse, ate a fast breakfast and once again headed down the main street of town. Paul was there to lead him to his destination, and before he thought about it, Lucien asked, "Whom were you speaking about last night? The *her* that you mentioned, who is it?" Even though the tone he used was one that caused most people to do his bidding, it didn't work this time.

Paul didn't look at him, just squared his shoulders and kept walking. "Nobody. We were just talking. That's all. The livery is over there. Good luck. I gotta go." He ran off before Lucien could blink. All traces of being in awe over a man that had sailed the seas were gone. It was like someone had taken the questions out of the boy.

After he entered the livery, Lucien saw a large man bent over and pounding on iron in the back of the building. The noise ended when Lucien cleared his throat, loudly, to gain the worker's attention. The man stood up, and for once in his life, Lucien found himself looking upward at another man. He was a big man, about a head above Lucien himself and had coal black skin. Sweat poured down his face even at this early and relatively cool time of the day, not to mention the time of year with winter fast approaching. The man turned to wipe his face and slip on his shirt, and as he did Lucien saw the crisscross marks all over his back. There was no doubt what caused them. The man had been whipped many times over.

Turning back around, the man smiled and held out his hand. "Morning, sir. You must be here to see the bay. I just brought him in last night. Follow me. He's out in the corral." But for the American accent, the man could have been in a drawing room in England with his speech. Lucien shook the proffered hand and then followed the man out to the corral.

The bay stallion shocked him. His coat gleamed in the morning sun. Small defined head, powerful hindquarters and a deep chest. Lucien walked up to the fence and smiled. He would indeed be hard pressed, even on a good day, to find an animal like this at Tattersall's. The stallion looked to have some Arabian in him, but Lucien couldn't be sure.

The horse screamed speed, endurance and all that he knew his father would want. His father had one of the top stables in England, and the duke always was looking for ways to increase his stock. The only reason he wanted this stallion was because he heard it was fast, amazingly so, and since he knew that Lucien wanted to have a racing stable, the duke bought the horse before his son could. To add insult to injury, his father ordered Lucien to fetch the horse for him. Anger pooled in Lucien's gut as he appraised the horse and thought of what his father had done.

"He's a beaut, isn't he? He knows it, too." The blacksmith spoke.

"Yes. I would look at him."

The large man nodded as he picked up a rope and sent it sailing over the neck of the stallion. Murmuring softly, he approached him, and when the horse was secure, he led him over to the waiting English lord.

The horse was every bit the arrogant stallion Lucien had been promised. His excitement at the prospect of being on the back of such an animal was a shock to Lucien who rarely got excited about anything. Even trips to his mistress were done in a cool and calculated way, no emotions allowed. He wasn't referred to as "The Black Marquess" for nothing.

"I would ride him."

If the blacksmith was surprised by that declaration, he showed no signs of it. He retrieved a saddle and bridle from the stable and quickly saddling the horse, stepped back and looked at the Englishman.

Lucien stared at the saddle. It was not what he was used to, that was for sure. He had heard of the saddles that these Americans used, but until now had never seen one. He grabbed the reins and swung up into the unexpectedly comfortable seat. The stallion tensed as Lucien's cloak settled over his haunches, but made no other notice of it.

As the blacksmith swung open the gate, he looked at Lucien and spoke before stepping out of the way. "Stick to the paths, sir. We don't want you to become lost."

Lucien bit his tongue to keep his retort in his mouth. He was no milksop, and even though he was not familiar with this place, he did not need anyone to be his nursemaid. The stallion below him was prancing and anxious to be off, the breath from his nostrils strikingly visible in the cool morning air. The horse's barely contained power beneath Lucien was apparent as he moved the animal forward.

Lucien took the street out of town and found himself looking out onto a field of green flowing grass. Without a

second thought, he touched his heels to the horse, and it shot away. The horse had speed, and as they flew across the ground, Lucien couldn't help but feel at peace. He lost himself in the ride and the fluidity of the animal between his legs.

Pulling the horse to a stop, Lucien looked around him. The view was unbelievable; the grass flowing in the breeze, the wildflowers, and the stream that sparkled beneath the morning sun as it ran along the edge of the field toward another mountain covered in snow. Lucien felt like he was the only person in the world. His mount's snort made him look in the direction of the stallion's gaze. What he saw took his breath away.

On the side of the next mountain over was a horse the color of ebony. It gleamed in the sun as it surveyed his domain. The stallion could have been a statue carved out of black marble, for he stood so still with his ears forward and neck arched. The animal was so gorgeous it took Lucien a moment to realize that what he was seeing was not fake, but flesh and blood. This must be the stallion they were talking about at the hotel.

The horse beneath him started to prance and blow, but Lucien expertly brought him under control. The free horse suddenly threw his ears back and let out a squeal that chilled Lucien to the bone. His horse reacted like it had been shot. Rearing, Lucien's horse responded with a screaming challenge back at the distant black one.

The one on the ridge tossed his head and like he had wings, turned and ran from view. As Lucien struggled to keep control over the horse, he failed to notice the clouds that

were rolling in, fast, dark and ominous. Suddenly his mount sidestepped and almost tossed him. In the time it took Lucien to regain his seat, the stallion grabbed the bit and headed up the other mountain in hot pursuit of the black horse. Lucien settled in for the ride, realizing that his best chance was to hang on.

Higher and higher the stallion took him. When the rain came, he didn't stop or even slow. They had taken so many turns that Lucien was not sure at all where he was, and his head was light and he felt faint from the thin air. As man and horse burst into a clearing, Lucien saw the black horse at the other side. His own stallion's sides were heaving from exhaustion, but the bay still issued a challenge to the black horse.

Lucien wrested control back from the irate equine. What had begun as rain now turned to snow. The temperature dropped even farther, and Lucien contained a shiver, grateful for what little protection his cloak offered. He was in real trouble; his horse had a desire to fight another horse, and Lucien did not know where he was.

A crash through the trees followed a low lumbering growl. Lucien's horse instantly was no longer fixed on the black horse across from him, but the ferocious black beast headed at them. A very large, very dangerous, very angry looking bear stood and roared at them all. Lucien's horse spun and lunged away as the bear dropped and headed for them.

As the stallion ran from the enraged bear, Lucien prayed that he would get out of this alive. The air rushed by him as the ground rose to meet him. He had been thrown! The bear,

after taking a swipe at the horse, turned his attention to the rider. For the first time in a long time, since Lucien first entered the army, he felt pure fear. His ankle felt broken and so did his arm. His last conscious thought was that he was going to die in this bloody country. No one would know where he was, and he father would probably only say, "Such a bloody shame he didn't bring me the horse." Lucien smelt the bear's foul breath as it ripped at him with his teeth and claws.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Three

Ciara shivered as the cold wind blew around her. Dressed in her buckskins, she should have worn her heavier coat. She did a final check on her wood supply for winter. It should last. Her father had built the shed right outside the cabin, and she spent the past few months making sure that it was stocked full. It was. Her larder was filled with meats, vegetables and everything else that she would need for the winter. A grin split her face as she gazed over at the valley below her. She took a slow, deep breath of the crisp air and turned to Faolan, stretched out on the ground fast asleep. Snow was coming.

"Get up old man. We have one more stop to make."

At her voice, Faolan rose to stand beside her. He was a sinister looking wolf, and his head was higher than her hip. As he leaned on her, she realized that he could knock her over if he wanted to. Ciara pulled on his ear affectionately before she headed off to make sure that she had all of the herbs she needed.

With a quick stop off at the cabin, she picked up her cloak and herb pouch. The rain had started, and she knew that by this evening there would be snow on the ground. Ciara started a fire to make sure that her cabin would be warm when they returned. As she closed the door behind her, she stopped to fix her cloak.

The thickness of her cloak was one reason she wore it, the hood also worked. This was a special cloak; she had made it to suit her needs. It could cover her completely from head to

ankle, wrapping her in a cocoon if she wished, keeping her warm if she had to sleep on the ground, but it also could be formed to fit her body like a second skin. A row of buttons on the back allowed her to split the cloak, enabling her to secure each half to each leg. The waist could be pulled in for a snug fit. She could go from a woman enveloped by a thick cloak to a woman that looked like she wore very thick clothing.

When she needed to move quickly in the woods, or carry a kill, she would secure the cloak to her body so there was no loose material. She did so now, not wanting to repeat the drenching experience of last night. When she was ready, she set off at the jog she always used through the woods, Faolan by her side.

When the rain turned to snow, she stopped gathering herbs. She rose and headed back to the cabin when she heard the growling of a bear. Faolan's back hackled and he faced toward a deeper part of the woods. Strange, the bears should all be sleeping now. Ciara moved forward swiftly and silently as she headed for the sound, her sharp vision scanning the ground for signs. What she saw didn't bode well for the object the bear had in its clutches, for she saw the prints of a cub as well.

She heard another noise in there. A cry. A moan. A scream. The closer she got, the more nervous she became. A scrap of cloth caught her attention; it was from a cloak. A person. The bear had a person in its clutches.

Without conscious thought for her own safety, she ran into the small clearing where the bear mauled a man, making him

look like a rag doll she had as a kid. She screamed at the creature, "Get away from him! Get out of here!"

Faolan jumped in and drew the bear's attention from the man with growls that would freeze the depths of hell. He held the bear's attention, kept it moving backwards to avoid the attack of a large wolf that did not seem to be scared. Every time the bear turned to make a circle the wolf was there to hold him at bay. When Faolan and the bear were clear of the human on the ground, Ciara ran to him. He was alive, but barely, and had finally succumbed to unconsciousness from the pain. Ciara worked quickly to make a paste from some of the herbs and falling snow to help staunch the flow of blood.

When she ripped off his cloak, what was left of it, she sucked in her breath. The man was magnificent. His thick, silky black hair was plastered to his head. His skin was pale from blood loss, but she knew that it would be a golden tan when he was healthy. Ciara shook her head to regain her wits. He would never make it through the night here. She hefted him to an upright position and slumped him against the tree. She unfastened her cloak and put it over the man's shoulders but the cloak, which could envelop her and keep her warm at night, barely covered him.

While she scanned for any signs of the bear or Faolan, she bit her lip in concentration when she realized what she had to do to help this man survive. Ciara crouched down in front of him then put her shoulder into his stomach, and pulled him so he toppled into her. She rose slowly as she adjusted the large man that hung over her shoulders and staggered a bit under

his weight. When she felt he was secure, she headed off to her cabin, carrying him just like she would carry a game kill.

He definitely was not like any kill she had toted before. Even as good of shape as she was in, she was breathing heavily as she finally entered the copse where her cabin was hidden. As she approached the cabin, Faolan came from out of the trees unharmed and hit the latch with his head and let himself in the cabin before her.

Ciara unceremoniously dumped the man on the bed that was nearest to the fireplace, the one she used for herself when her parents were alive and had occupied the only bedroom. She shut the door against the increasing snow and cold. First she built up the fire even more then prepared some more paste to heal his wounds and draw out any poison from the bear's claw marks.

While the paste cooled, she stripped the man on the bed. His chest was broad and covered with a dusting of dark hair. Even under the wounds, she could tell he was not a lazy man. He was in good shape so hopefully he would heal quickly, which she told herself was the only reason she looked.

She bathed his chest and applied the paste where necessary, covering the applications with bandages to keep the paste in place. He was a lucky man, for it appeared that the bear mostly had been tossing him around instead of mauling him. Three major wounds worried her, but from the way the bear had sounded and acted she was worried there might have been more.

His upper body done, she covered him with a quilt. She struggled to get his breeches off, for they were wet with

blood, snow and mud. Finally she slit them with a knife. *Oh my!* He was without doubt an impressive man. She cleaned his scratches and checked for broken bones. His arm had been fractured, and she splinted it. His legs seemed to be fine, aside from the scratches and abrasions. She rolled him over and checked his back and backside. Aside from the three deep scratches that went across his ribs and onto his back, he was clean of any serious wounds on his back.

Once sure there were no more wounds that needed to be tended she covered him with thick quilts to keep him warm and then attended to herself. She changed into a dry pair of buckskins then hung his clothes over a chair by the fire. She made herself something to eat, but she still checked on her patient every once in a while.

She made some willow bark tea and dribbled it down into his mouth, knowing that if a fever did hit him, it would not be good. He seemed to be in a peaceful slumber as she headed for her own bed, the door left open so she could hear him in the night.

"No! Get off me. Damn it, I don't want to die here." In a voice that nearly broke her heart, he asked the elusive person in his dream, "Why couldn't you just love me? Why did you hate me so?" Even filled with so much tormented pain, his voice was deep and smooth.

Ciara jumped out of bed at the voice that resonated through her cabin. She flew out to the bed where her stranger lay and noticed that he was thrashing around and covered in sweat. He had a fever.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Four

For the next two and a half weeks, Ciara battled the man's fever as she watched her mountain become buried under more snow than she had seen in many years. She stretched as she stirred some stew on the stove. She was so tired. She looked over at the man lying prone on the bed. She ate and went to check on him.

He was cool to the touch. She had done it; his fever was gone. Ciara grinned in relief at a job well done then rose to get him some more willow-bark tea. After she dribbled most of the cupful into his mouth, she offered up a prayer of thanks. She took the cup over to her table and set it down before changing into her warm bedclothes. She wore an old linen shirt of her father's that hung down to mid-thigh on her. Before she went to get some much needed and deserved sleep, she decided to check on her patient one more time. She brushed her hand over his face that now sported a beard and noted that he was still cool.

Briefly she closed her eyes, nodded her relief and started to withdraw her hand. She found it clasped in a grip that was tight despite the weakness of the man himself. "Don't leave me. So soft, so sweet. Stay the night with me." He mumbled as he tugged her closer.

Ciara allowed him to pull her closer, completely ignoring the low growl that came from Faolan. His hand moved upward and tangled in her unbound hair. His mouth brushed over hers, causing her heart to beat wildly. He moaned into her

mouth as he slid his tongue along her lips and slipped it inside her wanting mouth. "So soft, like silk. You are so beautiful, everything I could ever want in a woman. Beautiful skin, the color of rich cream, hair like golden wheat."

Realization hit her like ice water. He dreamt of someone. For some reason, that hurt. She tried to pull away, but he tugged her back down so she was sprawled over him, not even wincing from the pain of her on his wounds. He edged over a little without relinquishing his hold on her.

She settled in beside him, for what did it matter where she slept as long as she finally got some sleep? Her last thought before she drifted into a much welcome oblivion was that she felt warm and safe in this man's arms.

* * * *

Lucien came awake slowly, and wished he hadn't awakened at all when the pain hit him. His whole body was sore. He tried opening his eyes, but it was just too much effort. He felt like his body was on fire. He tried to move, but there was a weight on his arm. He turned his head slowly as he became aware of a head snuggled into his shoulder He breathed in a scent unlike any he had smelled before, clean, fresh and pure. The skin was soft like silk and felt right against his bare shoulder, he thought, before sleep claimed him again.

Ciara woke to a chill in the air of the cabin. She was warm and as she slowly opened her eyes she found out why. Draped over this man like a common whore, she was. Her nightshirt had ridden up, and her legs straddled one of his.

She was flush up against him and yet, thankfully, he still slept. She slid out of bed and covered him and went to dress. She returned to the room much more comfortable and built up the fire. Ciara ruffled Faolan's ears as she put on her cloak and went outside for a bit.

Lucien's midnight eyes opened slowly, his head pounding and his body still pounding with pain. He couldn't remember where he was. He remembered a bear, his stallion running off and the subtle smell of something that made him hard with desire—a woman. He couldn't remember her face, only her scent. The woman wasn't next to him, where she was supposed to be. Where was she? Who is she? Where am I?

The sound of a door opening made him look over. A hooded figure came in followed by the biggest, blackest dog Lucien had ever seen. The frigid air that blew in with them made him suck in his breath even though he was under a mound of quilts.

At his gasp, the figure turned toward him. It set down the wood it carried and made sure the door was shut tight against the howling winds. With a wordless gesture, it sent the black canine to go lay down.

"Who are you?" Lucien's voice was raspy, dry. "Where am I?"

The figure took off its cloak, and what Lucien saw made his jaw drop. The figure was a woman, wearing breeches that fit her like a second skin. Her hair was black and looked to be short. She had full lips and a petite nose on a face that was graced with the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen, set above high placed cheekbones. Amber eyes. Not just any

amber but the color of a rich whiskey. They were hauntingly beautiful and, like the whisky they resembled, potent.

Her bronze skin glowed from the cold, and it was not long before he realized that he had begun to stiffen under her direct gaze. She was more beautiful than any woman he had seen before; the women he had known and loved from England to Egypt vanished from his memory. He groaned.

Immediately she moved to the stove and made him a cup of something. She didn't move like women he knew either. She was graceful, with a natural grace, not one that had been trained in attempts to snare a rich husband. As the vision stooped beside the bed, she held the cup toward him.

"Would you like to sit up?"

Her low and melodious voice made his member twitch, and he groaned again. "Yes." He struggled to do so, but to his immense embarrassment, he couldn't.

Without comment, she set down the cup and lifted him boldly as though he weighed nothing, placing him up against some cushions. When he was settled, she handed him the cup. "Drink it all."

He drank slowly as his eyes followed her about the cabin. Another small building. He lay on a pallet in some kind of an alcove. As the warmth sank into him, he looked around the cabin, noticing Celtic artifacts and some that appeared to be African as well. Lucien slanted a look at her, wondering what her story was. His hand shook with exhaustion by the time he finished his drink. After he sat the cup beside him, he looked down at his bare chest. He looked then up at her as she approached with some fresh bandages.

"I will check your wounds, and then if you wish something to eat, let me know."

She was so direct Lucien didn't know how to respond. Still he wanted to keep her talking. Wanted information. "Where is my horse?"

Surprise flitted across her features. "What horse?" she asked with a slight shake of her head.

"You didn't see one? Maybe he made it back to the village." He tried not to be affected by her nearness as he recognized her scent from the one that had been next to him as he slept.

She sat on a chair beside him and preceded to check his bare chest like it was something she did every day. "Paradise Cove? You are the man, the Englishman, who was coming for Nyama and Cloud's son." It was not a question, but a statement. "The bay stallion."

Lucien responded as he sat forward. "Yes. Damn it. Now I don't know where he is. This whole trip will be for nothing. Who are *Nuamama* and Cloud?" He stumbled over the pronunciation of the words. He flopped back against the cushions while he panted for breath, as she put some more paste on his scars and new bandages on his wounds. Her subtle scent flowed over his senses, making him respond in ways he should not have. Ways that he had no energy to even think about.

"Nyama and Cloud. They are the sire and dam of the bay you came for." She stood, and before he could protest, she flipped back the quilts covering his lower half, which had kept hidden his substantial erection inspired by her closeness.

Lucien flushed with embarrassment, but as he tried to protest, he noticed that she did not even seem fazed. She doctored his wounds, and that was all.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Five

Ciara Malika McKay was fazed all right. It took all of her inner strength to keep all emotion off her face. She had no idea he would look like that. His rod jutted out from a thick nest of black hair and quivered as if it had a life all its own. There was a tiny drop of dewiness at the very top. She wanted to touch it, to see if it would feel as soft as she imagined it would. She finished as fast as possible without circumventing any of his wounds. She stood quickly as she flicked the quilts back over him with a dismissive glance.

Lucien was both shocked and angered. There was not a woman that could resist his charms should he so choose to display them, and yet she did. On the other hand, he was embarrassed that she had seen him like that, with no control over his body. Not sure what to do for once in his life, he snuck a glance at her.

Those golden eyes stared at him. "Would you like to eat? I have some stew that you should be able to handle."

Was he so unimpressive that it was not worth speaking about? His arrogance surfaced. "Have you no shame, or are you so used to looking at men in that state?"

As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted speaking so. She had done nothing wrong, but here he had snapped at her. I would like to bite that luscious body of hers as she moans her pleasure. Where did that thought come from?

The whiskey eyes went hard, the only sign of her feelings, for her voice stayed calm. "I have no time for modesty. I

have been taking care of you for the past two weeks, since I merely was concerned with keeping you alive. I did not mean to embarrass you. If you think you can handle me looking upon you, I will help you to dress in your trousers."

Two weeks? She was apologizing to him?

"No, I am sorry. Have I really been here for two weeks?" As the realization hit that he was entirely in her debt, he tried to backtrack. "I am Lucien St. Martin, Marquess of Heartstone. You may call me Saint. What is your name? And yes, I would like, at least, my trousers." He waited for the automatic preening women tended to do when they heard his title. Why did I say she could call me Saint? Only a very few did.

Men. Always trying to impress a woman. "Ciara." She pronounced it kee-ar-ra with a slight rolling of the 'r.' She turned her back on him and went to the stove to get him a bowl of soup. He needed to stay in bed for a bit yet, and keeping his clothes from him seemed to be the best way.

Lucien was not sure what to make of this woman. By all rights she should be in a swoon over the fact that she had a naked man in her house, as would any proper young woman. She should have succumbed to a case of the vapors or something like that; not going about her business like it was a normal day. "That's it? Nothing else to your name?"

She settled back on the chair by his pallet and offered him the bowl. "Ciara Malika McKay. What about you, anything else to your name? Can you eat on your own, or would you like some help? Eat first. Clothes second."

Regardless of the fact that he shook with exhaustion, he snapped, "Lucien Brenden Remington St. Clair. I can feed myself." He took the bowl and set it on his lap, and the first spoonful he spilled mostly on his chest and was glad it wasn't hot. His face flamed with anger or embarrassment, maybe both.

Ciara said not one word, just rose and got a cloth to wipe his chest clean, which she made into an erotic gesture. She took the bowl and fed him little by little. She gave him some more tea to drink and then asked him if he needed to relieve himself.

Lucien was just about at the end of his patience with feeling this way. This was embarrassing. He did need to go but not with her here. "Help me up. I will go outside." A command, one he believed would be followed.

"I don't think so." She rose and got a pot. It was placed on his lap. She said, "I will be back in a few minutes." Ciara swung on her cloak and flipped up the hood as she and her devil dog disappeared into the swirling snow.

Lucien cursed his weakness every step of the way, but managed to relieve himself and slip on the large woolen breeches she had left for him. Just as he fell back into the bed, she stepped through the door and, in his anxiety, barely missed knocking over the pot. He feebly maneuvered his legs back under the quilts and was worn out from just that bit of exertion.

Not saying anything, she removed the pot and took it outside. She was gone for about fifteen minutes, and when

she returned, she carried more wood along with the cleaned pot.

Ciara set the wood down and hung her cloak. As she stoked the fire she turned to look at her guest, watching him fight exhaustion as he struggled to pull the heavy quilts up over his shoulders. When her hands were warm, she walked over, lifted the blankets and made sure he was tucked in. When he would have said something she interrupted with, "Stop fighting it. The more you rest, the sooner you will recover. Remember, a bear attacked you. You will be up in no time. Rest now."

When she made to leave, he asked her, "Will you stay and talk with me?" Lucien realized that for a female she was very quiet. Not because she was trying to be flirtatious, but because she was a woman of few words.

"Aye. If you wish it. I will return." She left to her room.

Her accent, Lucien thought, sounded almost Gaelic. Some of her words were tinted with a hint of the brogue. When she came back into the room she had changed into a large wool shirt that might have belonged to a man, dry buckskin breeches, and fuzzy moccasin slippers. She sat in the large rocking chair by the fire as she absently stroked the head of her massive pet.

"Where did you get your dog?" Lucien struggled to sit up, and as he managed to he noticed that she tensed as if ready to jump up to assist if he needed it, but offered him enough respect to let him do it on his own. He felt a little better since he had slipped on the large loose fitting trousers that she had left by him when she went outside. They made him feel like

he had a bit more control. Part of him wanted to know why she had trousers this big. And from where had she gotten them? To whom did they belong? Did she have a man in her life? If so, where was he, and why was he letting her touch a stranger in the ways she was doing? If she were my woman, I sure as hell wouldn't let her be doing that.

"Faolan is no dog. He is a wolf. I saved him from a trap, and he has decided to stay with me." The wolf looked at him with eyes that were almost identical to the woman's.

"Faolan, what does that mean? Why are you here? Why don't you live in the town?"

"My business is my business, Wolf. Please do not ask me to speak of such things for I will not do so."

So polite. So distant. In complete control of her emotions, it was like looking at a feminine version of himself back in England.

"Wolf? Why do you call me that?"

"It suits you, like Faolan. You should rest. Lie back."

Angered at being so efficiently dismissed, he peered at her from under lowered lids. "Why do you not come lay with me. You have before, for your scent was over the pillows." He waited for her reaction. Never had he been so crass to a woman before, but something made him want to crack her calm composure. To get some sort of anger response. Something. Anything. He was so mad, at what he didn't know, but her cool poise made him even angrier.

Without so much as a smile, she stood. "Of course they smell like me. This is my place, and those are my blankets. I am sorry if they offend."

Damn her. This was not going well at all. The scent of her was not a problem. Well, it was but not in the way she thought. "Are you saying that you were not sleeping with me?" He hated the desperation in his voice, but he had to know.

"I have my own bed. Call me if you need anything. Good night, Wolf." She nodded and walked gracefully out of the room.

Ciara lay in her bed and trembled as she tried to get a hold of herself. Having seen his aroused naked body shattered her composure. She thought of what he had said, and of him; skin the color of rich cream and hair like golden wheat. That in itself was enough to square her resolve. She just had to make sure that he survived because apparently someone waited for him. For a single selfish moment, she wondered what it would be like to have a man like that waiting for her. She fell asleep with that thought.

* * * *

A low growl woke her a few nights later. Awake immediately, she had a knife in her hand even before her feet hit the floor. A tall figure lurched unsteadily in front of the fire. Faolan had awakened her, but he stayed by her. Taking a deep breath, she put the knife down and slipped on her moccasins.

Ciara stood in the doorway and watched as Lucien struggled to get strength back in his limbs. The fire cast a golden glow over his body that was healing nicely; he would

have scars, but he would survive. As she stood there watching him in the firelight, he pitched forward.

Unable to sleep, Lucien had waited until he was sure that she would be asleep before he tried to rise. He sat up slowly and, as he rested, set his goal. He would walk to the table and back. It wasn't far, but it was a start. He was healing but he would have a set of scars that reached around one half of his body for the rest of his life. Preferable to being dead, he considered, so it wasn't bad. Even though he took small baby steps, he was covered in sweat by the time he reached the table. His legs shook uncontrollably under him. He turned back to the bed and wondered if he would make it. As he pitched forward, he realized that the answer was no, he wouldn't make it. He muffled a curse as he hit the floor.

Within seconds, a pair of surprisingly strong arms lifted, yes lifted, him and helped him back to the bed. "I have to make sure you didn't open your wounds." Ciara did a quick and thorough exam before she covered him.

Angry with himself for being here, being injured, being so weak, rushed to the surface. He grabbed her arm and squeezed. "What? You aren't going to tell me that I shouldn't have been walking yet? I'm too weak? Why don't you say something? Anything?" He was shouting by this time, and Faolan rose to stand next to his mistress. The wolf did not raise his hackles, but Lucien felt the menace that rolled like waves off the animal.

Her calm lilting voice broke through his fog of anger. "If you value your life, remove your hand from my arm." He then

realized that it had been a huge mistake to touch her in anger with the protective wolf around.

"You are brave with the wolf to hide behind," he sneered. He did release his hold on her arm though.

"No harm done. What good would I do if I told you those things? Your body is weak, not your mind. I couldn't know what your body is capable of more than you could. You are a man. I figure you would like to be up and able to take care of yourself soon. You didn't hurt yourself so there was no harm done." She didn't even touch on the fact that she had a wolf to defend her.

When she put it that way, he could find nothing to argue with. At least she had noticed he was a man. She spoke a command to Faolan, and the wolf went and lay down on the rug by the fire. It was a word he didn't understand. "What did you say to him?"

"Not important. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No. Thank you." He reached up to touch her face, and when he did, she stiffened, but her eyes stayed on his, clear and guileless. She was beautiful. Achingly so. He wanted to kiss those full lips. He wanted to run his tongue over them and nibble on them.

"I will see you in the morning, then." She straightened and spoke one word to Faolan, and he followed her into her room. She did not acknowledge at all his treatment to her, and the fact that she was silent and not upset by his words or actions hit him harder than if she had yelled at him.

* * * *

He felt a little stronger in the morning as he ate the breakfast she set before him. She was dressed as before, in buckskins. When the meal was done, he looked at her and asked, "How did I get here?" His memory was sketchy except for seeing the bear charge him.

"I brought you here."

"How?"

"I carried you." She took the dishes and washed them with water that had been heating on the stove.

Lucien snorted in disbelief. She was a female. "You mean someone helped you carry me."

"No. I carried you. There is no one usually on this mountain. You are far from Paradise Cove. It is dangerous for you to be without a guide. Why was there no one with you?"

"I don't need a wet-nurse. I am a Marquess. If you must know, I was taking the stallion for a trial ride. Before that damn horse spooked because of the bear." His temper rose with indignation, and his voice was laden with scorn. He knew that it was not fair to blame the horse for running, but he had to blame someone or something, and it sure wasn't going to be himself.

The dish dropped as she spun on him, eyes flashing golden fire, and she let him have the full, unchecked onslaught of her anger. "You! You were a fool. You alone are to blame. Not the horse, you! I know that in town they told you not to go off the path. Bears are only one of the wild animals you would have to worry about in this area. While it is not a battlefield, neither is it a path through your self-absorbed, pigheaded and conceited haut monde. As for the stallion, I hope that no

harm came to that splendid creature because of your arrogance and stupidity.

"Apparently you did and still do need someone to watch over you because if you did not, you would not be one mountain over from where you started and I would not have had to carry you and tend you back to health and ... and now be stuck with you until spring." She spun around, dishes forgotten, ripped on her gloves and her cloak as she exited the cabin in a blaze of fury.

Lucien sat in stunned silence. There were few people that would speak to him in that tone. Here—all winter! This was news to him. How did she know about the *monde?* Perhaps he *had* been a bit arrogant in his decision, but surely she was exaggerating. Females always did so when they wanted men to feel sorry for them. Damn, but she was spectacular in her rage, and he knew that her responses to lovemaking would be just as passionate. To *his* lovemaking. He set a goal to seduce her. She was good looking; all right, she was stunning, and he had been a while without a woman so it would work for both of them. Satisfied that his life would be getting back on track, he smiled. He purposely forgot her accusations.

Lucien waited for her to come back in the cabin. After thirty minutes, he walked a little bit and then sat on the bed to regain his breath. When an hour had passed, he got worried. Still no sign of her so he struggled up again, stumbled to the window by the door and pushed aside the heavy curtain. As he cleared the frost away he looked out on to a scene that he never would have believed.

His gaze took in Ciara as she played tag in the snow with that wolf of hers. The snow still fell, and it was about up to her knees. She smiled as the animal pounced at her and knocked her down. He watched her for about fifteen minutes before she turned and loaded her arms with some wood and headed back toward the cabin.

He barely got to sit back on the bed before she came in the door. The silence was strained as she put more wood in the fire and replaced her cloak and gloves. Taking a breath, Ciara looked at him and spoke, her voice once again calm and controlled, her gaze devoid of any emotion. "I must go out for a while. Would you like to have a bath?"

A bath? It would be wonderful. "Yes I would like one. Where do you bathe?"

"I will bring in a tub and heat the water for you. If you are sure you can handle it yourself."

His groin stirred at her words, but as he looked at her face he realized that she was not being coy with her wording. Just straight forward. It was as though she didn't know how to flirt and that alone made the words she spoke all the more provocative.

"I will be fine. Besides," he added flashing a grin that was known to make women melt into his arms, "I have to get up and moving around, or I will not get better at all."

"Very well." No blushes. No sighs. For all intents and purposes she was not affected by his grin at all. Lucien frowned. This was going to make seduction even harder, but victory all the sweeter. The Black Marquess did not fail when

it came to women; there was not one that he couldn't get into his bed.

Ciara went out and dragged in a huge metal tub. She set water to boil while the tub warmed by the fire, and got ready for her day. She poured in the water and placed some soap and a drying cloth on a chair next to the tub. She walked over to him and took off his bandages. "I believe that they can stay uncovered now. Do you require any assistance?"

The devil in him made him want to say yes, but he needed to do this on his own. "No, I will manage."

Ciara spun about and went into her room where she put on her heaviest buckskins, and when she heard a small splash, she went back out to the room to see him settled in the tub. She dropped her father's shaving tools on the chair as well, and at his look she added, "I did not know if you wished to shave." He was magnificent. His chest was almost devoid of hair, aside from that dusting, making it all the more defined.

She swung her cloak over her shoulders and spoke again, "There is a clean shirt and your breeches are there as well. You may wish to keep wearing the wool ones since yours were ripped. The fire should be fine, and there is stew on the stove. Will you be okay for the day?"

The day? "Where are you going?" The question came unbidden from his lips. "It is dangerous out there. You should stay here."

"I have things to do. Will you be fine here?" She waited for his nod and then slipped out the door, Faolan at her side.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Six

Lucien St. Martin had never been so confused. The woman must not be right in the head. Determined to forget her, he allowed the warmth of the bath to soak in. He picked up the soap she left and was pleased that it was not a flowery smell, but a more masculine one. At the same time he wondered why she had soap like this.

He shaved first while he was sure to have the energy and immediately felt better, having never liked beards on his face for they scratched. He stayed in the water until it started to chill before he got out and dried off by the fire. Later, after he slid back into the wool breeches and socks, he looked for the shirt that she had spoken of. It was a heavy flannel that was a little tight in the shoulders but would suffice to keep him warm.

He felt better so he wandered around the room, with small steps. The items decorating the cabin were a mix of African and Celtic heritage. The two blended together nicely and made the cabin look more like a home than his ancestral mansion did. His place was large and screamed *wealth* where her little cabin whispered *love*. His chest tightened when he realized that this was what he needed in his life. Love.

He knew that when he returned to England he was going to look for the appropriate woman to be his Marchioness, get her with an heir and probably seek his pleasure with a mistress, as did most of the peers. There was no way one woman could keep his attentions for the rest of his life, and

he would not be a cuckold. For some reason, though, the thought of living the rest of one's life with love held some appeal.

His father had treated his stepmother badly and she in turn had done the same to him. Theirs was a cold, icy even, relationship, different from his memories of his mother who had died birthing his sister. They each carried on discreet affairs after they had married. While they lived in the same house, they slept in different rooms and barely said any civil words to one another. Not entirely what he was looking for in a wife.

He walked to the bedroom and pushed open the door. It was barren. Well, not barren but compared to the women's rooms he had seen, it was. Most of the room was covered in the same African/Celtic mix. Brightly colored cloths covered the walls, her bed covered in the same type of quilts he had. A shelf along the wall had some dried herbs on it, making the room smell different. Her scent, however, filled the room. He couldn't place it. It was a mix of honey and something. Something sweet, a berry of some kind. Under the herbs were some books. There were no knickknacks aside from a carved rearing horse, a running wolf and a soaring bird. On the wall beside her mirror was a painting, faded with age but still striking.

A tall red headed man, with the same color eyes as Ciara, looked down upon a stunning woman with skin that looked a bit darker than Ciara's, his hand under her chin as he tipped her face up toward him. The woman had her hand on his chest, and her eyes were full of love, life and laughter as she

gazed up at the man beside her. Whoever painted it caught that much. At the bottom it said, Cormac Aiden and Kerry Jahzara McKay. Her parents? Whoever they were, he had never seen a couple look like that, so much in love. He could feel the love coming off the painting. He left the room uncomfortable with the feeling.

Lucien forced himself to eat a bowl of the stew. It was good despite the fact he had no idea what he had eaten. She had left some bread out for him as well, and he ate that. His energy spent, he lay down for a nap.

* * * *

As Ciara headed back to the cabin, she smiled. It had been a good day. She found her missing herbs, even though she had to dig through the snow to get to them. It was fortunate she found them for they were almost no good. She had also found a small mountain lion kitten next to the body of its dead mother. Not such a good part, but it all worked out. Faolan was being its surrogate mother whether he wished to or not, and it pleased her to watch as the young kitten tried to keep up with him through the deep snow. Her wolf was used to creatures coming and going in the cabin.

A deer was slung over her shoulders. She had food stores, but fresh meat always was welcome, especially with this growing kitten to feed as well as the very large man in her cabin. She had two hares hanging from her waist. Her cloak was split to fit her, and as she strode toward her cabin, she found a smile on her face. For the first time since her parents died, she would have someone to talk with throughout the

winter, even though he was an arrogant man. As they entered the small clearing in front of the cabin, she laughed as the kitten tackled Faolan with his teeth, causing the large wolf to yelp in pain.

The sound of an animal woke Lucien, and he sat up slowly, cursing his weakened condition. As fast as he was healing, it was not fast enough for him. He despised weakness, a trait his parents taught him. He moved toward the window and pulled the curtain back. He saw Faolan as he chased what looked to be a kitten around the yard. He looked past them and saw a hooded figure striding up with a deer over its shoulders.

Ciara? Nay! The figure turned and headed for a small building to the side and dumped the animal in the snow then came toward the cabin. Not sure what to do, Lucien figured that as long as the wolf didn't have a problem then it couldn't be someone bad. The door swung open, and a wet wolf led in a figure in black.

After she stomped the snow off her boots, Ciara pushed back her hood and found a shocked Lucien looking at her.

"You? You were the one carrying that deer?" Disbelief filled his face.

"Yes. How are you doing?" She leaned over and placed the small kitten on the floor where it looked at Lucien and hissed. Ciara headed to the fire and added some more wood before she began to drag the tub out.

"Wait. What are you doing?" Lucien sputtered.

When she was done dumping the tub, she returned it to where she kept it. She went back into the cabin and watched,

amused, as the kitten tried to attack the hanging quilt. Lucien watched the creature warily. "It won't hurt you. He is only a few months old."

"Where did you get him? What is he?"

"His mom was dead. Since I couldn't leave him, I brought him back. It is a cougar kitten."

"A what kitten? What are you wearing? And what were you doing carrying a deer?" His questions followed no line of logic she knew of, so she answered them the best she could.

"A mountain lion, cougar, wildcat, I don't know how you know them as. I am wearing my cloak like I always do. I thought fresh meat would be good. Especially with the little one here. I have to go and fix the meat. You stay here with the baby." At the door she paused, looked at him and smiled at him, a completely open and unreserved smile filled with humor and good cheer.

His heart stopped for a second before it started again at twice the speed. Blessed hell, she was gorgeous when she smiled like that. "Play with him. He will help you get your strength back." She slipped out the door with Faolan.

The little creature ran to the door mewling and crying. When it couldn't get out, it made its way back to Lucien. The males sat and looked at each other, sizing one another up, neither sure what to do. The little tan spotted fur ball was kind of cute, Lucien allowed.

Lucien rose slowly and headed for the chair by the fire. The kitten followed him and rubbed against him, purring. He picked up the little thing and before long both males, wolf and lion in their own right, were fast asleep by the fire. That was

the scene that Ciara discovered when she and Faolan came back in the cabin.

She came in with fresh meat for pies and stew. After the door shut, she found the two weakened males asleep by the fire in the chair. Her weakened males. She put the meat down and unfastened her cloak. The kitten opened its eyes, but didn't move from his warm place on Lucien's lap.

She moved as quietly as she could as she made them some dinner. After it was in the oven cooking, she opened the door to go back outside when the kitten appeared by her side. Ciara snuck a glance at the man in the chair, but he was still dead to the world, soft snores escaped his mouth. A quick glance at the fireplace told her that it was fine so she, Faolan and the kitten, that she had dubbed Kosse, headed out to play in the snow that fell in soft flakes.

Lucien woke to the rich smells of cooked food. His stomach growled as he sat up in the chair and looked down at his empty lap. He was alone in the cabin yet again. He rose to put some more wood on the fire and then snuck a peek into the oven.

A thick roast simmered, surrounded by thick gravy with biscuits. His mouth watered. He listened for any sound of Ciara and heard her husky laugh as it filtered in from the outside. He peered out the window and saw her with her cloak billowing around her as she stood petting two horses. One was that big black that he had seen before the bear attack, and the other was a bay, like the stallion he had ridden the day he was thrown.

Faolan and the kitten romped in the snow, and the horses did not seem to be concerned by them at all. This was a strange place, and she was a strange woman. The wind picked up enough to blow her hood off her head and enabled him a clear view of her face. As he watched, the big black pawed at the falling snow and tossed his head.

Ciara grabbed his mane and swung up on his back. The stallion gave a halfhearted buck before he trotted around the small clearing. The mare fell into step beside him, and as he watched, while in mid-stride, she swung from one horse to the next. She rode the mare for a bit and then dismounted before the mare even stopped.

Lucien's heart jumped up to his mouth. Anger seethed through him that she would risk herself like that. He was almost to the door to yell at her when he realized exactly what his situation was.

He was a titled man, set to inherit a dukedom. He was trapped in a cabin, unchaperoned, with a female of marriageable age. If they were in England, he would be forced to marry. Well, maybe not since she was not exactly what one would expect for a wife of the elite. Instead of her trying to trap him, she appeared to be almost indifferent to him. She treated his wounds and took care of him, but was much more comfortable with the animals that surrounded her, for when she was with them, she was completely unreserved with her emotions.

Here was a chance for him to find himself. Maybe discover that one part of him that always had been kept down because of who he was and who he was to become. There was no

society here that could slander him. No parents to show their displeasure at his activities. He could do as he wished, and no one would know or care. Maybe he would get a friend. He didn't have many friends. In fact he had two, but he had many acquaintances.

The company he kept obviously did not care about his title so there would be no mindless prattle to try and get in his good graces. What would they think if he came back with a wife as well as the horse his father had ordered him bring. Shocking his parents was something he did well, and what better way than to return with a wife that was not of "good breeding." One that was not a blueblood. That defiantly bore further thought.

Ciara gave a short whistle, and Faolan came to her, with Kosse in tow. She made sure that there was some grain out for the horses and headed back into the cabin. Lucien sat at the table, his gaze predatory. Instantly she was on guard.

"Are those your horses?"

"No." Her answer came too quickly to suit him. She hung her cloak and put some food down for Kosse. She let Faolan out to go hunt his own food.

"To whom do they belong?"

"They are wild. They belong only to themselves." She set the table for dinner, and for once she would not meet his gaze.

"Why did you help me?"

Ciara paused, confused. He was after something. "You were injured. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Thank you for that. I will repay your kindness." His voice smooth as if he soothed a savage beast.

"I did not ask for payment and therefore require none."

She pulled the roast out of the oven and set it on the table.

The aroma filled the cabin, and she quickly served them both.

She gave him some coffee and took some water for herself.

"I always repay my debts." His voice showed his displeasure at her for having turned him down.

"Eat. It will get cold if you don't." Ciara closed her eyes and offered up a prayer before she began to eat.

"Do you pray?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Why did you not do so out loud?"

"I don't know your beliefs and did not wish to make you feel uncomfortable."

Lucien was shocked again. It was a nice feeling having someone care about him. "Tell me about you," he commanded, as he watched her eat. She certainly had a good appetite; the women of his acquaintance would never eat like that in front of him. Of course they would also not be able to lift a deer and carry it. Or him.

Ciara looked up from eating, her gaze shrewd. "Why do you wish to know about me? What interest can you have in me aside from the obvious fancy of one who is different from you? I am merely a passing interest, nothing more. I am not on display for you."

He didn't know what to say. She saw right through him. He did not like losing control of the conversation and tried a

different tactic. Women loved to talk so he merely had to find the right subject. "Tell me about Faolan."

"I already did."

His jaw clenched as he proceeded to eat his dinner. It was very good. Not something he would have in England, but the best food he had since he had arrived in this bloody country. He was determined to be just as quiet as she was. Dinner was finished in silence.

While he spoke no more, he did watch her. She had elegance and grace; it was just not refined to the point of being coldly graceful. Her movements were warm. Her head lifted, and she went to the door and opened it to admit Faolan. She was in tune with her animals.

Kosse pounced at the black wolf, and when Faolan ignored him and went to the fire to lie down, the kitten followed and curled up beside him. Ciara's eyes smiled as she got a pie from the back of the stove. She took a piece and set the rest by him.

Lucien took a piece and ate it slowly as he stared at her while she ate. If she noticed, she gave no indication that she did. Finally when she turned her gaze on him, his breath hitched. She blinked and spoke, "Would you like some whiskey? I believe that I still have some."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Seven

She set a bottle of Irish whiskey in front of him. Lucien looked up at her, his face bunched in confusion. "Where did you get this?"

"It was my father's."

"Was? Where is your father? Where are your parents?"

"Dead." She offered nothing else.

Damn it. He wanted some sort of conversation from her. Some kind of emotion. Happiness, anger, sadness. Anything. Something. Not this indifference. He was used to being the cold one that shut people out. People tried to get him to open up, not the other way. They wanted to be the one to 'tame' the Black Marquess, the one who broke through the wall that surrounded his cold heart.

"How did they die?"

Her eyes deepened with grief as she searched for the right word. "Heartache."

She rose from the table and picked up her cloak. "I will be back later. Can I leave Kosse here with you?"

"Kosse? Who's Kosse?" He was lost; the conversation had been taken from him again.

"The kitten. Kosse."

"Surely. We get along together." Lucien kept his own counsel. He might be a rake and a harsh man, but even he knew when someone needed to get away. *Heartache? What did that mean?* He conceded this round to her.

"Faolan." The word was spoken so softly he wasn't sure that he even heard it. The wolf did. He rose and padded over to her side and followed her out into the increasing darkness.

Lucien sat at the table as he stroked the kitten that seemed as confused by the abrupt exit as he was, as he thought about his woman. His woman. There was something about her that made him want to gather her in his arms and protect her, to shield her from the memories that she ran from so hard. He put the dishes in the tub and heated some water. While he was still weak, he found that his strength was rapidly returning. She had done a wonderful job at healing him.

Despite the fact that Kosse dogged his footsteps, Lucien did the dishes. He may have been a Marquess but he was also a man who had been in the army. He knew how to clean dishes, regardless how he felt about doing so. He put some more water on for tea. Maybe she had some more of the one she gave him when he was sick, for he felt a little achy.

Lucien looked at the door and noticed a large pair of boots, heavy, and fur lined. He put them on, and while they were a tight fit, they would keep his feet warmer than his riding boots. He noticed his cloak, what was left of it anyway, hanging on a peg as well. It was shredded, and he cursed as he realized how close he had been to dying.

A man's heavy coat hung by the door, and he slipped it on. It was again a little snug, but it would work. As he went to open the door, he noticed a cane by the door. It was a deep red color, smooth with figures of running wolves carved on it.

The craftsmanship amazed him. He took it just in case he needed some extra help. A gun would have been nice.

As he opened the door, Kosse burst out in front of him and tumbled off the porch and into the deep snow. Lucien made the slow journey to take care of his needs. When he was done, he spied Kosse still playing in the snow. Suddenly Kosse lifted his head and headed off in the opposite direction. Lucien had no choice but to follow.

He struggled through the snow, wishing that he were healed completely, wishing that there were a clear path. It was snowing, and he was having a hard time following Kosse. In the trees, he realized that he lost him. "Damn cat."

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he turned his gaze slowly, getting a better grip on the cane for that was his only weapon. The disturbance was Faolan. Lucien relaxed only a little. The wolf looked at him, trotted past him and headed off again. Before he was out of sight, he turned his head and stared at him with those amber eyes as if to imply, *Are you coming or not?*

Lucien followed the wolf. Faolan went slowly and never disappeared from Lucien's sight. The man and the wolf came to the clearing of a large meadow. Lucien saw a figure in black kneeling in the snow by a headstone. The graves of Ciara's parents. He knew it just as he knew his own name. Before he got to her, he cleared his throat so she would know he was there. He noticed Kosse romped beside her.

Ciara rose when she heard his throat clear. She said her goodbyes and turned to face him. "I see you found the cane. Good. Come, we should get back. There's a storm coming."

"Do you think that we could rest for a minute? I wore myself out following that cat of yours." He gave her a crooked grin to try and lighten her spirits and somber mood.

As she watched the boyish grin, she smiled in return. "Fine. Not long, though. I wish to be back before the storm hits. It is going to be a big one. We are going to get a lot of snow."

"How do you know?" He asked as he collapsed on the ground and tried unsuccessfully to push Kosse off his chest. Although still a kitten, Kosse was strong.

"I have lived here most of my life. I know the weather. It smells differently when there is going to be a big storm."

He sniffed deeply and only hurt his lungs. "Nope, can't smell anything except cold. Is that why you said that I would be here until spring?"

"Yes. In the winter, the trek to Paradise Cove would take nearly a week. It is too much of a risk, with storms that come up so fast. You could be stranded right by a cabin and die not knowing how close you were to survival. Look at you now. You probably think that you walked a good distance to get here. When the cabin is not very far at all. Just with the snow and cold winds, it takes a lot out of you."

"I feel like I walked a few miles." Kosse pounced on the cane. Lucien teased the kitten by pulling the cane away and dropping it just out of the kitten's reach.

"No doubt you do. That is only because you are still weak from all your blood loss." Ciara rose and held out her hand, "We need to go now. Come, I will help you up."

The devil in Lucien twitched to life. He reached up to take her hand with the full intent to pull her down into the snow with him when she narrowed her eyes and braced herself. "How did you know what I was going to do?" He sounded like a petulant child.

"It was all over your face. You get this devilish glint in your eye." She pulled him effortlessly to his feet.

"Saint's woman, you are strong." Saint's woman. My name is Saint, and she should be my woman.

"Aye, I am. And it's a good thing that is so, or you would be still sitting on the ground." She turned, handed him his cane and proceeded to walk away, leaving him to follow.

Lucien saw she was right, that Kosse had led Lucien on a long way to get to Ciara, as the cabin was not that far away. By the time they got there though, he was exhausted. Ciara looked back over her shoulder at him and flicked her gaze over his body in obvious perusal, making him just about groan aloud with desire.

"Do you wish some assistance?"
"Yes."

She walked back to him and ducked under his arm. "Lean on me. You won't crush me."

He gave her most of his weight, and true to her word, she didn't fall; she did not even stumble. As they got to the door, he began to pull away so she could open the door when she said, "Faolan, door." By God, if the wolf didn't hit the latch with his muzzle, and the door swung open.

Ciara helped him inside to sit on the chair by the fire. She closed the door, and after making sure that Kosse had not

gone back out, she took off her cloak and hung it on the hook.

Lucien liked the feel of intimacy this gave him. He removed his boots and set them by the fire to dry. Faolan lay down by the fire, and Kosse flopped down next to him. Lucien looked up to see Ciara holding out a cup for him.

"Tea." She said to his raised eyebrow. "You looked like you were in some pain, so hopefully this will help."

"Thank you." He drank the warm brew and enjoyed it, much to his surprise. Before this situation, he would not drink tea. Hated it. Every time his stepmother wished him to drink it, he would have a brandy or something.

She pulled up a cut log and set it between them then brought over another chair. She propped her feet, snug in warm moccasins, up on the log and gestured for him to do the same. As she sipped a drink from her cup, she spoke, "Tell me about your family."

The question startled him. Lucien felt all the old resentment come up at the mention of his lands, holdings and such. He started with the stuff that had been drilled into his head to say when asked about his status.

"I am the Marguess of Heartstone and will be the..."

"No," she interrupted with an unexpected wave of her hand. "I don't want to hear title stuff. Tell me about your family. Not what you are worth."

"My family and I don't get along. We are estranged. My parents, father and stepmother, rarely speak to each other and have affairs with other people. My brother—my stepbrother—despises me because I am to become the duke

when our father passes on. He is four years younger than me. Nothing I do is good enough for my stepmother who seems to hate me with every breath she takes." Lucien heard the bitterness in his voice, but for once, it just felt good to get it off his chest. He glanced at her to see if there was pity in her gaze, but there was nothing of the sort. Just assessment.

"My stepmother is a cold, vain woman who wishes me to marry someone just like her. A cold, heartless bitch. But one I suppose she can control. I spend my days doing things that will shock them and am usually found in the middle of a scandal. I have a sister, but she is different. Her name is Devonna. She is eight years my junior, the one family member that I like, but she doesn't acknowledge me. She just stares out a window, not smiling or laughing. Our mother died when she was born. Of course, in our houses there is not much cause for laughter. I'd say that about sums it up. What about your family?" He looked to see if his language shocked her, but she just sat there and listened to him without judgment.

"Well?" He prodded. "Your family?"

A wistful look came across her face. "My father was a farmer and bought my mother as a slave in Ireland. When they fell in love, he freed her and married her. They headed for America, where I was born, to start over. Why they left Ireland, I'll never know. I do know he wished to return some day.

"My father was a tall man, not as tall or big as you but close. He had bright red hair, and I remember him having a booming laugh. He was a strong man, but gentle. So gentle.

My mother had skin the color of mahogany. Her hair was black like ink, but soft as silk. She was tall as well and muscular. Very strong for a woman. I remember her teasing him that she could beat him up if she wanted to. He would just laugh and say it was only because he could never raise his hand against the most beautiful woman he had ever seen." She shifted in her chair.

"He taught me how to hunt, carve and speak his native Gaelic which is where I get my accent at times. His name was Cormac, Cormac Aiden. My mother claimed that she was an African princess and Papa never argued with her. Just said it was probably true. She was wise with medicines and taught me how to use herbs to help heal the sick.

"She was also one of the gentlest people ever. Never said a bad word about anyone. Unless they badmouthed my papa. Her name was Kerry Jahzara. She taught me to speak in her tongue, and so I learned that along with English, too. I am sure every now and then I sound like Mama did when she was vexed with Papa." Her words were not meant to brag; she was merely stating what she knew.

Lucien watched her face grow soft with love for these people she spoke of. "They helped to found Paradise Cove. But one day we moved away." Her tone grew sharp, and then as if she remembered herself, she calmed down. "Papa built this all on his own and made several trips to the town to get the things we needed. No one knows where it is. You are the first person to be here.

"Anyway, we weren't rich, but we loved each other. I learned to be strong and fend for myself. I have many happy

memories with my parents." Ciara got up for another cup of tea. She brought more for Lucien as well. As she sat back down she noticed the look on Lucien's face. His overwhelmingly handsome face looked pained and hurt. "I think that is enough about my family."

Lucien felt a pang of something, wistfulness perhaps, as he listened to her go on about her family. Love and happiness was something he didn't know much about. It was no wonder that most of London referred to him as the black sheep. He was a loner because that was what they made him. His parents never had time for him, never showed him love, and so as an adult he was the same way. Heartless. Cold. Empty. He didn't like that revelation.

After he settled back, Lucien rubbed Kosse with his foot. The wind picked up and hammered the side of the cabin with increasing force. It was cozy and warm in the cabin however, and he was glad to be there. They sat in comfortable silence as she sewed his cloak back together. She brought him some more of her father's clothes and put them on the bed. After a while, she stood and looked at him from under her lashes. With his tanned skin, dark hair and eyes like the rich blue of her lake he was beautiful. "I will bid you goodnight."

She got to the door of her room when he stood and spoke. "Wait." His voice was deep and smooth like the whiskey her father used to drink.

Ciara turned to face him. She was tall, and yet she came only to his shoulder. One lean finger stroked the side of her face and lifted her chin to meet his gaze. His skin was still loose from him being sick, but he had healed nicely. The

shadow of a beard had begun to come in, she noticed, as she looked up into his eyes.

When she had said goodnight, Lucien knew that he couldn't let her go just yet. He rose and bade her wait, and when she turned to him he had to touch her. He needed to feel the silkiness of her skin against his own. Lucien stared into eyes, eyes the color of whiskey, and he could not stop himself from tasting her.

Ciara stood still as his face lowered to hers. She could smell his scent; he was all man and a lot of one. He inflamed her senses. Even though he only touched her with one finger she could no more move away than if she was caught in those steely arms of his.

Their lips met, softly. Gently. A featherlike touch of lips but both felt the jolt all the way to their souls. Although he wished for more, Lucien backed off her mouth but stayed that close to her as he whispered, "Goodnight, my lady."

Ciara backed into her room and sat on the edge of her bed. Faolan jumped up onto the bed, and Kosse tried. When she lifted him up, he curled up again by Faolan. In automatic movements she readied herself for bed.

Lucien sat by the fire and tried to control his lust. He had never been so close to taking a woman. His breathing became ragged. He banked the fire for the night and climbed into his bed, lying there for a long while before he surrendered to dreams ruled by a bronze skinned woman that smelled of honey and something else.

* * * *

Lucien woke late, warm and toasty under his quilts. The cabin was empty, but there was a note on the table for him.

Breakfast in the oven. Kosse's with us.

He ate alone and afterward dressed to go outside. As he opened the cabin door, he found he had a hard time maneuvering. The snow on the porch was up to his knees. He saw a shoveled path leading to the outhouse and one to the woodhouse. With the wind, the porch stayed covered as if she had not been there at all with the shovel.

Lucien swore under his breath about the fact that she had to do this instead of him while he walked to where the shoveled path ended. Her footsteps were visible in the snow that led to where she had been yesterday. He gripped his cane and plowed after her.

The closer he got, the more he could have sworn he heard voices.

"Easy there." A husky voice crooned, making the hairs on Lucien's body stand. It was Ciara's voice. "Easy boy. That's right. You are a handsome one, aren't ya? You know me. Easy now. Let me take care of you. Just a little more, a little harder and then we're done. That's my boy. You are fine now. Easy now, don't fight me. You know me. I won't hurt you."

Lucien's blood ran hot. What the hell was going on out here? He stumbled around the last tree and into the clearing, his body tense and ready to fight. She was talking to a horse! His stallion. The bay. She worked on his side.

"Ciara. Move away from the horse."

"Good morning to you, too, Wolf. How are you feeling?" She stayed right where she was. Ciara calmed the stallion

with a few words when he started to fidget at Lucien's presence, but never once did she look up from her task.

"That horse could injure you. Move away from him." Fear made his voice sharp.

"This horse was injured." She patted him on the neck as she spoke to Lucien then the magnificent stallion headed off. She turned her gaze to Lucien. At the look on his face she spoke, "He will be back, worry not. You will have him by spring. If he makes it through the winter."

She looked at Lucien. Really looked.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eight

Gold eyes met brown eyes and held. Kosse broke the spell when he attacked Lucien's ankle. When Lucien tumbled into the snow, the cat was all over him. Before long, he was actually enjoying himself. Ciara allowed herself a smile. Lucien was so handsome it made her ache to watch him. She watched as he rolled the kitten away, and as it came back for more, Lucien obliged him until they both panted with exhaustion.

A quick glance at the sky told her all she needed to know. "We must get going back now. It is going to get very cold."

Lucien didn't argue, just reached up a hand for her to pull. When she placed her hand in his he tugged, and she fell on top of him. Her face was scant inches away from his. Their breath mingled, and he inhaled her fresh scent along with the scent of horse on her cloak. Her body was fully plastered to his. Her legs were inside his muscular thighs and lean hips.

Ciara's hands were on either side of his neck as she licked her lips and lowered her head, unable to keep her lips from his. She groaned as their lips met. Or Lucien groaned. Maybe they both did. His tongue slipped between her lips and invaded her warm, silky mouth. His hands were on her arms still, but he moved them to her back and pressed her closer. Her curves against his hard body inflamed his passion even more.

He was oblivious, as was she, to the cold. He wasn't, however, oblivious to the cold that was making its way down

his collar. His eyes flew open, and he gazed into Ciara's laughter-filled eyes. The snow she pushed had passed his collar and was headed down his shirt. She pulled back and jumped up, trying to keep in her laughter as she watched him attempt to get the snow out of his shirt. Kosse was not making it any easier for he was jumping on him and probably adding more snow from his massive paws.

"I will get you for that, woman." He growled his promise, but as he looked up at her, he realized that he was not angry in the least. He took her hand when she held it out this time, and they made their way back to the cabin with her trying not to laugh and him trying not to let the snow down his shirt melt.

The temperature had dropped by ten degrees when they finally reached the cabin. Ciara turned to him and said, "You go and add to the fire, and I will bring in some more wood. I think we will need a lot for the night."

One dark eyebrow quirked at her while he commented, "I know better ways to keep warm at night than that."

"Humph. Get going. I want the place to be warm soon." She strode to the woodhouse while he went in to do as she bid. As he entered the cabin, he realized that he was being managed. He was okay with it.

When Ciara came in, her arms were loaded with wood. She made two more trips before she was content. Then she went out and brought some more to the porch so it was stacked high there as well. She tied a rope from the porch to the woodhouse and one to the outhouse. By the time she

finished, the sky had turned black, and snow fell so hard she had to use the rope to get back to the cabin.

As she entered, she shook of her cloak, which was white instead of black. It was warm in the cabin, and she tried unsuccessfully to repress a shiver. She headed for her room to get into warm dry clothes. When she came back, Lucien feasted his eyes on her with an intensity that made her repress a completely different kind of shiver.

"It's getting bad out there, isn't it?"

"Yes. My guess is we will be stuck in this cabin for a few days. I tied ropes from the porch to the woodhouse and one to the outhouse. If you do go out, use them."

"What about food?"

"The larder is stocked. Since we have been eating fresh meat, I haven't touched what is in there."

"You don't have enough for the two of us for all winter, do you?" He realized what sort of situation he put her in and did not like it at all. Running out of food would not be wise in the winter.

"Don't worry. On days that it's not snowing like this, I will get fresh meat. Faolan hunts for himself, unless the weather gets too bad. But he usually gorges himself so if he misses a day it is fine. Since I wasn't expecting Kosse here, I would need to hunt for extra meat anyway."

"I will pay you back for this," he vowed. This woman never ceases to amaze. She lives by herself in the middle of nowhere and then I get dumped on her for the whole winter and she doesn't bat an eye.

"Very well then. I would have your word on something."

His curiosity was piqued. "What?"

"Your word that no harm will come to the bay stallion by your hands."

That was easy enough. "You have it." As he spoke the words, he remembered that his father was not the nicest person around the horses he had. Something made him add, "I am getting the horse for my father, the duke, but as long as he is with me, I will not allow harm to befall him. Anymore."

"Do you race horses in England?"

"I am too big to ride them myself, but I like to wager and watch races. I have wondered what it would be like to have a horse that would beat one that my father had. His thoroughbreds are amazing. For being a mean old man, he does have good horses."

"Why don't you open your own stables? I assume that being a Marquess you would have the money."

Lucien thought quietly before he answered, freely, which was unusual for him especially to a woman. "I have thought about it. But if I ever showed interest in a horse he would offer the person twice what I did just so I wouldn't be able to get him. That is what he did with this one. Rumors of the bay reached him from sailors that had been to Baltimore and so he asked—no ordered—me to get him for his own collection. Since I had shown interest in the horse, he claimed it first. I would have the money. I just would not get any horses. I would have to start from scratch."

"What's wrong with that? I would think that you would jump at such an idea. I mean, to have something that is

yours alone. Not because you were born to it, but because you made it what it was. Something your father could not take from you." She shrugged as she stuck dinner in the oven and then joined him by the fire.

Anyone who knew Lucien well, which would be a grand total of two people, would realize that he had begun to lose his sense of humor at the direction of the conversation. Ciara didn't, or if she did, it didn't stop her.

"Look, I don't know your situation..." she continued.

"No. You, don't." The tone sharp. The meaning clear.

"However," she continued, completely dismissing his veiled threat as inconsequential, "I do know when someone is trying to live up to someone else's expectations. I look at you and see a handsome, a very handsome, man. You are lost. You have no direction. You are still under your father's rule and will be until you do something for yourself and not something with the sole purpose of it being to shock your parents."

Handsome? Very handsome? She thought he was handsome.

"Handsome? You think I am handsome? What else do you think of me?"

"Nothing. Stop changing the subject. You have enough arrogance without me speaking just to bolster your ego. Maybe in England it is good to have that cloud of arrogance, but I am the only one here, so stop trying to impress me. I don't like your attitude. All it shows me is rudeness, and that you feel you are better than someone because you were born into something. You did nothing to earn it except being born.

"You probably don't even mean to flirt. I am guessing it's a second nature to you, and you don't know you're doing it. I have no use for flirting or anything similar. To me, it's petty. I don't find it attractive. I have seen something in you that I like, but when I think you will let that person out, you shove him away, and become cold, hard. Soulless. I much prefer honesty versus sweet sounding words that have less meaning that the air you wasted saying them."

She rose to check on dinner.

Lucien was shocked. Shocked. Astounded. Enraged. Furious. Embarrassed. Is that how people saw him? She was closer than she knew in her observations of him. He was all of those things; for him to flirt was second nature. He didn't think of the women he slept with, for they were merely brief distractions. Servants and nonmembers of the peerage were not worth a second glance.

His nanny and schoolteachers had drilled, no beaten with their whips and rulers, all that into him from the time he was a baby. She was right. He was a veritable jackass. Until now he just hadn't cared what everyone else thought.

The anger deep within him, that had festered, stewed, and grown since he was a boy, boiled over at her words. His eyes narrowed in challenge at her back as she returned the dinner to the oven. "Honesty," he sneered, his eyes black as pitch with uncontrolled rage. "You wish me to be honest? Very well. Let me tell you. I want to take you to your bed and strip off all your clothes. I want to run my tongue all over your body, delving into each and every crevice to find out what you taste

like. I want to fill you with my hardness and spill myself into your depths."

He rose and stalked her. He knew she listened, but she wouldn't turn to face him. She stayed and faced the window after she put the rabbit back in the oven as he continued.

"What I want is you. You. You have bewitched me. You with your bronze skin, golden eyes, lush lips and intoxicating scent—that I have yet to identify—I want to take a lifetime getting to know you, and then when I am done, I would wish to begin again. You with your body that you keep covered by male clothing yet there is nothing masculine about you. You, who doesn't lose your composure. You spurn my advances, and I want to break that. I want to break you, tame you, make you mine."

His strong hands gripped her shoulders as he spun her around to face him, his voice deep and resonating. He forced her to look at him, not physically but with the allure and velvet heat of his voice. "I want to hear you moaning my name. Not Saint, not Wolf, not my lord. Just Lucien. Lucien. I want you to call me Lucien as I cum deep within you. I want to spend days learning your body, your likes and dislikes. I want to show you things that I learned in my travels. I want to brand you as mine. You will belong to me. I will have you."

Her eyes flashed dangerously.

He quirked a brow and added, "I want you to dream of me. I want to know that the very thought of me makes you wet and wanting me. Is that honest enough for you? Or would you like me to go into more explicit detail of what I honestly want?" His hands cupped her face, his thumbs caressed her

lips as his eyes bore deep within her soul, while they exposed to her more than she was ready to see.

Ciara's eyes narrowed in response. Her heart pounded so fast and hard, she was sure that he could hear it. She wasn't one of his London beauties that would swoon. Her father had told her of men like this, and so had her mother. She composed her face into a mask of indifference and shrugged her shoulders.

"Thank you for proving my point. You are rude. You try to sweet talk me, and when that doesn't work you try to shock me. I find it a shame that you English can't just talk to someone. Just because I have breasts doesn't make me an idiot. I am good for more than just spreading my legs for you to find some relief and bearing children as a wife."

"Who said I wanted to marry you." His scorn scathed her, his anger made him foolish with his words.

She continued on with no response to his ridicule. Ciara ignored the bolt of pain that lanced all the way through her heart. "I suggest that you come to terms with the fact that I am not going to simper over you just because you are a beautiful man. We have all winter to spend here, and I am not going to do this every day. If you wish to rant and rave some more, go ahead. I will stand here and take it, but when dinner is ready, you are done. This attitude of yours will cease. If not, you can leave and fend for yourself."

The impact of her words poured over him like ice. He would never have done that in England. He had never been so rude; regardless of her status in the world, she was still a woman and deserved respect. Not even to his stepmother had

he ever behaved so abominably. She just made him so angry. She didn't seem upset by it; she felt sorry for him. That struck him deeper than her hurt ever could. He turned away and went back to the fire. After tossing on some more wood, he sat and played with Kosse.

Ciara tried to control her trembling. His words did affect her no matter what she said. If she would only learn to keep her mouth shut. She headed for her room to sit for a bit, needing some comfort from her mom. On her bed she held the painting of her parents in her arms and prayed for strength.

Lucien saw her leave the room, and as Faolan followed her and Kosse followed Faolan, he found himself alone. Just like in England. He had two friends in the world and this woman. This remarkable woman was offering him a chance to find out who he really was, and all he did was hurt her. He gripped the cane, and when he felt the carvings, he took the time to examine it closer. Its detail staggered him. It was made of cedar and the wolves ran up the side. The top was a wolf silhouette that had been lacquered over to keep it smooth to the touch. A cane like this would be hard to acquire cheaply in England.

Lucien rose and set the table for the two of them. He set a candle in the center and lit it. Since he didn't know how long the food needed to be in the oven, he headed for the doorway of her room. He knocked on the doorframe and heard a growl in response. He stuck his head in and saw her on her bed as she stared off into space. "Ciara?"

Eyes that shimmered with unshed tears looked at him.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Sorry." She slid off her bed and walked to the door.

He didn't move. "That isn't what I came to say. I came to apologize."

She kept her head down as Faolan and Kosse slipped past them to the main part of the cabin.

Hesitantly he reached out a hand and tipped up her chin. She met his gaze straight on. No hesitation, no false tears, no cry for sympathy. Just a direct gaze that hit him smack in the heart. Even in her own room, she wouldn't allow tears to fall. She was so proud. His princess had a will of iron. His.

"I want, no I need, to apologize to you. You were right about what you said." A grin flashed across his face as he tried to lighten the mood, "I have a request to make of you. Will you help me plan a stable?"

"I don't know that much about stables. I have ideas, but I am no expert on it." Not like Mama was.

"Please. Help me."

She searched his eyes for a hidden agenda, and when she found none, she nodded her assent. "I will offer what I can." She knew what it cost him to lower himself and ask for help, especially from a woman.

"Thank you." A huge grin spread across his face. He drew one finger up the side of her face, and his gaze became hesitant like he remembered something. "I set the table and even found a candle." He turned away from her and walked quickly back to the chair by the fire as if he didn't trust himself that close to her.

Ciara shuddered at his touch. She followed him and smiled. Now there was something to do for the winter. She did know horse stables, for her mother had taught her. Her mom spoke of the racing she had done in her country before she was taken by the pillaging slavers that raided her homeland. She pulled dinner out of the oven she set it on the table.

Lucien joined her asked, "Will you say grace for both of us?"

"Of course." She closed her eyes and began. "Our Father which art in heaven..." and she completed the familiar prayer. "Amen." Lucien's deep voice surprised her as he echoed her.

Opening her eyes, she found his intense gaze on her face. He smiled, and she returned it. "Will you serve, Wolf?"

"'Twould be my honor."

He cut off a chunk of the succulent rabbit and placed it on her plate before he served himself. Vegetables swam in thick gravy. She had made some biscuits that released steam when opened and were warm and fluffy when he broke them open. He nearly groaned with pleasure as he ate. She did wonderful things with food. Even though it was plain fare, the spices were outstanding. It was not like home where it was creamed peas and other rich food, like pheasant, served on gilded plates. This food was for people who worked hard during the day and needed something to sustain them. Not intended for the life of dancing until wee hours of the morning and sleeping until dusk.

She brought him a cobbler of some sort for dessert, and he had coffee with it. Full and content, he helped her clean up

and wash the dishes. When they were finished, he took her by the hand and asked, "Do you have some paper I can work with?"

She heard the eagerness in his voice, and wordlessly she got one of her father's empty ledgers and a pencil. Lucien was settled at the table and working on sketches and long term plans in no time. Ciara grabbed another item of his clothing that needed repair and settled in a chair by the fire as she sewed.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Nine

They worked in a companionable silence for over an hour. Lucien looked up and found his gaze straying to the woman by the fire. She sewed something that looked like his breeches. She worked endlessly, and when she was done, she rose silently and let the two animals outside for a bit.

The wind howled, and she grabbed the oversized jacket and put it on. She slipped her feet into the boots he had worn and went out with them. She looked a lot like the bear that attacked him. Lucien put down the pencil and put some water on to heat for tea. He smiled as he looked at his sketches and plans. What he saw on paper was good. He had something that he wanted to do. She was right. It would be his, not his father's. He made her some tea and went to the door. When it opened, a snowy wolf ran in, followed by a small snowdusted kitten. A shivering snow-covered woman followed them inside.

He held out the tea to her as he took her coat. "Here. Drink this."

"Th ... Th ... Thank you. It is cold out there."

"Looks that way. Come sit here. I want to show you what I have so far." He herded her toward the table.

"Bring it to the fire. I'm cold."

Lucien picked up the papers as he followed her to the thick animal pelt that was on the floor in front of the fire. Ciara flopped down on her belly on the fur. Lucien swallowed as her firm butt was exposed to his rakish gaze. He slowly laid

himself next to her, allowing his leg to press against her firm one. He spread out the papers he had been working on.

Ciara held onto her tea she looked over his ideas for stables. Her critical eye picked out some points that she liked and others she didn't. As she perused the drawings she spoke, "Thank you for the tea. Just what I wanted."

Lucien grinned as if he had been named a hero for saving her life. He found that he craved her praise, her words of encouragement. The earlier incident was over. She had not held a grudge against what he had said, and things were once again friendly between them. If that had happened in London, he would have had to spend money to soothe an irate mistress' feathers.

"I like this, this and that one." She moved them closer to him. "All seem good ideas to me and good if one is starting out small. I like the designs of the barns and the training areas. The others are good, but I don't see you in them. They seem cold. I envision your father when I look at these, based on how you spoke of him."

She pushed up and stood. "I have some other things that need my attention. Can I get you anything while I am up? Coffee? Tea?"

When he rose after her and headed to the table he muttered, "Coffee." He was already absorbed back into his plans. She grinned as she made him a cup and set it in the middle of the table so he wouldn't knock it over.

Ciara went to her room and checked on her drying herbs. She put them into containers and pouches before she picked up some more things that needed to be sewn She had almost

finished a quilt for Marie. It was a slow process. All she needed to do was tie it. That could be done tonight. She carried the heavy quilt out to the room and settled down in her chair.

Three hours later Ciara was exhausted. The quilt was tied off, finally. She had still not caught up on the sleep she lost while nursing Lucien back to health. She turned her head to glance at the object of her thoughts. He still sat bent over the table, making slash marks with the pencil, as he worked on his ideas.

He was definitely on the mend. His hair shone with health instead of hanging listlessly and dull. His skin was back to the golden color she knew it would be. He was not tired, and his fracture seemed to have healed well. He was a strong man. He was not lean and wiry. He was big and muscular. His shoulders were broad; arms were well defined as were his chest and stomach. His waist was narrow.

He was a good-looking man, with full lips, which she knew were nice to kiss. His eyes were piercing, and she often found herself drowning in them when he looked at her. Thick lashes, that seemed a sinful waste on a man, framed those eyes. His nose was slightly bent, as if broken in a fight. His hands were large with long fingers that she knew could be gentle or, if provoked, could cause serious damage.

"Like what you see?" The amused voice broke into her perusal.

Her eyes snapped up to meet his, eyes full of male arrogance. He was beautiful, and he knew it. And knew that

she knew it. "Yes." She spoke plainly and honestly while she hoped that she was not blushing.

That yes was nearly his undoing. He had been hard at work when he had felt her gaze on him. When he turned to look at her, she was staring at him with stark desire in her eyes. She hungered after him like it was her last meal. It made him feel good. She was the first woman that ever looked at him like that, the first woman that wasn't a possessive mistress or one angling to become his next. He smiled at her discomfort but spoke not one word to her about it. When she rose and walked to her room, he allowed himself a satisfied smirk. No matter how she tried to hide it, she was attracted to him. She came out again and bundled up one last time.

The animals made a quick trip, and she was back in no time. "Good night, Wolf."

"Goodnight, Princess." As she disappeared with the animals into her room he added, "My beautiful princess. My beautiful Nubian princess."

* * * *

The storm woke Lucien up in the middle of the night. He got up to put some more wood on the fire when he heard it. Whimpers. Thinking maybe Kosse needed to go out, he lit the lantern. Kosse was nowhere to be seen. The whimper came again. He carried the lantern and headed for the room where Ciara slept. As he stopped in the doorway, the lantern light reflected off the eyes of Faolan who watched his every move.

Lucien held the lantern up as he peered into the room. Ciara cried in her sleep while she tossed and turned. He stepped into the room but kept one eye on Faolan who stared at him with an intensity that was unnerving. Still the wolf did not stop his entrance. Lucien set the lantern down on the dresser in the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Ciara. Ciara, wake up." She moaned some more and began to whimper. Lucien snuck one last look at the wolf and saw that he had put his head down on his paws, but those eyes were still watchful, ever vigilant.

Lucien reached out to touch her shoulder. Only his lightning quick reflexes saved him. One second she was dead to the world, lost in the throes of a nightmare, and the next she had knocked him off the bed and was lying on top of him with a knife that moved smoothly into his neck.

"Ciara." He gasped as he felt the tip slide further into the flesh under his chin.

Recognition poured in. She retreated and dropped the knife. "Oh my God! What have I done? I am so sorry. Sorry. So sorry. Are you all right?"

"Do you think you could get off me? Normally I would love to have you on top of me, but right now I think we need to talk." He struggled to keep his voice even, but he shook with untold emotions. Experiencing near death was never a good thing.

She slid off his body and stood. When she offered her hand to him, he ignored it and rose on his own. He knew she felt the slight, but she did not say anything. When he regained his feet, she said, "By the fire."

He went first, Kosse next followed by an ever-watchful Faolan. He had taken a seat by the fire when she came out of her room. She wore a gown of bright colors like the hangings in the cabin. It was form-fitting and worn thin from so many washings. He groaned as he shifted in the chair to hide his arousal as he traded one pain for another.

As she walked toward him, heedless of how she affected him, he noticed that her hair was down. It cascaded down her back and framed her face like lover's hands.

"What was that all about?" His tone was firm; the tone of a man used to giving orders and having them followed to the letter. The tone of a man who one day would become a duke.

Regardless of how Ciara felt about the tone, she knew that he deserved an explanation. She had nearly killed him.

"Sorry. Can I see to the wound?"

"Later. Tell me now. What happened that you would react so strongly like that?"

He was angry; she knew it. "I have always had a knife when I sleep, since we moved here. I am not used to having someone sleep in this cabin so when you touched me ... Well, you were there. You know what I did."

"That is not an answer."

"Why did you come into my room?"

"You were crying in your sleep. I thought to wake you from your nightmare."

"Thank you for that at least." She rose and got a cloth to put on his neck. He sat completely still as she administered to his wound while standing between his rock-hard thighs. "I am sorry. It won't happen again."

He gripped her hand and applied pressure until she raised her eyes to meet his gaze. "It was a nightmare. It may happen again. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Tell me what it was about."

Her eyes, which had been so full of remorse for what she had done, hardened at his words. "No." It wasn't a *please ask again and I will tell you* type of no—it was a flat refusal. "I would ask for your forgiveness for my actions, but I will not speak of it. Not to anyone." The pain was too great and the cost had been too dear.

Lucien slid a glance to the wolf on the floor that watched him with caution. His free hand tipped her face to his as he spoke in hushed tones. "I will forgive you. I do forgive you. I would ask for but a kiss in return."

"You don't forgive someone and then ask them to give you something." Ciara pulled away from him and stepped back from between his muscular legs. Her heart beat so hard she thought it would burst out of her chest.

He stood as well. His eyes became hooded as he stared at her. "I don't ask because I gave you my forgiveness. I ask because I want to taste you." His voice lowered and sent shivers over her body. "I wish a kiss, Ciara. Nothing more. Just a kiss."

Lucien did not take his eyes off her. His body thrummed with need. He had to touch her. Taste the sweetness he knew she contained in her dusky rose lips. He wanted her to touch him of her own accord. He took a step toward her and heard a low growl. Lucien stopped. He didn't look at the wolf, but kept his passion-infused eyes solely on Ciara. "The kiss? I am

asking. Will you kiss me? Your wolf will not let me closer to you. The choice is entirely yours, Ciara."

Ciara stepped toward him. When she was in front of him, he stood straight as so not to touch her. His hands clenched into fists to keep them from delving into her thick tresses that tantalized his senses with every movement that she made. She looked up at him and observed, "You are too tall."

"Kiss me." His soft command pulsed through her body as it rendered her incapable of doing anything but what he decreed. She reached up, put her hand behind his head and tugged. He bent, but as soon as she stopped, he stopped moving. Ciara realized then that the kiss was completely up to her. She alone needed to instigate each moment.

She pulled his head down so she could reach his mouth. When his lips were a breath away from hers she pressed her lips against his. Briefly. It lasted only seconds. It was nothing more than a chaste kiss, but she did it on her own. It was a small victory for Lucien.

Ciara released his head and stepped back. He straightened, but never once did he break eye contact with her. He blinked and then gave a small, secretive smile before he spoke, "Goodnight. Princess."

Lucien sat back on his bed after she had disappeared into her room. His body was wound so tight that even if he went out into the cold he didn't think it would cool his ardor for the embodiment of perfection that slept in the next room.

* * * *

When Lucien woke the next morning, it was still dark. The fire blazed heartily, and the smell of food was in the air, but it was still dark outside. He looked for Kosse or Faolan. When he didn't see either, he rose and dressed quickly. He went to her room and saw Kosse asleep on the floor, but there was no sign of Faolan or Ciara.

Lucien muttered under his breath as he looked to the door. Her cloak was gone. The wind strained against the cabin, and he shuddered to think of her out there. He pulled on the boots and coat to go to take care of his morning ablutions. Kosse followed in his wake. The chill took his breath away as he held onto the rope. He took care of things quickly as he cursed the weather. This was why she said that she wouldn't be going anywhere till spring. The weather turned with the drop of a hat.

On the way back he noticed Faolan was on the porch. The wolf entered in front of him and headed for the fire, Kosse trotting underneath his belly. As Lucien closed the door behind him, he heard a voice say, "Don't close the door."

He watched as Ciara stumbled into the cabin, covered in the snow and rain mix that was falling. He had to push against the door to shut it; the wind was so strong. Ciara had gone to stand by the fire as she stripped from her cloak.

He removed his things and joined her by the fire. "Morning."

"Good morning, Wolf." Ciara looked directly into his gaze and gave him a small nod. "I will have breakfast ready soon. Just give me a few seconds to warm up."

"Whenever. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Was this him? A marquess that offered to help with the making of food? No one back home would believe it.

"You could set the table. That and get some water on for coffee. I am freezing."

Lucien did as she asked. He liked this feeling of comfort, closeness. When he had been in England, he harbored the opinion that servants were nothing. That all they cared about was money. They were beneath his notice. As he set the table, he realized this was what it must feel like to be a part of a real family.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Ten

"Ciara?" Lucien's voice broke into her thoughts as she worked by the fire on some more sewing. "How did the reputation of the bay get to be known? This place is very remote so how did people find out about him?"

"Baltimore."

"Baltimore?"

"Baltimore. The bay used to be a racehorse there. Someone stole him from the farm where he was kept and released him out here. None of those dandies from the city can get close to him, and when he raced, no horse could touch him. A legend in his time."

"How did he get here? Do you know who took him?" Lucien wondered what sort of troubles this would cause him.

"I don't know who took him. I never wanted to know. I suspect the stallion fell in with a wild herd."

"When were you in Baltimore? I thought you said you lived here the whole time." He grew cold at the thought that she had a man back East.

"I did. I never said I lived there. I said that is where his name was made." Ciara mumbled, deliberately obtuse.

"Tell me the whole story. Dark rumors surround that horse. Are they true?"

"The ones about him being a man killer? Aye. Those are true."

"How do you know so much about him?"

"I was there when he was born. He was born out here and taken to Baltimore by a man who was determined to turn him into a racer after he had been seen running free across the plains. Once he started racing, his name became legendary, for no horse could touch him. I am sure you know all that." She turned the object she was sewing and began again.

"Anyway, his jockey was a mean bastard. He loved to saw on the reins and take a whip to him. During what turned out to be his final race, he was winning, but apparently not fast enough to suit the jockey. The jockey took his whip to him for no reason. Everyone agreed that there was no way any of the other horses would catch up to him." Lucien could hear the disgust in her tone.

"What happened next, or rather why, is really anyone's guess. The jockey was thrown." Instead of running off, Colonial Star—that was the stallion's name—charged him, trampled him to death under his hooves." Ciara placed her work on her lap.

"Everyone knows that the track is no place for a killer, so they were going to put him down. That night someone stole him and took him away. I guess that even though he was a killer, they figured that as long as he wasn't there it was all right for him to still be alive."

"He has been here, running free, ever since. I don't know how you got sent in this direction to get him. I don't want to know." Ciara looked at him with assuredness in her gaze that hit him hard. She knew what she talked about personally. "Don't get me wrong. With the right trainer, he could once again be the legend he was. I have known of only one horse

that was faster than..." she broke off as if she had said too much.

Lucien sat as he digested her information. It sounded like the perfect horse for his father. Mean. No problem, for he handled being under a saddle, maybe it was just other horses that bothered him. He had been well behaved on his ride, up until the other horse appeared, and then of course the bear incident. But one can't really hold that against a horse. What horse wouldn't run from a bear?

Suddenly it hit him what she had said, one that was faster. Who was faster? In town they had mentioned the same thing. "Which horse was faster than he was? Tell me? If there is a horse that you say can beat him, I could take him for my stable."

Whiskey eyes glinted with a hard vigilance that he had not seen before. "No. You will not take him. I will not let you."

"Who is it?" He ignored her protest, his tone once again that of the haughty marquess that did not believe any would dare disobey his command.

"His sire. Nyama. The black." Resignation tinged her voice.
"Why are you so sure that he is faster? Maybe you are just saying that to get me to leave the bay."

Instantly a change came over her. She did not raise her voice, but even an idiot could tell that she was beyond angry. Livid. Her words came sharp and had a hint of a brogue in them. "I am sure because I was there. I was riding the black when we beat his son. That is how I know. By all rights, the bay is mine. I agreed to the sale, for the sake of the town.

Unlike you and your damn society, I don't lie. I wouldn't make a deal and then go back on it."

"Besides anyone who knew horses would know that while the son is fast, he is merely a combination of what his parents were. The black—his sire, Nyama—was brought here from the Barbary Coast. He is nothing but speed and endurance. Combine that with the heartiness of the dam, a mustang, and you get the son. Nyama can beat his son any day of the week, carrying me, while his son carries none."

"I know that most of the horses in England are of the Byerley Turk and such lines, but they are more weakened lines than those of the Arabians which they date back to. The Barbs may not be as old as the Arab, but they are still just as pure. Colonial Star is of mixed descent, and he is not as fast, but the mare was not the best either. I may be a female, but I am an intelligent one. Don't ever question my loyalties, honor, or my word again."

Lucien sat still as he stared at her. How come she knew so much about horses? He was not sure how to proceed, and so he mistakenly did so in the arrogant way he would handle someone who tweaked his anger at home, with sarcasm and menace. His fixed her with the most autocratic look he had. "How did you get a horse that was from the Barbary Coast? Whose horse is it?"

Ciara's Irish overpowered her tenuous hold on her temper. She set down her sewing and rose from the chair. "Listen to me, and listen well for I will only say this to you one more time. Nyama is mine. Given to me by my father and my mother. The day you take that horse from me will be the day

that I draw my last breath. Are we clear on that? Nyama is mine. Mine." She trembled, she was so angry. Faolan had risen beside her and leaned against her leg to offer quiet support while Kosse sat by Faolan and copied his seriousness. Lucien would have laughed at the little kitten if the situation hadn't been so precarious.

Unrelenting, he continued to badger her. "Where did they get him? You said yourself that your mom was a slave and your father a poor Irish farmer. How would they be able to afford a bloody horse like that?" His tone was snide. He wanted answers, and this little person, an upstart colonial at that, wasn't going to stand in his way. A least, that was his thought.

"Listen, you condescending bastard." Venom dripped off each word. "You have no right to speak of my parents in that tone of voice. I never said my father was a poor farmer. I said he was a farmer. The fact that my mother was a slave holds no bearing on this whatsoever. I suppose that to most men of your station anyone with dark skin is considered to be inferior."

"I mean even you have said as much. 'Skin the color of rich cream and hair like golden silk' those were your own words to me after you grabbed me—not that I look like that—and kissed me. My parents knew a love that went beyond skin color. The love they had was real. Something I am sure you know nothing about. But that is not what you wished to know, is it? Fine. I will tell you." Daggers flew from her hardened gaze.

"On the way here from Ireland, they stopped off in Africa in Côte d'Ivoire. Don't know why, for I wasn't born. Anyway, that is where they got Nyama. They landed somewhere, maybe Baltimore, I am not sure. By the time I was born, they were out here. We went from Paradise Cove to Baltimore with Colonial Star, but Mama and I came back out here while Papa stayed there."

"One day he showed up here in Paradise Cove. He had a bunch of other people with him, and that is when the town really began. There was an incident in town, and he moved us out of there. We came here and helped him build this cabin. The trek always took a couple days because he didn't want anyone to know where we were.

"Two people other than you know of the cabin's location. They took that secret with them to their graves." At the look on Lucien's face, she continued on in a tone that was sharp enough to cut him, but empty and devoid of any emotional feeling in the words she was saying. "Not enough for you?

"What? Would you like me to tell you how my parents died? How I found them? My mother, cut and bleeding from having been raped and tortured. My father tied to a tree with his lids sewn open forcing him to watch as they raped and tortured my mother—the love of his life, before they finally killed her, releasing her from her pain? What more do you want me to tell you? Would you like to know what they did to my father, what they cut off of his body? More details for you? Or is that enough to satisfy your curiosity?

"Nyama is mine. I agreed to sell his colt. Don't make me regret that decision anymore than I already do." Ciara still

quivered with anger and bitter grief as she left the room to go lie on her bed. Faolan and Kosse left with her. She curled up in a thick quilt, and as sobs racked her body, she softly cried herself to sleep.

Lucien felt like he had been hit upside the head with a tree branch while he rode a horse at top speed. The wind had been knocked out of him, and he tried unsuccessfully to find his bearings. The conversation was not supposed to take that kind of turn. She was just supposed to bend to his will like the others of his acquaintance. He was a marquess; he demanded respect.

She was nothing like the people he knew. She was real. She didn't put on airs or try to be someone she wasn't. She was Ciara. And he was the ass that made her cry. Not only that but he was the one that had made her relive the horror that happened to her parents.

His head dropped into his hands as he sat in the empty room and groaned aloud. He really messed this up. She would never trust him. All thoughts of seducing her vanished. It was not important to make her another one of his many conquests; all that was important was getting her to forgive him.

Not being close to his parents, Lucien couldn't even come close to imagining what she felt when she lost her parents. Now knowing how she found them made his guilt even heavier. This was not something that could be fixed in his usual way, by buying some meaningless bauble for the offended party, because she wasn't like that. Not to mention

he had no way of buying her anything, being stuck up here on the mountain.

His high-handed ways only caused someone more pain than he had ever wanted to deal with. Lucien did not remember saying anything to her about 'skin the color of rich cream' or 'hair like golden wheat' at anytime. He had hurt people before—and not cared—but this was more. He had slandered the memory of her parents for no good reason. Even now he wanted to know what had caused them to leave Paradise Cove and move out to this wilderness. Was it connected to the ones that killed her parents? Lucien wanted to protect her.

She was right. She was different. Her skin was darker, and that only made her all the more beautiful to him. She was alive and not afraid to be in the outdoors, a place Lucien loved to be instead than being in the city. She was so full of life, so unconventional and refreshing. It was like inhaling a breath of fresh air to be around her. Ciara loved life, and it showed in everything she did.

A woman like that didn't come along every day. That must have been what his father saw in his mother. A woman full of passion, life, adventure and love that waited for just the right man to enter into her life. Lucien wanted to be *the right man*. Hell, he wanted to be the only man.

He could see himself with her by his side. Children—their children, playing at his home, Heartstone, giving it a warmth that was not there now. Maybe she could even make his sister open up. If Ciara had managed to make him realize

what an ass he was, there was hope for anyone, especially his sister.

Which brought him back to the original problem. How to acquire her forgiveness. Lucien fell asleep by the fire and woke when it got chilly. He put more wood on the fire and wondered what to do about something to eat.

A glance at the door showed her cloak in place so he was pretty sure she was still indoors. He moved slowly to the door of her room and was met by silent bared teeth as Faolan blocked his entry. Ciara lay prone on the bed wrapped in quilts, silent. Shame cascaded through his body as he turned and went back to his bed. He dallied with his stable plans, but his heart wasn't in it. He made sure the cabin was toasty warm so the heat would make it to her room. Lucien sat and faced the flames as he absently stroked the cane.

A noise behind him made him look around. Ciara had put on her cloak to take the animals outside. She didn't even look at him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eleven

Ciara made some food for him but set the table for only one. When she was done, she headed back to her room and curled back up on her bed. She was exhausted. The day had just been too much for her to handle.

Lucien ate alone. He could almost hear the emotional blocks as they fell around her heart. Each clink made him wince harder as he thought about what he had done to her. He cleaned up after his dinner and went to the porch to bring in some more wood. It was freezing outside. His lungs hurt from the few minutes he was there.

Ciara made an appearance in the evening and started to make him dinner. Still she said nothing.

"You don't have to cook for me, Ciara."

Not even a glance in his direction. Nothing. No indication that she had even heard him.

"Will you at least eat with me?" he implored. He put out an extra plate for her. She served him a dish of the stew and set out some biscuits for him then went back to her room. For the second time that day, he ate by himself and had never felt so alone.

Lucien took Kosse out later that night before he went to bed, but after Ciara had made dinner, there was no sign of her at all. Not even Faolan left the room to go outside. Lucien felt bad and was beginning to get angry so he went to bed early, with Kosse beside him.

Ciara awoke more hungry than tired. She looked out the small window in the cabin and saw that skies were clear so she should be able to get some hunting done. She rose and dressed quickly, for the room was chilly. Faolan at her side, she put on her cloak and set out to run her trap line. She knew she should have run it yesterday, but she just couldn't. Kosse followed them out. She set out across the dark yard, grateful to be outside again.

Kosse and Faolan ran free as she checked her traps. Most were empty; there were a few hares that would work for Kosse's food. She strapped them onto her waist.

She went to her parents' grave and cleared away the snow from the marker she had carved for them. Ciara wept silently for them. After a while, she rose and headed back to set out grain for the horses. Hopefully they were all right.

Lucien woke to a smoldered fire. He quickly built it back up, and soon the cabin was cozy again. He looked for his bed partner, but Kosse was nowhere to be found. He looked in Ciara's bedroom, and it was empty. She too was gone.

He bundled up, and went outside. While snow no longer fell, the temperature still was cold. Frigidly so. The rising sun glared off the snow, which made it overly bright. He noticed footsteps leading off into the woods. Lucien stepped in the direction she had gone, but he stopped as he saw the shovel.

Physical activity. That was what he needed. What better way to rid oneself of tension? He started on the porch, cleared the whole thing. He moved next to the path to the outhouse, and when that was done, he struck out toward the

woodshed. Every muscle screamed in protest each step of the way. It was hard work and exactly what he needed to build himself back up to the man he had been before the bear attack.

That was the scene Ciara came back upon. Lucien was working like a man possessed. He had shoveled a path that followed the rope to the woodshed. There was one to the outhouse and even the porch was cleared. Seeing flying snow, Kosse decided to attack it and took Lucien down with a grunt.

As soon as he heard the rumbled purr he knew who it was. Kosse. That bloody cat loved to chase things. Of course flying snow would be so much fun to grab. Lucien rose slowly as he shook snow out of his coat. He turned, not knowing what to expect from Ciara and was surprised that he didn't see her. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the motion of a door that swung shut to an old shed that didn't look like it would protect much.

He headed over there even though he sank deep in the snow as he went. Before he got to the door, Faolan appeared around the corner and stared at him with those uncanny eyes that looked so much like his mistress' eyes. When the wolf did nothing but pounce toward Kosse, to send him off through the snow to escape the wolf, Lucien continued on.

He swung open the door to the shed. Ciara leaned over a table that was lit by a single lantern. She didn't acknowledge him at all. She tossed something over her shoulder into a bucket that was on the floor beside her. It was red and dripping.

It was bloody chunks of meat she tossed into that bucket. His stomach rolled and heaved. But he stayed. He watched as she scraped the furs cleaned and put them on a rack. When she was finished with the three hares, she washed off the knife with some snow that was in another bucket. She picked up the lantern and both buckets and turned toward him. Her eyes barely flicked over him as she passed him, her body pressed up against his fully, making his breath come faster.

Even covered with animal parts this woman was able to arouse him. She slid past his sweaty body and out the door where she set the buckets down. She blew out the lantern, making sure there was no chance of remaining heat from it and set it back inside the door of the shed.

She took the buckets to where the animals were. When they realized what was in them they followed her to the edge of the copse. She dumped the one with the meat on the ground for Kosse. The one that had the bloody snow she gave to Faolan. She made sure to wash both buckets out well with snow before she took them back to the shed and placed them inside the door. Finished she headed for the cabin.

"Good morning Ciara."

The gaze that settled on him was aloof and detached. "Morning Wolf." She disappeared into the cabin.

Well, that didn't go well. Lucien wanted to follow her. He had to talk to her, touch her. His blood burned for her. With the wolf outside maybe he could at least get within a foot of her.

After a slight hesitation, he followed her inside and shut the door behind him. The smell of pancakes and frying ham

hit him and made his mouth water. He hung up his coat next to hers. Everything about them looked made for each other, he realized.

"Ciara. We ... I need to talk to you. You don't have to say anything, just listen." He didn't say *please*, but the word was there. Implied even if not spoken.

She stopped her work and looked at him. She waited. Silent.

He sat down at the table. Lucien gestured to a chair and asked, "Will you sit?"

Ciara crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the counter where she kept watch on the cooking breakfast.

"Fine. We'll do it your way." His hands threaded through his hair as he searched for the right words. She was retreating more and more from his grasp. He turned a gaze that beseeched to her, only to find that she countered it with a bland stare. This wasn't going to be easy at all. He heard a yelp from one of the animals and knew that his time alone with her was just about over.

Lucien jumped up, acting on an instinct he didn't know he had—protecting and holding onto what he thought was his, for he had never wanted anything like this before—his chair screeched across the floor planks as it was shoved back. He strode over to her, and before she knew what was happening, his callused hands cupped her face and he kissed her. Inhaled her.

Ciara's bones melted. His touch made her weak, shaky, breathless. She leaned into him as she gripped the front of

his shirt and pulled him closer. He wedged one muscled thigh between her legs and pressed her back into the edge of the counter. Cooking food was forgotten.

He tugged on her lips with his own. He coaxed her mouth open with his tongue before he plundered its depths. His body tingled. He couldn't get enough of her. Couldn't get close enough to her.

Arms slid around behind her and demanded her body come closer. Large hands cupped her firm bottom as he lifted her onto his leg. His arousal dug into her hip.

Ciara slid her arms up and wrapped her hands in his hair. She loved the feel of it. Thick, silken. Their tongues met, dueled, parried and made love to each other.

Both of them panted and desired more when the door swung open, and they were shocked back to the present. Current time, current problems. Lucien dragged his mouth—a huge effort—off of hers. He couldn't relinquish his hold as he turned his head and looked at Faolan and Kosse as they tumbled wet and snow-covered into the cabin.

With elegance she didn't know she had, she slid off his leg and tried desperately to ignore the continual thrum between her thighs as she shut the door against the winter. She turned back to him to find his hungry gaze on her with one thing in it. A promise. A declaration.

A promise to finish what was started. His eyes, although narrowed, were darkened by longing. His body shook with need. His breaths were convoluted as he tried to control the fire that had consumed him in its entirety. Lucien clenched his

hands into fists as he took deep breaths but could not look away from her.

She was magnificent. Her skin flushed, her eyes smoldered with barely restrained passion that would only take a spark to set off and releasing what he knew would be nothing short of volcanic in reaction. He had aroused the sensuous woman that lay untapped beneath the surface.

That knowledge was an aphrodisiac in itself. He wanted her. The other women were faceless, not even a memory. He left them, and they faded from his recollection. Women experienced in the art of seduction could take lessons from her. Ever since the kiss in the snow, and yet possibly before then, she had been the only one present in his mind.

The women with the creamy complexions, the heart shaped faces, all that was the epitome of grace according to the *monde* could not even hold a candle to the eroticism this woman—this colonial—brought to his mind.

Ciara stood by the door as she watched Lucien. By all that was holy, that man could kiss! Her body desired, craved, yearned for more of his touch. She sucked on her bottom lip to savor his taste. Even from where she was she could see his sharp intake of breath at her action. She approached him slowly. Eyes locked on one another, invisible sparks of desire jumped between them. She passed by his hardened body to the counter. Lucien didn't make a move to touch her; nevertheless, he moved with her as he kept eye contact. It was as if they both knew what would happen if they touched again.

A very shaky Ciara turned to finish breakfast. Meantime a tremulous Lucien headed for the fire, not that he needed to be heated up, if anything he needed to cool the fire in his blood. He added some more wood just to have something to do. Then he sat in a chair, the farthest one from her.

Never had it been so hard for him to stop himself from plunging deep within someone. Even from across the room she affected his breaths, for they still came fast and hard. It was like he had just gone fifteen rounds in the boxing ring he used in England.

Breakfast was a tense affair. Neither of them spoke, and they kept their gazes lowered. It was awkward. Finally Ciara looked up at him and spoke.

"What did you have to say to me?"

"What?" Lucien mentally smacked himself. He'd totally forgotten. "I wanted to apologize for my disrespectfulness yesterday. You were right. I have no right to speak of your parents in any way. Very poorly done of me. I also agree that I have no right to question you on where you got your animals. As a marquess, I know that I get aggressive even when it is not in the best taste. I always have.

"I can only hope that you will give me another chance to become your friend. I am not used to having a woman as a friend, but I do truly value your opinion and hope that what has transpired between us will not overtly affect our relationship."

Ciara stared intently at the man across from her at the table. She was drawn to him like a bee to a flower. She schooled her face into a bland expression. "The winter will be

too long if we can't get along. We both were out of line, and I also apologize. I could have handled it better, but I lost my temper."

"So. What do we do now?" He voiced the question for which neither of them had an answer.

"Since we will likely have only a few more hours of nice weather, I am going outside. I can show you around if you wish."

Nice weather? She considered this nice weather? "I would like that." Bloody hell, he sounded like a stranger, not like the man that just had his tongue down her throat and wanted more. Much, much more.

They cleared the dishes, and as they got ready to go out, she looked at him. "I am going to wash some clothes today as well."

"Good. I think I have worn out my welcome in these." His words fell on deaf ears as she pictured him naked. "Ciara? Is everything all right?"

Ciara blinked, and she smiled a small, secretive smile.
"Fine. Are you ready?" She reached for her cloak, as did he.
He held the door, and they all paraded outside. Faolan,
Kosse, Ciara while Lucien brought up the rear. They had
made sure that the fire was fed so it would be warm when
they returned.

Lucien fell under the hypnotic spell her hips and backside, as they swayed back and forth in her buckskins covered by the cloak, which did nothing to hide the motion. Teeth gritted, he strode up beside her.

Ciara led him to a ridge that overlooked a lake in the basin. "I used to hide from my parents around here. They always pretended that they couldn't find me. Even if I was sitting in plain sight, which was often the case. I was never really good at hiding. I learned how to swim in that lake. I built a raft, and when I was in the middle of the lake, it sank. Well, it felt like the middle, I seriously doubt I made it very far.

"My papa and mama laughed so hard, causing me to cry even harder. Papa just smiled saying, 'A raft is more than two pieces of wood.' I hadn't even tied them together. Just thought it should work. That was the first and last of my deep-sea adventures. That was, however, when Papa decided to teach me about woodworking, carving and such.

"The lake in the spring turns a beautiful rich blue. Mama was forever saying how she wished she could get that color to come out in her dyes. It was never how she wanted it, too dark or too bright. Never that exact shade she wanted." The same shade as your eyes, Lucien St. Martin.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twelve

They walked on farther. When they entered a clearing, he stopped when he saw a herd of horses, Nyama's herd. The bay was there as well. They had banded together for the winter. All the horses were in their winter coats, but it couldn't take away from their beauty.

Ciara walked out to the edge of the clearing and let loose a low whistle. The black, Nyama, tossed his head and came to her. She spoke to him in a language that Lucien couldn't understand but knew that the horse did.

As she spoke to the horse, Lucien took the time to look him over. He was interesting, not ugly but not as beautiful as he had been from afar. He was smaller than the thoroughbreds and had a distinctive face. The head was elongated and the hindquarters were sloped. The tail set was low. He could see raw power in that horse though. Ciara was right; the horse moved with a grace that one wouldn't expect in a casual viewing.

With a smile that would rival the heavens, she asked, "Would you like to go for a ride?" When Lucien looked at her with a blank stare, she tried again as she swung up on the horse.

"Would you like to take a quick ride? We can ride back to the cabin." Her voice urged him to accept her proposition.

The thought of riding behind her was too good of an opportunity to pass up. Titled or no, rich or no, he was a man who had never ridden bareback. A frown crossed his face,

how would this work? Pride deemed that he do it, but he didn't want her to know that he had not done so before?

"Sure." Arrogant male won out over logical person. "I will ride behind you."

"No. Do you think you can handle the bay?"

"A stallion? With nothing on him? Are you sure that would be wise?" He didn't care that the question was way less than a manly response.

Ciara quirked a brow in perfect imitation of him as she swung down from Nyama. She gave another low whistle, and a mare came up. She was a beautiful brown color with a spotted white rump. Looked like she had snow falling on her hindquarters.

"This is Epona. She is my favorite mare. I got her from some of the Indians. She is something else. This is the animal I want to breed Nyama to. I think that their combined endurance and speed will be amazing. You can ride her."

Lucien looked at Epona. "What does her name mean? Epona?" He moved in and rubbed the mare's nose. She was large, almost larger than the stallion. And solid.

"Epona was a Celtic goddess. Of horses. Besides, I couldn't pronounce her name when I got her, so I changed it. Go on. Get on."

Ciara swung back up on Nyama and waited for Lucien to mount. He did so, his action a bit clumsy, but she made no mention of it. They walked slowly because she realized that even though he did not say so, he was not used to being without a saddle.

As they rode through the quiet forest, Lucien gained a new appreciation for Ciara and her horses. The mare he rode was calm and strong. She walked along nicely and responded to his legs. He stole a glance at Ciara and saw one of her rare, unreserved and wholehearted smiles that rocked him to the core.

They approached another small clearing when he heard Ciara whisper to him. Epona stopped, and Lucien looked at Ciara. "What?" He asked in a whisper as well, not sure if there was going to be trouble.

"Wolf, look." She pointed to the trees. A bunch of bunnies ran around on top of the snow, completely enjoying the sun and relatively mild day. Their antics were funny and cute. They sat and watched the bunnies until an overzealous kitten came into the picture. The sight of Kosse as he slid across the smooth surface of the snow, trying unsuccessfully to catch a bunny, made Ciara peal out in laughter.

Lucien felt his heart stop. It was like the first time he had heard her laugh. It was not a little twitter meant to attract a man's attention, though it did. It was a full laugh, husky and seductive, unknowingly so, but still seductive. With his gaze slanted at her, he saw her head tipped toward the sun, her teeth shining brightly against her dark skin, that sexy throat moving as the laugh erupted. Her eyes sparkled with joy. It was unrehearsed, pure. It was life and all that he had missed. Joy.

Ciara looked over at Lucien. She smiled as she watched him try to contain a smile of his own. He just didn't realize it yet that she was good for him. He needed to find happiness in

his life. She was determined to help him find it. Even if it was only for the short time they were together. Everyone deserved to know what pure euphoria was like. No hidden agenda, no plans to get something back.

It was a way to honor her parents' memory and the reason they started Paradise Cove. To give people a place to start over, no matter where you came from or how you looked. If you were willing to accept others on those same terms you were welcome to stay. Everyone was equal. Everyone deserved a chance to be happy.

Lucien seemed to have missed a vital part of life. He was rich, yes. He was titled, yes. On the outside he appeared to have everything, but the more Ciara watched him, the surer she was that he was far from being complete. His childhood had not been good, and now people didn't want him as a friend; they wanted the benefits that came with knowing a marquess. That was something that Ciara had no use for. What did she need? Nothing. Her life was pretty much near perfect in her eyes.

Since she had grown up with nothing but love, it was hard for her to imagine what it was like for him. A cold, bleak world. Money was important, but nothing, nothing, was more important than love and family. What good was all the money in the world if you had no one to love, no one to share your life with? It seemed that he was short on both.

"Go ahead and smile, Wolf. I won't tell anyone." Her voice teased him.

His eyes snapped to her face as she twinkled with merriment. He couldn't have stopped the smile if he had wanted to. Which he didn't.

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it? You should smile more. You appear very—how do you say it in England? Suave? Debonair? I don't know. I do know that it makes you very, very handsome. Come. We need to go back. The weather will change soon." She nudged Nyama with her knees, and he followed suit with Epona.

"What does Faolan mean?" Lucien asked as Epona drew up alongside Nyama. The horse was amazing; combined with how he felt around Ciara, he didn't think he could remember a time that he was this happy.

"It is a Gaelic word for wolf. Pretty inventive, don't you think?"

"Well, why do you call me Wolf? It's not even part of my name." Even her voice elicited sexual reactions from him.

"Does it bother you?"

"No. But that doesn't explain it." He could listen to her talk all day.

"Why do people call you Saint?"

"Part of my name. Besides only certain ones do that."

"Let me guess, certain ones that you see at the functions you attend. Right?"

"Yes. That's right. My friends call me Luc. My parents call me Saint as well."

"Sort of a formal title for you. Well, I call you Wolf because you remind me of Faolan. When we were first together. He didn't trust me and was overly cautious around me and yet at

the same time he was full of himself. When I would get close to him, he would hackle up and bare his teeth to try and scare me. I knew he was full of bluster. He was more scared than anything, and while he knew I was no threat, he still had to act tough. That is why I call you Wolf."

Lucien figured that made sense and said as much. "What about Kosse? What does that mean, lion?"

"Actually it does. In the language of my mother. What can I say? When it comes to names, I am not very clever."

"I think you are very clever." The words made her stomach go all quivery. "Will you let Kosse go?"

"When he is old enough to fend for himself, the choice will be his. Faolan will teach him to hunt. He just never would have made it through the winter alone without his momma."

"Amazing. And you didn't think of the meat that he would need to survive? How that could affect you?"

"Not everything is about what you have. If I went through life like that I would have left you in the bear's clutches. It's what I do. I help things that are sick. And when they are better, they can go, if not, well then I just have another mouth to feed on occasion.

"Sometimes when Faolan brings down a deer, he brings me to it, and we split it. We share, and we survive. It is the only way up here."

"Amazing." And he meant it. It was nothing like he had ever experienced before.

They rode into the area before the cabin. She swung down gracefully as he slid off Epona, not so gracefully. The mare stood there next to him and nudged him. "She wants some

grain. I will bring it out. Be right back," Ciara said before she disappeared into the woodhouse and came back out with two buckets of grain.

The horses made short work of it, and then with final pats from both humans, they disappeared back into the trees. The clouds rolled in, and snow started to fly. Both Ciara and Lucien loaded up on wood from the woodhouse and headed into the cabin with the four-legged members of the group.

Lucien built up the fire as Ciara began making dinner. They missed lunch since they had been away from the cabin, so both were hungry. By the time she got the dinner on the table the winds howled loudly, and the snow was so thick they couldn't see past the porch.

She changed into dry clothes and found some clean dry ones of her father's for Lucien. Dinner was relaxed and easy going. Afterwards, since they had stayed out later than she had first believed, Ciara announced that she would do laundry in the morning. He changed in her room and when he came out, she was making up his bed pallet.

He groaned as he saw her bending over to pull up the blankets. Her butt was tightly encased in buckskins that hugged her small waist and firm legs. Her hair was braided down her back in a thick black rope. Whoever said that women should not wear trousers was absolutely right, but not for the reason he believed that they stated. Women would drive men crazy if they all wore things like that. It had to be a sin to look like that.

He made some coffee and sat at the table to work on his plans. He couldn't concentrate. His eyes kept straying to the

woman that was bent over across the room. She moved a chair beneath a shelf. He put down his pencil and watched as she stood on the chair and reached up to grab a small trinket off the shelf. She was crazy. Utterly and totally adorable, but crazy.

Ciara felt the chair give, she knew it was rickety but had hoped it would hold. As she fell, she suddenly was wrenched up against a solid wall of muscle. Lucien had caught her. She was pressed tightly to his massive chest as his arms formed two steel bands around her. Her face was in the curve of his neck. God, he smelled so good.

"Damn it, woman! What in the blue blazes were you doing? You could have killed yourself. I would have gotten that for you if you had asked. Don't ever do that again. Promise me. You just took ten years off my life with that stunt." Words came in a rush as Lucien tried to slow his heart that to him sounded like war drums.

He had heard the chair before it actually gave, so he was already on his way when she fell. Now that she was in his arms though, he didn't wish to let her go. Seeing her fall toward the fire was too hard on the slim control he kept on his nerves.

"Why didn't you ask me to get that for you? That chair was not meant for standing on." His voice once again calm belied his true terror.

"I am not used to having someone here with me. I hoped that the chair would hold." Ciara wasn't fighting to be let down. She rather enjoyed being held in his strong arms. His

hold offered her a feel of security that she craved, but knew she couldn't pursue.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he lowered her down the hard planes of his body. Ciara relished the feel of her body against his. When her feet reached the floor, he dropped his arms from around her. His voice, deepened by need, asked, "What was it you were getting from the shelf?"

She blinked like an owl, a stupid one, for she had lost track of the conversation. She stared at him until he tapped her cheek with a finger, and she realized that he had repeated the question. Lucien smiled as he saw her reaction to him. No matter how cool, calm and collected she appeared on the outside, he rattled her. He had to repeat his question twice before she answered him.

"The ... the box. The carved one. Please."

Seconds after he stepped away from her, Lucien felt empty. He took down the carved box and handed it to her. He observed her silently as she sat on his pallet and ran her fingers lovingly over the box. Ciara held the carved box in her hands. She touched it only once a year. It was made out of maple, and on the top her name was carved into the wood. On two of the sides, opposite ones, were a string of Celtic knots that led up to the top. The other two sides had African designs leading up to the top. She ran her fingers lovingly over the knots and pressed the hidden button that was hidden in one. The lid flicked open.

She ignored the gold and gems that were there and instead looked to the underside of the lid, where her father had engraved a saying for her. It read:

Our dearest daughter,
We were blessed the day you came into our lives
This is your legacy. You are our legacy.
No matter what, we are proud of you.
We love you.

Lucien glanced over her shoulder. His jaw almost dropped as he saw the gold and gems inside the box. When he read the saying, he sat down beside her, took the box away from her and pulled her into his arms. When she was settled on his lap, he just held her. He was not sure how to offer support, but what he was doing seemed to be working. His hands rubbed in circular motions on her back as her body shuddered with silent sobs.

They sat like that for a bit. Lucien froze when Faolan settled on the pallet next to them. The wolf did nothing more than nose Ciara and lie next to Lucien's leg. Kosse finally settled on the other side of Lucien.

What a picture they made. An English marquess holding an American colonial flanked by a black wolf on one side and a mountain lion kitten on the other.

A sense of security flowed into Lucien as time passed. When he realized that she no longer sobbed, he leaned her back and looked down at her. She met his gaze, and he saw the unshed tears.

"I am sorry. I only take it down once a year. Will you put it back up there, please?"

"Certainly." He wanted to ask her about the money and gems, but now wasn't the time.

Ciara got off his lap and the pallet. As the lid closed, she whispered, "Goodbye, Papa. Goodbye, Momma. I love you." She caressed the lid as he took the box from her.

After he placed it back on the shelf he watched as she fed the busted chair to the fire. Ciara was not staring off into space aimlessly. Rather she was figuring out how much time they had left. About three months, less if they got a warm spell. If one arrived, she would take him back. Christmas would arrive soon, and she wished to get something made for him.

Her decision made, she rose and went to her room. She searched until she found the piece of wood she wanted. Cedar. Perfect. She gathered her knife and headed back to the fire. Lucien had gone back to his plans for his stable, and she sat and began to carve. He looked at her and saw her working with the knife, but couldn't see what she made.

They worked in silence until she grew tired enough to call it a night. Ciara rose to let Faolan and Kosse outside and then put her things away in her room. She let the creatures back in, and as she shut the door behind them, she looked over at Lucien. He was unaware of anything but his papers. He worked like a man possessed. She stood in her doorway and whispered so not to disturb him, "Goodnight, Wolf."

* * * *

It was late when Lucien took his attention from the papers. He was done. He had come up with a plan for how he wished his stables and training area to look. Excited, he glanced around for Ciara. She wasn't there. He banked the fire.

He saw Kosse come out of her room, and when he looked outside, he realized just how late it was. Damn, he had wanted to share this with her. He still did. His foot tapped the floor, and he acted before he realized that what he was about to do was not wise.

Lucien entered her room, held the lantern up and watched her sleep. She looked peaceful. She lay on her stomach, head under a pillow. One brown hand tangled in Faolan's coat. The wolf looked at him and bared his teeth.

"Just go away. I am not going to hurt her. Can't you see that?" Great, now he was talking to a wolf. If his jaw hadn't been attached, it would have hit the floor when Faolan rose and left the bed to curl up on the floor.

"Ciara. Ciara, wake up." Understandably a little unsure of whether to touch her based on what happened last time, he spoke a little louder. "Ciara. Wake up."

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Her voice, heavy with sleep, came from the pillow.

"No. I finished. I want you to see. I'm done."

Slowly she pushed up from the bed. Ciara rolled over. Lucien gaped at the vision before him. She looked so delectable. Her hair was free and rumpled. She looked like she had just been pleasured and pleasured well.

His groin hardened. Her tongue slipped out to wet her lips. He groaned. Lucien inhaled deeply as her nightgown slid off to bare one shoulder to his lecherous gaze. Her skin shone like bronze silk in the muted light from the lantern.

She patted the bed. "Let's see them. Come sit. It's cold out there, and I am not getting out of bed."

He moved to join her on the bed, once the light was set on the table beside them. He could hardly swallow when she flipped back the blankets for him to get under them with her. He slid in and was immediately surrounded by her scent of honey—how she got that he had no idea—and a faint smell of drying herbs.

She took the papers from him and spread them out in front of them. As if it was nothing to have him in her bed. Their hips were flush, and their legs pressed against each other. It was not a huge bed.

Lucien's vision swam as he pictured making slow love to her in this bed. The sight of her naked body as it was slowly exposed to his gaze. The feel of her skin on his. He blinked a few times to clear his mind as soon as he realized that she had spoken to him.

"What? Can you say that again? I didn't catch it."

"I said, I thought they were good. Very good." She gathered them up into a pile as she spoke. She set them on the table on her side of the bed and snuggled down into the quilts.

"That's it? Nothing more to say about them? What are you doing?"

"It's the middle of the night. I am going back to sleep." She snuggled up against him, and he thought he heard her say, "So warm. This is nice."

Why not? He blew out the lantern, and as he slid down next to her, he half expected her to demand that he leave her bed at once. Nothing. Well, not nothing. She curled up even more and flopped over onto her stomach. She put one leg

over his and placed her hand on his chest, over his heart. It was like they had been sleeping together for years.

The last thing he heard from her was "Faolan." The wolf bounded up on the bed and curled up next to her. In the dark he heard Kosse, as the cat scrambled to get up as well. Before long it was quiet except for her soft breaths into his neck.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

They slept in. Ciara awoke first. Her hand was still on his chest and her leg was, well it was up against something firm and rigid. Waking had never been so nice. She felt the chill in the cabin, and as she moved out of his embrace, he groaned and tightened his grip. Ciara wished she could stay there, but she slid out of his arms and made sure he stayed covered by the quilts before she headed for the fire. She heaped on more wood and let the animals out as she heated up a bunch of water.

She slipped on his coat and boots before going out on the porch to drag in the tub. She set it close to the fire so it would warm. With Faolan and Kosse outside still, she snuck back to her room and found some clean buckskins. She brought them along with a drying cloth and her honey and berry soap out to a chair by the tub.

Finally she sank into the hot water. She groaned in ecstasy as the water worked away her stiffness. She washed her hair, and as she rose slowly out of the tub, she heard, "Oh my God."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Thirteen

Lucien awoke alone. It took him a minute to place where he was. The room was very colorful. This was her bedroom, and it suited her. She was gone, the animals were gone and he was alone. He was hard. He fought for control and slipped from the bed to head for the main part of the cabin. What he saw when he got there was nothing his twenty-six years could have prepared him for. He had seen naked women plenty. Not like this. Not even close. Even the famed statue of Aphrodite rising from the foam had nothing on the vision before him.

She remained motionless in the tub as water ran down her body. The firelight transformed the water on her skin to diamonds and topaz. Her hair lay down the middle of her back and ended at the curve of her waist. Her breasts were full and high. Her stomach flat, muscular. Her legs were toned and firm. He ogled at flawlessness.

"Oh my God." The groan slipped past his lips.

Ciara turned at his voice. The desire she saw in his eyes took her breath away. Before she could say or do anything, he strode across the cabin. Lucien plucked her out of the tub like she weighed no more than a feather. Compared to him, she didn't. He set her down in front of the fire and picked up the drying cloth. His eyes asked an unspoken question. Could he dry her off?

She smiled shyly at him, which gave him the answer he wanted, craved. He worked slowly, savoring every moment.

He started at her neck, and when the skin was dry, he placed kisses in place of the water droplets. He worked his way down each arm and followed the towel with his lips.

"Gorgeous." He placed little kisses along her belly. Her body shuddered as she tried to remain upright under the ministrations of his magical hands and mouth.

He dried off her legs, lifted each foot and kissed the instep on both. When she was dry, she was still shivering. Not from cold. It had come time for him to make good on his promise. He swept her up in his arms and laid her on the pallet.

"You are so beautiful." He moved up her body and inhaled her clean scent. His hands skimmed along her flesh, making her tremble where he touched. "So wild, so untamed." He made those words sound like a compliment, and they were.

He ran his callused hand over her breast, and she swallowed a gasp as he plundered her mouth with his. Her nipple hardened in his palm. Her reaction was like a jolt to his system. She arched her back to press into him more and more.

He lay over her, dressed. Her hands slid under his shirt. "Off," she murmured. "Take it off. I want to feel you." He didn't know he could get any harder. Lucien reared up and ripped off the shirt, not caring where it landed. "I always thought you were beautiful," she said, "even when I first brought you here bleeding. These scars only add to it. You are stunning." Her words made him feel like the only man in the world.

He kissed her quiet. She pulled on the waistband of his trousers. Her meaning was clear. He shucked off the rest his

clothes. Within seconds he stood before her completely naked.

Lust. Raw hunger filled her gaze, as she looked him over. He was magnificent. It was like looking at a dark haired Adonis. He could have modeled for a Greek statue. He took her breath away. "I want you." Those three words hit him, and he almost jumped on her right there.

"Slowly. We need to go slow." Lucien prayed he had the control to go slow.

"No." She looked up at him. "Now. I have dreamed about this since you arrived."

"My God, woman," he groaned as he fell on top of her. His hands were everywhere. They touched. They caressed. He slipped one hand between her legs and dipped his finger, one long finger, between her sable curls.

She was right; she was ready. She was wet. So wet. He almost spilled himself right there. Lucien moved over her and put the tip of his throbbing manhood at the dewy juncture of her thighs. Ciara spread her legs wider to accommodate him, and whimpered when he slowly ran the head along her slit. She wanted him deep within her. He tortured her. She raised her legs and wrapped them around his hips.

"God, that's right. Wrap them around my waist, princess." His rich voice stroked her soul.

Lucien didn't want to hurt her. Didn't want to appear like a rutting bastard, but he had just about lost control. Her musky scent filled his nostrils, making him want to plunge deep within her and claim her as his own.

In the end, Ciara made the decision for him. Her legs, strengthened by years of traversing throughout the mountains, yanked him toward her. He slammed inside her to the hilt. Both of them groaned at the sensation. In the back of his mind, Lucien realized he broke through no barrier. It didn't matter. She was tight, so tight. She fit him like a velvet glove. She caressed him.

Ciara moaned as his hard length filled her. When she had seen him in front of her naked, she wondered if he would fit inside her. He was huge. Now that he was inside her, she knew why he was so large. So he could fill her to capacity and make her feel like she did.

Lucien lost control. Primal feelings, the likes of which he had never felt before, dominated his slim hold on his restraint. With a low growl that would have done Faolan proud, he pounded into her like a man obsessed. She met each of his thrusts with undulations of her hips. Drawing him in deeper, further, harder and faster into her soul. Her body began to tighten so he slipped his hand between them and rubbed her glistening crux. Her back arched as she let loose a cry of uncontrolled, unbridled and unrehearsed feeling while her lithe body shook with the aftershocks of her ardent release.

At the same time, her dampness gripped him, milked him, and he couldn't hold back any more than he could stop the rise and fall of the tide. The tendons on his neck stood out as he drew back and plunged into her deeper than he had been. He was one with her as his head fell back. He roared his fulfillment to the cabin and the mountains that surrounded

them as he spent himself deep within her. He couldn't move; he didn't want to move. Lucien dropped his face into the softness of her neck and fought to slow his erratic breathing. He was exhausted. They lay there, both gasping for breath.

Lucien was mortified. He had taken countless women and never before had he lost control like that. Before, he always maintained a distance from the women. It was only a matter of physical release and that enabled him to withdraw before he spilled his seed inside them. He had no wish to father any bastards.

He couldn't have pulled out of Ciara if an army had swarmed the cabin. He lost all rational thought. His only necessity was to ravage the woman beneath him and fill her to capacity with his essence. For a man that had just acted like a primitive heathen he wanted to make it up to her.

In his defense, he didn't hear any complaints from her. "Are you all right?" His words warmed her neck.

"Aye. Never better." When he would have moved off, she gripped him and said, "No. Stay. I like the feel of your weight."

"I'm too heavy. I want to hold you." He slid out of her, moved behind her and pulled her into his chest, so they nested together like spoons.

* * * *

Ciara awoke later as waves of pleasure throbbed through her. Lucien lay between her spread legs as he licked her womanhood. Her legs were draped over his broad shoulders,

and he held her nether lips open with his fingers and teased her with his tongue.

Her fingers dug into his scalp as she ground into him. It was scandalous yet she couldn't help it. He drove her wild. As his tongue laved attention on her swollen bud of desire, his fingers teased the entrance to her femininity as they slid easily within her, for she was slick with her own juices. He paid her worship in ways she had never dreamed about.

First only one finger was inside. Soon another joined the first. He anchored her writhing body in place with a muscled forearm as he slipped yet another finger deep within her. Her moans were coming louder and more constant as he moved his fingers in tandem with his tongue. Lucien brought her to the verge of pleasure. He retreated just before she could find that elusive release. He teased her again and again as she writhed above him. She begged, pleaded with her moans, because she couldn't form any coherent words, for him to allow her to reach the pinnacle she sought.

Suddenly she arched and screamed as she was allowed to find her release. Lucien stayed with his arm across her hips as her dewiness bathed him. He continued to pay homage to her as she orgasmed harder and harder. While she still quavered with tremors, he rose above her and plunged deep within her in one smooth stroke. He filled her to entirety.

Lucien lowered his mouth and kissed her. Ciara tasted both of them on his mouth as he moved within her. She pressed her body closer to his, determined to take whatever it was he was willing to give her. His body responded to hers like

brandy and cigars, so his own release arrived moments later as he moaned her name.

They lay still for a moment before Ciara pushed on his shoulder. He picked up his head to glance down at her, and questioned with his eyes as he kissed her again, not able to get enough of her taste. "I have to get up. The fire is going low, and the animals are still outside."

"You don't have to go anywhere. The animals are fine, and personally I think the fire is nowhere near going out." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"Arrogant male."

"Uh huh. I have every right to be. I earned the right."

"Aye. That you do, and you did. But I really have to get up." She rolled him off her and rose gracefully from the bed.

She felt his gaze on her as she walked nude to the chair that held her clothes. She hesitated before she headed for her bedroom. She needed to take another bath now before dressing in clean clothes.

She put on her dirty clothes and lugged the tub outside. When she brought it back in and started to warm more water, Lucien got up. "What are you doing?"

"I am going to clean myself and then do some laundry. Why? Did you wish to bathe?"

"Only if you join me."

"Thanks, but I am fine for now." Her enchanting flush betrayed her true feelings on the matter.

Lucien cleaned himself after she finished. He put on clean clothes and gathered more snow to melt for water to do laundry. He helped her with the wash, and when all the

washing was done, spread out on chairs by the fire and hung on a rope he strung up, he dragged the tub outside for her.

When he emptied it, she started to shovel the porch. Lucien came up behind her and made a grab for her. She screeched and ran down the steps while he gave chase. He tackled her to the ground and covered her with kisses.

Faolan and Kosse jumped in to join the fun, and before long all four of them were involved in a huge snow fight. The animals would hit them in the knees and run before they could get up. Lucien and Ciara threw snowballs at each other and at the animals.

Tired, cold and wet, they all stomped back into the cabin to get something to eat and dry off. While Ciara prepared the food, Lucien made a nuisance of himself as he nibbled on her neck, constantly, touching her, distracting her.

It was as if that morning had changed their whole friendship, and the next month might be filled with joy and cheer. In the times before, he would sleep with someone but seeing the woman again would be awkward. Not so with Ciara. If anything, he felt more comfortable with her than before.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Fourteen

As he watched the woman across the table from him eat her stew some nights later, he realized that he wanted her to be his for all time. "Come back to England with me."

Ciara's head shot up. Something flickered in her eyes, but was gone before he could identify what it was. She offered him a grin, and he knew it was forced. "No. I don't belong in your world."

"I want you with me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I just told you. I don't belong in your world."

"You would fit. You fit with me. I could offer you things you never dreamed of. Bedrooms bigger than your whole cabin. Silk sheets. Servants at your beck and call. Rooms full of gowns made by the best dressmaker in town. I would dress you in the finest clothes. You would be the envy of all London. I would make love to you on beds covered in rose petals. What do you think?"

As her eyes flared, he realized that he erred. Grievously.

She responded with a sad chuckle, "That was a very sweet thing to say, no matter that it is not true." At his questioning stare she continued. "Don't you see, Wolf, I don't need those kinds of things to be happy. Silk sheets, dresses, what you offer comes at too high a price for me."

"What do you mean?" She was the only woman he knew that would turn down the chance to be a marchioness, or to be the mistress of a marquess.

"If I were to take those things, I would have to give up the thing that means the most to me." At his confused look, she pressed on, "My freedom. I would be bound and confined by your rules and your society's dictates. I love the smell of the country. I would not last in a city. Within these mountains, my heart beats the strongest.

"Besides, I can't be your mistress. I won't be." Ciara held no delusions that he would wish to marry her. All she was, was a passing fancy.

Pain lanced through his heart at the thought of her left behind when he returned to England. But would you be my wife? "What do you call what you are now?"

"I call myself your friend. What I give you is just that. Something from me to you. I want none of the things you bestow on your mistresses. You will leave soon. I want you to find happiness. For once in your life, have someone like you for who you are, not because of what you own. My laying with you is just that. A gift, something that I love sharing with you. I harbor no illusions of what will happen. I am living for the now. I am happy.

"Also, I don't think that Faolan would do well in your country, much less Kosse." She rose and sat on his lap, her arms looped around his neck to bring them nose-to-nose. "There is something inside you, Wolf, which is very special. All I want from you is you. For once, forget all your wealth and privileges and just live your life. That will be enough for me.

Have fun while you are here." She kissed him and then cleared the table, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Lucien studied this woman. She was mind-boggling. She went against everything he had been taught about women. The way she answered him didn't even allow him to be angry with her. As long as he walked the earth, he knew he would never find another like her.

Ciara kept her own counsel as she cleared the table. She had already fallen for this Englishman. It would be so easy to accept his offer and go to England with him. Her body, even now, cried for his touch, his caress. She knew her time frame; she had him until she could take him down the mountain.

Lucien reached down to scratch Kosse and wondered if he would ever get her to change her mind. He realized who the heart of the mountain was. It was Ciara. She thrived here. In an environment that would kill most, she lived, survived and prospered. If she ever left, it would be to follow her heart, not because he asked her to.

"Ciara? Would you consider selling me a horse? I would like a colt out of Nyama and Epona."

"And how am I to get this colt to you? Are you going to come back to Paradise Cove to get him?"

If that's what it took to see you again. "I was thinking that you could send him by ship to my country estate, Heartstone. I would leave you the address and payment in advance so all you would have to do is put him on the ship."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Because I asked, for one reason." His tone was not as confident as he would have liked, and she heard the hesitancy in his voice.

"A colt? There is no telling when that could be. Epona could drop only fillies. Why would you wish to do that?"

"Like you said before. If you give your word, you don't go back on it. I would be content to wait for one. Yes?"

"Deal. You will leave payment with Marie. And when there is a colt, I will send him to Heartstone." The price she quoted him was a fair one, and he agreed.

"Good, now come here, woman. If I am to have fun, I wish to have it with you." He swung her up in his arms, and she felt his arousal as she slid down to the floor.

"Good." Her eyes grew dark with passion and expectation as she tugged his head down for a kiss.

* * * *

Lucien ran the trap line with her; he was getting into shape as he trekked beside her in the mountain snow. She had taught him how to skin the carcasses and stretch the hides so they could be sold.

Lucien learned how to have fun. He smiled more and more as the days passed. He felt better than he ever had before. For not having gaming halls and places to drink, he found that he was even happier. He observed Ciara when she didn't think he could see her. Although she smiled, she rarely graced him with a completely open smile. Her smiles normally could make his heart race. When she gifted him with one that was without reservation, it could bring him to his knees.

If they were in the cabin, she would wear loose fitting clothes that she said were African. They were brightly colored and only enhanced her beauty. Usually she wore trousers and a long shirt that would go to her knees, but she also had some dresses. Winter was too cold for wearing dresses, she claimed.

Their nights were filled with lovemaking. Lucien took her to the stars and beyond each and every night. Ciara made sure that he came along for the ride. Nothing was wrong in their world. They learned each other's bodies like their own. Each night was a new adventure in traversing the heavens.

One day Lucien ran the trap line on his own, well, not entirely alone. Faolan and Kosse accompanied him; Ciara stayed home. When he got back and had cleaned the game, he fed some to Kosse but took most of it for them. He walked into the cabin and stopped dead in his tracks. There was a small pine tree in the corner with decorations on it. There were three presents underneath it. The cabin was rich with smells, and he looked at Ciara who stood by the oven in a dress that molded itself to her body.

"Merry Christmas," was the first thing he heard upon entering the cabin.

Lucien set the meat on the counter. He swept her up in his arms and kissed her like he had been gone for a week instead of a few hours. "Merry Christmas." His deep voice rumbled in her neck. "When did you do all this?"

"Today, while you were gone. Get cleaned up. We will eat soon."

He washed fast then stopped as he realized that he had nothing to give her. He looked at the tree and wondered what the three presents were.

"Presents, or food first?"

"Food. I'm starved."

"Good, There is a lot of it."

She set a big turkey on the table. There was cornbread stuffing, puddings, potatoes and a red relish.

"Wow. That looks wonderful."

"I'm glad you think so. Eat up."

"I had no idea what day it was today. I'm sorry, I don't have a present for you."

"You being here is present enough."

"Woman, are you ever selfish and cruel?"

"At times. Rarely, but at times."

They ate dinner, but before he had pie, he wanted to open his gift. Ciara tugged him to a chair by the fire and, after giving him a brightly wrapped gift, settled at his feet.

"What is it?"

"I'm not telling you. You have to open it to find out."

"What are the other two?"

"Oh, those are for Kosse and Faolan."

He slowly unwrapped the cloth that concealed his gift. It was a carving of a leaping wolf. It had its front feet off the ground as it jumped an invisible item in its way. The detail was very intricate. A phrase was etched in the base of the statue. He turned it and read:

Wolf,

Aim to the heavens for your dreams,

No matter the obstacle, you will triumph.

For the first time in many a year, the sting of tears filled Lucien's eyes. He blinked them back and spoke to the woman who sat by his feet. His voice shook with emotion. "Thank you. I will treasure this always." He tipped her face up for a kiss. It was the gentlest of kisses and even if neither of them knew it, it spoke of love. The kind of love they both had searched for.

Ciara gave him the other presents. "You open them for Faolan and Kosse. I know what they are so it will not be fair that I do it."

Lucien opened Faolan's first. She had made him a collar out of a rich green woven material. There were African designs sewn into it. The whole thing was put on a piece of leather for stiffness.

While Ciara put it on Faolan, he opened Kosse's. It was the same as Faolan's except the color was a deep blue, and it had Celtic knots sewn into the material. He put Kosse's on him.

Rising from the chair, he pulled Ciara to her feet and into his embrace. "I am sorry I don't have anything to give you."

"But you do. You give me yourself. That is enough for me." She angled her head up, gazed into his midnight blue eyes and foundered under the intensity of his stare. Her eyes conveyed the message that her mouth couldn't. *My heart belongs to you.*

Lucien's heart swelled with joy as he saw the love in her eyes. She loved him—; he knew she did. His mouth swooped down on hers, claiming her. Tasted her, loved her.

He carried her to the bedroom. There he removed her clothes, and when she tried to sit up, he pushed her back. "This is my gift to you. Let me worship you."

At his words, her body tingled all over. As she watched him with a heady gaze, her body already was wet and ready for him. He took his clothing off and stretched out beside her. She reached for him.

"No. I want to look. I want to remember how you look right now, forever." His hand stroked down her side as he leaned over her, propped up on one elbow, and stared at her with eyes he knew had the power to intoxicate her. "You are so beautiful. Your skin is so soft, like silk." He dipped his head and flicked his tongue over her collarbone, watched as she shivered.

"You taste like you smell, honey and berries. I love your taste." Another stroke of his tongue along her neck then he moved down. His hand touched her arm; he ran his fingers along it, watching the contrasting colors and textures. "Your arms are so strong, so tender. Everything about you is strong. Yet you remain one of the softest people I know." He ran his tongue along the same path his fingers had just traveled.

She squirmed. "No. Hold still. Or I will stop." Ciara moaned her frustration.

"Look at your breasts. So full. Perfect for suckling." He did just that. When his lips closed about her breast, she arched her back and pressed herself into his mouth. When she tried to reach up and touch him, he shook his head without leaving her breast. She got the message.

"So perfect. But you have two, and I can't ignore the other one." He lavished attention on her other breast until both her nipples were taut and stiff. His breath made her shiver as it hit the spots where he had suckled and left her wet. "Further down we come to your stomach." He delved into her bellybutton with his tongue, eliciting a gasp, but she held firm. "You have a wonderfully flat stomach. Lovely hips." He nipped at her sides, making her whimpers grow in volume.

Lucien slid down and settled between her legs. He ran his hand over her legs. "Your legs are in amazing condition. All this mountain climbing has made them so strong." He ran his tongue down the inside of her leg all the way to her foot. "Your ankles are small, and your feet are delicate." Taking her toe in his mouth, he sucked on it like he had her breasts. The reaction was the same; her body quivered with need.

From his position between her legs, Lucien could smell her body's spicy perfume. He groaned as he saw the inky curls between her legs glistened with moisture. He ran his tongue up the inside of her other leg after loving her other foot and ankle in the same fashion.

He gave her stomach more love bites. As her mewls grew louder, he spread her thighs further apart. "And then there is my favorite part. Your core. You smell like a mixture of spices." His fingers teased her as they slid through the hair and along the slit, but never did he enter her. When he ran one finger along her opening, she tried to move against it. "No, no, no. I told you not to move. I shall have to stop."

"No, don't stop. I won't move again." Her voice was breathless as she gripped the blankets with a hold that should have wrung the colors out of them.

"One more chance, no moving. Understand?"

"Yes." He had to strain to hear her.

"Very well then. Where was I? Oh yes, I was enjoying your smell." He wedged his body between her thighs and draped her legs over his shoulders. Ciara could feel his warm breath at the juncture of her thighs, but he wouldn't touch her. She begged with her whimpers. He spread her lips and dipped one finger inside her. Lucien's finger crept into her wetness. She tightened around him to try to keep him inside as he removed his finger.

"Look at me." The timbre of his voice made her shiver with anticipation. "Look at me." She slowly sat up and braced herself on arms that were none to steady. "Scoot back to the headboard." He stayed where he was between her legs as she clumsily moved back with her arms since her legs were still draped over his shoulders.

When she was against the headboard with a pillow behind her he drove two fingers deep within her, never once taking his eyes off hers. Ciara's body shuddered with pleasure as her eyes fluttered closed. He started to withdraw his fingers. "No. Look at me. Don't close your eyes. Watch me, Princess."

The hypnotic pull of his velvety voice gave her no choice as she dragged her eyes. His riveting gaze almost appeared black with passion that was barely kept under restraint.

"Your reward." He slid his fingers back into her, making her eyes almost—she caught herself in time—roll back in her

head. His thick fingers were covered with the fluids flowing out of her body. Lucien maintained a steady but forceful rhythm. He held her gaze as she came on his fingers.

"You are a thing of beauty when you cum." Her cries had turned to full out moans. She tried to keep quiet, but he flicked his thumb on her pleasure nub. He realized she was trying to stay quiet, and he shook his head. "I wish to hear you. Don't keep quiet. I want to hear what you are feeling."

"Please," she cried.

"Please what? More of this? Tell me. Tell me what you wish, my Nubian princess." His fingers stretched her as she approached the edge of the chasm again.

"Please. More ... I want ... let me ... I am going to.... "her voice was agitated as she tried to concentrate on what she was asking for.

"What do you want? What are you going to do? Cum? Yes, you are. No, don't look away. Keep looking at me. Keep your eyes open. Watch me as I make you cum. That's my girl. My Nubian beauty. Watch as my fingers slide in and out of your wetness. I feel you tightening around me. You're almost there, aren't you?" His inhalations had increased along with hers. Indigo eyes locked with amber as his fingers moved like pistons in and out of her heated core. "Now! I want it now. Cum for me."

At his words, her head dropped back against the headboard, and her thighs clamped around him as she orgasmed in waves. She managed, just barely, to keep eye contact with him. "Good girl." He withdrew his fingers, and as

her eyes widened with wonder he slipped them in his mouth and sucked them clean.

That sight alone was almost enough to make her cum again. He lowered his head and placed his mouth over her. He drank every bit of her essence. When she whimpered again, he rose and settled on his knees, leaving her legs on either side of his waist. His member was jutting out from the nest of black hair. It pulsated, and it drew her gaze. Velvet over steel.

Lucien grabbed her legs and dragged her to him. He moved over her and teased her with the tip of his penis. "What do you want?" His voice was rough with need.

"You." Came her response.

He slid the tip inside her, and she sighed. He stopped, and she complained. "What do you want?" He asked again as he slid in a little deeper.

"You," she cried.

Lucien began to withdraw. One look at her, flushed and swollen, and he just about lost it right there. He couldn't hold out much longer, but he needed to hear it first. "What do you want?"

"You, damn it. I want you." She screamed in frustration.

He sank lower so his mouth was by her ear, teasing her more as he gritted out his question, as he tried valiantly to maintain his hold on his control.

"My name. Say my name. Tell me you want me." His tone pleaded. For what, he wasn't sure. She was.

"I want you. Please. I need you to fill me. I need to feel you deep inside of me. I need you. I want you. I want you, Lucien."

That was all it took. He slammed home in one stroke and exploded with an intensity that rocked him to the very center of his soul. His body shook with aftermath as he buried his face in her neck, inhaling her scent, imprinting this moment in his brain.

Ciara wrapped her arms around him and placed kisses along his shoulder. Her voice, deepened by her arousal, flowed across him like a balm. "That was by far the best Christmas present I have ever received."

Lucien began to laugh. A laugh of joy or one of relief he wasn't sure. He rolled off her and rose from the bed. She followed, and they got dressed. They took the animals outside then came in and cleaned up from dinner. They stayed up for a bit before they went to bed.

As they lay in bed Lucien asked, "How did you do the statue? When did you?"

"It was the one on the shelf up there. I really just had to add the inscription. I hope you like it."

"I love it. Thank you."

"Mmm. You're welcome." She was asleep in moments, while Lucien lay awake far longer, thinking about his temporary life with Ciara in the wilds of America.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Fifteen

A week later, when Ciara awoke in the morning, she was alone. She rose and dressed quickly only to find that the cabin empty. She heard Lucien before she saw him. She looked through the curtains and laughed as he was tripped by Faolan and pounced on by Kosse.

She swung on her cloak and went out to join them. A grin split his face when he saw her coming through the door. "Good morning, Princess."

"Morning, Wolf. What are you doing?" The familiar thrum ran through her body as he called her 'princess.'

"We are shoveling." His imperious tone didn't do much to impress when Kosse sat on his chest and hampered his attempts to rise.

"I see, and what are you shoveling exactly?"

"Watch it, woman. You are outnumbered. There are three of us men versus one of you."

Ciara quirked a brow. "Those two will do anything I say."

He huffed indignantly. "I know, I know you have them bewitched." He shoved Kosse off and rose. Lucien stopped in front of her, skin flush with cold, he added, "You have me bewitched as well." He kissed her lightly on the lips and then with a jaunty whistle, reached out for the shovel and got back to work.

Ciara had a smile on her face until a breeze turned her attention from the dark haired man shoveling snow. Faolan came to stand beside her. She spoke in a foreign language to

the wolf, one she knew Lucien wouldn't understand, in case he overheard. "I know. I feel it too. A warm spell comes. We will take him down today and be back within the week."

She turned toward the hut where she did her tanning. She checked her rations of grain. There was enough for her to make the trip down and back. Her heart heavy in her chest, she turned to observe Lucien as he entered the building behind her.

"What's wrong? You seem sad." He reached out to brush some grain off her cheek.

"Nothing is wrong. There is a warm spell coming. I will be able to take you back to town. You will be there in a few days. We leave today." She strode past him into the sunlight.

Lucien's jaw dropped. Leave? Now? He spun around and went after her. He grabbed her arm and turned her toward him. "What are you talking about? I thought you said all winter."

"Maybe I did. I was wrong. This good weather will hold. I can get you to town in three days. It is unusual for January, but it does happen. I will pack some things. You should gather your things. Not that you have much." She entered the cabin, which left him to follow.

"I'm confused. Why are we leaving today?"

"You need to go. You were supposed to be headed for England now. This warm weather is a surprise to me as well, but we will put it to good use."

"Now? You want to leave now? Will you stay in one place and talk to me?"

Ciara had gone to the bedroom. No, she didn't want him to leave. He had to leave. As she faced him, her face schooled once again in the emotionless mask, she questioned, "What do you want to know? My guess is that since there is a warm spell the winter will come back in full force and stay longer. This is the perfect time for me to get you down the mountain." She stripped off her clothes and reached for her thick buckskins.

Lucien grabbed her before she could reach the clothes.

"Wolf, please. Your hands are cold, and we have to go."

"If you are sending me away, I want you once more. Please." It was the only way he could think to maybe change her mind. Leave her? How could he? He loved her.

Her answer came as she ripped away his clothes. They fell back on the bed in a tangle of blankets. They coupled with ferocity and yet tenderness. She nearly wept as he orgasmed deep within her. He groaned as he found his release, blinking back tears of his own.

They separated and acted like strangers as they dressed. Ciara took a bag and put his papers in there along with the statue. She flicked a glance at him as she gamely tried for a smile, "The first colt out of Nyama and Epona will be yours. You have my word."

"Good. *Um,* you have my address in England so you know where to send the horse."

"Aye. I put the statue and your stable plans in the bag."

She packed food and put out the fire in the fireplace. Ciara faced him by the door, "Is there anything else you think you will need?"

Nothing I can take with me. "No. I think that will do. I still have my things in Paradise Cove. What about payment for the horse?"

"Leave it with Marie, and I will get it from her later. I would also appreciate it if you would give her this quilt for me."

"Yes, certainly. I can do that."

She nodded. "Right, well we should go. It will be a long trip. She took the rolled up furs and gave him the pouch with his things in it.

They stepped out on the porch, and Ciara let loose a whistle that pierced throughout the snow-covered mountain. He stared as Epona followed by his stallion came trotting into the copse. How she managed to call his bay stallion, he would never know. She tossed a fur on the back of her mare and did the same for his horse. They mounted in silence and headed off, followed by Kosse and Faolan.

Ciara wound in amongst the trees, and within moments Lucien was lost. She would be a formidable adversary with her skills in the woods. He followed her in silence. They made camp about an hour before dark. Thankfully she made up a single bed of furs instead of two. Dinner was eaten in silence under the clear, star-filled sky, and as they settled in to sleep, he heard her give Faolan a command. They made love gently that night and fell asleep to peaceful dreams beneath the winter sky.

Lucien was having a most wonderful dream. He was making love to Ciara, and she was so warm, so wet. Her supple body was tight around his swollen member, making

him tense for relief. He woke as he felt himself just about to release. He couldn't stop the groan and buck of his hips as he spilled his seed. Wide awake with mortification of what he did, it had felt so real, he opened his eyes in wonder as Ciara removed her mouth from his still hard member and moved over him. She sank down and took him deep within her.

She rode him like a horse, her head thrown back in ecstasy. Lucien reached up and grabbed her hips, and her eyes opened on him. The sultriness in her gaze made his breath hitch. She shook her head as she wordlessly removed his hands. She rode him at her own pace. She was nude despite the cold, and her nipples were puckered in the chill. He reached for them.

She beat him to them. She grabbed her own breasts and kneaded them, pulled on the tips until she panted out loud. He had no self-control. Lucien reached up, grasped her hips and rocked upward as he drove into her. The forest was silent except for his groans and her little panting noises.

He slid his hand between them and rubbed just where he knew she needed it. She erupted with a jerk, and as she tensed, she pulled him right over the edge with her. She fell forward and kissed him, allowing him to taste some of his seed on her lips.

"Good morning. We should be going." With that, Ciara pulled the furs back up over them and settled back down into the warmth.

"What a way to wake up. Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why did you allow me to find release in your mouth?"

"Didn't you like it? I enjoyed it when you did it to me. I thought maybe you would like it as well."

"Hell yes, I liked it." He kissed her senseless before he rose reluctantly and began to dress.

They ate on horseback. Ciara made more twists and turns than he thought was possible. That night passed the same as the previous one.

When they started off in the morning, Ciara was nervous. She wove in and out of trees and backtracked. When she stopped, she was at the end of a glade, but they were still hidden. It was late afternoon. She dismounted, and Lucien did the same as he wondered what the problem was.

"This is where I leave you. Paradise Cove is across this clearing. You should be there by dark." Her eyes welled up with tears.

Lucien took deep breaths to try and control how he felt at this moment. He reached for her, and she went willingly into his arms. "Come with me." He tried once more.

"Safe journey, Wolf. Good luck with your stable. I hope you find what you are looking for."

I have what I am looking for right here. He fought to blink away tears and tried for a smile. "Thank you. For everything."

"My pleasure." She glanced at the sky. "You should get going. Take care of the bay. And yourself."

"You too."

"Aye, I will." She made a motion, and Faolan came up.
"Say goodbye, Faolan." The wolf took Lucien's hand in his
mouth. Jaws that could kill with ease caressed his hand like

silk. He was released after a brief pressure on his hand. It was the wolf's way of saying goodbye.

Lucien patted the wolf on the head. "Take care of her, boy. Take care of her." He turned and pulled Kosse's ears affectionately. He rose to look back at Ciara. She stood tall, fortitude making her so.

He strode over to her and swept her up in his arms. He nearly crushed her. Lucien slowly lowered her as he kissed her forehead and then pressed his mouth to hers. He devoured her; she devoured him. Neither of them wanted to let go. Finally each stepped back.

Ciara licked her lips and touched her fingers to his bearded jaw. "Goodbye, Wolf."

He stepped close again and spoke so softly she almost missed it. "Why don't you call me Lucien? You did once. No one but you ever has."

She raised her eyes to his as she memorized the face. "Go. It grows late. Stay to the middle of the field." Her jaw trembled in an effort not to cry. She reached out and pulled him in for one last kiss.

"Goodbye, Princess." His eyes kissed her just as much as his lips did. Then he spun about, swung up on Colonial Star and rode off without looking back. Never before had a farewell been so painful for him. Never had he felt like his heart had been left behind.

"Goodbye, Lucien," came the whispered response that she knew would not be heard.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Sixteen

England

"What the hell do you mean you are starting your own racing stable? What happened to you over in those bloody colonies? I had hoped that you would come back a man, but I guess I was wrong." Spittle flew from the mouth of the man in the chair. Lucien stood rigidly before his father as the man yelled at him.

"Just what I said. I am leaving Stokley and going home to Heartstone. I will build my stables there. I am also taking Devonna with me." His pronouncements made his stepmother gasp with shock.

Her high-pitched whiney voice grated on his nerves. "Why would you wish to go there? The ladies are in London, if you leave then you will not find a bride."

"That's it? That is all you have to say? Don't go because then I can't find a bride? What about your daughter?"

"She stays," yelled his stepmother.

"Take the stupid bitch. All she does is stare out the window, and it's embarrassing. Take her with my blessing." The venom in his father's voice hit him hard. His stepmother backed down under the glare of her husband.

"We will be gone within the hour." He walked out of the room as he swore under his breath. It had been like this ever since he returned from America. His father had more nice words for the horse than for his own son. He had at least been pleased with the horse.

Lucien climbed the stairs to his sister's room and knocked gently on the door. He opened it a little and stuck his head in. "Devonna? Are you in here?" He heard movement by the window and entered the room. Dressed in a drab black gown, his sister sat in silence by the window. Her hair was lifeless and dull. He sat on a cushion by her and tried not to show how her cringing away from him hurt. "Devonna. I am going to take you with me to Heartstone. It's in the country. I think that you will like it there. Wide open spaces, woods and lakes. What do you think? Would you like to go with me?"

Although her face remained impassive and still, Lucien told himself that he caught a flicker of hope in those eyes. Something had happened to his sister. She used to be so full of life and laughter. He reached out to pat her on the arm, and she visibly flinched away from him. Carefully keeping his face straight, he pulled his hand back and smiled at her. "We will leave in an hour. I will have your things packed." He rose and exited the room. When that door shut, the caring brother was gone, and in its place was a marquess that whipped out orders as fast as the words could leave his mouth.

They were headed to Heartstone in less than an hour. He was shocked at how little clothing his sister had. They rode together in the carriage for a six-hour ride. He would have preferred to be on horseback, but he thought he should spend some time with her.

"Are you excited, Devonna? I think it will be a grand adventure. Do you remember the adventures we took as children?" He watched her face for any sign of recognition and found none. If anything, she withdrew farther into herself.

"I am going to start a stable for racers. Would you like to have a horse of your own? Or maybe a dog or cat?" When she didn't answer, he plodded on with the one-sided conversation. "Well, let me know. Would you like to hear of my time in America?"

That time he knew he caught a glimmer of excitement. "You know," he said even though she probably didn't, "I had to go get a racer from America for Father. The town I went to was called Paradise Cove. Very small, very quaint. The people there were all different, and yet they treated each one the same. I met an old woman, which is the one that I got the horse from, and she reminded me of a grandmother that we used to hear about in stories. Always smiling and ready with hugs.

"Well, I took the horse, the one I brought back—his name is Colonial Star—out for a ride. I was not as good a rider as I had thought for he got away from me and took me high up into the mountains. Then a big bear came and attacked us." Devonna was trying to pretend she wasn't interested, but he caught the look on her face. Lucien suppressed a smile as he continued.

"When I woke up, I was in a cabin. The whole thing was not much bigger than a receiving room at Stokley. I thought I was alone, but the first thing I saw was a woman. She had saved me. Her name is Ciara. She had found me and carried me back to her cabin." At his sister's look of disbelief, he did smile and nodded. "It's true. She lived all alone, and we were stuck there together because the snows came, and we couldn't leave."

A panicked look filled his sister's eyes at the mention of him being alone with a woman. A clue perhaps as to why she was so withdrawn. "Well, I shouldn't say alone. She had a wolf for a pet. And while I was there she also got a mountain lion kitten. She also had horses. She wore breeches and did things like a man."

She may have done things like a man, but there were some things that she did which were all woman. He brought his focus back to his sister he continued with his story. He noticed that she listened with wide eyes. "She taught me all about the woods, how to trap animals—which was really messy—and how to survive a winter in the mountains." That wasn't all she taught him, but his sister didn't need to know that.

"I think you would like Ciara, Devonna. She is a very kind person. She loves life and smiles and laughs a lot." He saw tears well up in his sisters' eyes. "She is supposed to send me a horse for my stable." He broke off as tears began to stream down his sister's face. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. She flinched back. That was getting old. "Devonna. You have to know that I am not going to hurt you. I would never hurt you."

Devonna pushed back into a corner of the carriage and watched him with scared eyes. When they stopped to rest the horses, he got out and rode on his gray gelding, giving her time alone in the carriage. Damn, he wished he knew what was wrong.

They arrived at Heartstone in the early evening. As he rode up to the mansion, his heart swelled. This was where he

would make a name for himself. The servants were all lined up to wait for him, to see the famed Black Marquess. He dismounted at the steps and issued orders to his man of affairs. He helped his sister down from of the carriage after steeling himself for her wince.

He took her to her rooms, which were on the opposite wing of the home as his were. As he opened the door to her suite, he glanced at her. Her eyes barely took in the amenities of the room. Instead she went straight to the big windows that had extra thick cushions placed in front of them. The room was done in a pale lilac with dark blue accents. There was a large bed and lots of space for her things, which he realized she didn't have many of. Why not?

"I will come for you at dinner." Her eyes flew wide with fright, and she stumbled backwards. "Devonna? What's wrong?" He reached out a hand to her, and she actually put her shaking hand in his. Lucien could see that she was mortified and scared beyond belief, but she didn't disobey his hand reaching for hers.

"Maybe you would wish to take a walk or get some sleep. I will see you in a bit." Lucien left the room and realized that he was shaking. From anger. He kept his counsel until he found his man of affairs getting ready to leave. Why was his sister so scared of him? Although they couldn't be classified as close, he had never done anything to hurt her.

"Foley. A word."

"Yes, my lord?" Foley was a thin man. Very competent and loyal.

"What the hell happened in that house when I was gone?"

"My lord? To what are you referring?"

"The treatment of my sister. What the hell did they do to her there?"

"I am not sure. I know that when you were gone, your brother was there a lot. Your family did not see fit to include me in many of the discussions."

"Find out."

Foley fought the instinctive need to take a step back at the malice that laced those two words. "Yes, my lord." He took his leave and rode away from Heartstone not sure he wished to find out.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Seventeen

America

"Are you going to let him know?" Marie's question invaded her thoughts.

"No." Ciara said with a very determined look at the woman who questioned her.

"He has a right to know. We both know that."

"Maybe someday. Not now."

"Child. You should tell him." Her tone unusually sharp for Marie, the woman she viewed as a surrogate mother.

Ciara looked at the old woman and smiled, a smile full of serenity and calmness, one that totally belied the rolling of her insides at the mention of *the man*. "This child is mine. I am not ready to tell him." Him. Lucien. The man that still invaded her dreams. The father of her unborn child.

"Tell him." Angelique spoke, which surprised them both.

Ciara shook her head. Marie clucked disapprovingly and rose. "The quilt he brought from you was beautiful. Thank you."

"You know I like making things for you. It was my pleasure." Ciara's mind drifted to the time she had spent with Lucien. He had never been far from her mind.

"He had nothing but good things to say about you, and now I know why." Marie gestured to her protruding belly.

"Marie. Shame on you." Ciara felt the heat of a blush rush across her face. "I brought you some honey. The first batch I had."

"You should not be riding around in those mountains. Not when you're about to give birth." The older woman respected her desire to change the subject.

"I am fine. Besides I never go anywhere without Faolan and Kosse. They would die before they let anything happen to me."

"How is that old wolf? And that little devil cat?"

"They are both fine. You know you could go open the door, and let them in."

"And have animal fur in the house. Never."

"Don't ever change, Marie. I couldn't stand it. I have to be going." Ciara rose, kissed both women on the cheeks and walked outside with them. She whistled, and Nyama came from the thicket where he waited. He stood as she awkwardly mounted. Her belly had already begun to get in the way.

"Come before the birth. You shouldn't be alone then."

Marie reached out and handed her a money pouch with a seal embroidered on the side that caused Ciara's heart to skip a beat.

As she traced the pattern on the pouch, Ciara acknowledged them with a wave of her hand then she headed home, her mind focused on past memories. As soon as she entered the woods, a glossy black wolf and a lustrous, albeit gangly, mountain lion placed themselves on either side of the stallion.

As the time of the impending birth grew closer, she fluctuated back and forth about going down to Marie's. One day the decision was made for her. Marie and Angelique showed up at her cabin. How they knew where it was, she

would never know. How the old ladies made the journey alone she would also never know.

They couldn't have timed it better. Within the week she gave birth to a boy. She named him Brenden Kumi McKay and called him Bryn for short. He was a beautiful boy. His skin had a golden tint to it, but he was still lighter than his mother. He had a head of thick black hair, and his eyes were blue, the exact shade of his father's. A deep midnight blue that could penetrate a soul.

Kosse and Faolan loved him, and he became a member of the group. They took care of him when she had work to do. Later that same winter she found that Epona had been successful with her breeding to Nyama, and so she expected a foal by late fall the next year.

* * * *

The years passed, and as Brenden grew her heart ached each time she looked at him. He was a bright child, speaking all the languages she did. One autumn five years after the birth of her son, Bryn, she found that Epona was carrying again. Her other foals had been fillies. Still she waited for the first colt. The next fall came, and when Epona gave birth she bore a colt. Black like his father with a white lightning bolt pattern on his left haunch. She had no more excuses. It was time to go. She trembled at the thought.

The colt was weaned at six months, and she gathered the eldest daughter of Epona, who she had named Artemis, Artemis' sister Angel, and Brenden's gelding Toka, along with the colt. She, her son, the four horses, a black wolf and a

mountain lion, no longer gangly, set out to catch the first ship to England deliver on a promise that had been made years earlier.

The group attracted much attention, especially the horses, but the presence of the large black wolf seemed to deter anyone thinking to take them even though his muzzle was grizzled, a testament to his age. If the wolf alone wasn't enough then the sleek mountain lion, a lush deep red tipped with copper brown whose every movement spoke of raw power, got the message across.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Eighteen

England

Lucien accepted the congratulations that came his way as another one of his horses won. He glanced at his sister who had been opening up over the past seven years. Dealing with his sister and opening the stables had both proved difficult. His father had thrown every obstacle possible in his way. Lucien had succeeded, however, despite the problems he had faced. He had become successful at something that was his very own. Proud, he gathered his sister and headed back to Heartstone.

Lucien entered his study and poured a brandy while he sat at his desk. At one corner sat a carving of a wolf with a message at the bottom. Ciara. He thought about her often. More than often. Daily. Nightly. It seemed that his heart tattooed out her name. He realized that he had known love.

His two friends, Rafe and Phillip, joined him in the study and helped themselves to some brandy. "Some race today, Luc. Your stables are doing well." Rafe Carson, Viscount Harrington, spoke as he took a long drink of the smooth brandy. "I bet your old man hates it."

Lucien smiled, one of pure male satisfaction. "Probably."

Phillip Vallence, Earl of Edais, spoke next, "I say, Luc, you are a different man since you returned from that heathen country."

"America, Phillip?" *Bloody hell, man, that was seven years ago.* Seven long years.

"That's the place. What happened to you over there?"
"I went and fetched a horse for my father."

Rafe snorted his disbelief. He spied the carving and walked over to pick it up. "Where did you get this? I don't remember seeing it before." He whistled low as he read the inscription. "Wolf?"

"Put it down, Rafe." Lucien's tone brooked no argument.

"Who is Wolf? Is that you? Where did you get this? Better yet, when did you get this?" His friend kept pushing.

"Leave it alone, Rafe."

Phillip spoke up. "I say, I bet it's some colonial whore that secured a place in his heart." He laughed as if he had told a hilarious joke.

The sound of glass breaking snapped both Phillip and Rafe to attention. Lucien spoke softly, but there was no way to miss the daggered tone of his voice, the glass he had been drinking from lay in shards and his hand bled. His eyes were like ice shards. "She is not a whore, and if you speak of her in such a way again, I will kill you."

"Sorry. I didn't know she meant..."

"You don't know anything. You are drunk, Edais. Go home. Take Rafe with you." Lucien waved a hand dismissively and shut his eyes against the onslaught of pain every thought of Ciara brought. It had been seven years, and he still dreamed of her every night.

Seven years and no sign of the horse she had promised. She could be married now, with children. The thought of another man with her caused him to groan as he put his head on his desk. He couldn't get her out of his mind no matter

what he did. The women he pursued now looked nothing like her. Who was he kidding? No one in England looked like her. She was amazing. She was gone.

He was thirty-three and needed to get an heir. Lucien was still one of the most sought after men for the mothers in the marriage mart. He kept to Heartstone. He didn't want a blushing debutante. He wanted someone with curves that made him weak in the knees. Someone that smelled fresh. Someone that would stand up to him and make his life interesting. Someone like Ciara. No, there was no woman in the world like her. He wanted Ciara.

Devonna was coming out of her shell; they had a rocky start, but she was doing well now. If she saw her brother or father, she would fall silent and withdrawn. Not like they ever came out to Heartstone. Foley had found nothing to report on the happenings while she was at Stokley.

His stables had taken a lot of time and a lot of hard work, but he was proud of them. He looked up as Rafe came back into the room. He glared at his friend. "What do you want, Rafe, I thought you were leaving?" Lucien had wrapped his hand to stop the blood and summoned someone to clean up the mess he had made.

"I sent Phillip back home. I came to apologize. I didn't know that you had met someone over there. I never would have said anything about the statue if I had known."

Lucien shook his head. "That's all right. No one knows. I am going down to the stables. Want to come?"

Rafe nodded and turned toward the door. It opened and in walked Devonna, garbed in deep purple, a stunning color on

her that brought out her violet-blue eyes. Lucien started to say something to Rafe when he noticed the two of them. They were staring at one another like they were each other's lifelines, and they needed to look at each other just to survive. Lucien was as good as invisible.

"Humm humm." Lucien cleared his throat and hid a grin as his sister and best friend blushed to their roots. Devonna managed an awkward curtsy and mumbled, "My lord, Lord Harrington."

Lucien took pity on them. "Was there something you needed, Devonna?"

"*Um.* No. No. I was only going to ask you if I could go for a ride. Sorry, I didn't know you had company."

Which was a down and outright lie. She knew the second that Viscount Harrington had shown up at the house. Once again, Lucien hid a smile.

"Nonsense. Rafe and I were just on our way to the stables. Why don't you join us? We could all go for a ride." He glanced at Rafe and raised one brow in dare. "Rafe, what do you think? Care to join us?"

"I would love to." His eyes flared as he nodded eagerly. They all headed for the stable. Lucien watched in amusement as the two with him pretended not to notice each other, when in fact neither could take their eyes off the other. It was the most animated he had ever seen his sister. It encouraged him, for she was twenty-five now.

When they arrived at the stable a liveried servant from the house ran up to him. "My lord," he panted. "His Grace is coming. Up the drive."

Lucien slanted a glance at his sister, noticing she had paled. "Thank you, Thomas. Ready some rooms."

Devonna had backed up into a stall, completely ignorant to the fact that there was a horse in it. Rafe noticed but wisely kept his mouth shut.

Lucien took a deep breath before he headed back to the house. Part way out of the barn, he swung back and asked Rafe, "Will you escort my sister on her ride? Take a groom with you so it is proper. Come back in about one to two hours." The urgency in his tone was not lost on his friend who immediately nodded agreement.

Lucien cracked his neck on his way up to the house as he prepared for a confrontation. He waited on the steps when the carriages pulled in. His father descended and looked at him. "Your Grace. To what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

"Don't get smart, boy. We came because we found someone to marry your sister. Even though she is on the shelf and dumb."

Lucien's eyes narrowed warningly. "Watch how you speak of my sister."

"She is my child, and I will speak to her or of her anyway I wish. Bring her to me. I have no wish to remain in this place longer than necessary."

Lucien smirked. "Good, I have no wish for you to remain. She is not here. She is out riding."

"Go get her, boy." The voice rose. "I have promised her hand to Viscount Dansworthy. They will be wed within the month."

Viscount Dansworthy was a letch. The small progress Devonna had made would be lost under him. "No. She won't marry him."

"You dare tell me who she will and will not marry?"

"No, I do." Rafe entered the conversation. "I am sorry Your Grace, I have compromised your daughter, and I was discussing the details with her brother since it was here that it happened. I will do the honorable thing and marry her."

Devonna stood slightly behind him, and at his announcement, Lucien could have sworn that she smiled. Teeth gritted in an attempt to control his temper, Lucien turned to his father and said, "Perhaps we could go inside and finish discussing the details." The look he sent to Rafe promised that his time was not long in coming for that stunt. The duke stomped inside followed by his wife, his son Lucien, daughter Devonna and soon to be son-in-law, Rafe.

Lucien's younger brother, Richard Nidels, a stepbrother, stayed outside to smoke and see what trouble he could get into. Richard was an angry man. Not handsome, he was whip thin with an overly large nose, his eyes a light watery blue. His teeth were crooked, and he was not built to wear clothes nicely. The finest tailor could make clothes just for him, and they still wouldn't look right. His body was not proportioned well at all. He hated his stepbrother and the fact that Lucien was set to inherit all while he would get nothing. He wanted the luxury of spending money as much and as fast as he wished and not having to live off an allowance. A situation he considered an embarrassment.

Devonna sat next to Rafe in the receiving room. The duke and the marquess were engaged in a shouting match. The duchess sent icy looks in her direction. Devonna inched closer to Rafe. She had always been attracted to him. She really did love her brother, Lucien, and believed that if he trusted Rafe, that between the two of them she would be safe. No longer would she live in fear from her other brother, Richard. That very brother came in the room and speared her with a lecherous grin that made her cringe. She felt Rafe's hand tighten on hers in reassurance.

A knock on the door sounded, and the butler stepped in the room. "My lord. There is someone here to see you."

"Weeks, we are busy here. Tell them to leave their card and wait, or come back later."

"I tried, my lord. They insist that they have an appointment with you. They don't have a card."

Lucien's brother rose and said, "I'll deal with it." He walked past the butler who didn't even flinch, but gazed imploringly at his employer.

Lucien wondered if maybe it was his current mistress, Christie. But the normally unflappable Weeks seemed quite nervous. "Stupid butler. Do your job, we are busy here," the duke put in.

"Enough." Lucien roared. He was furious. "This is my house. These are my servants. Do not speak to them in that tone. Everything will be dealt with in due time. I will go with Weeks, deal with this person, come back. Then we will finish this. Get some food for His Grace. He will be staying longer

than expected. Everyone understand?" Even the duke was silent, for his son astonished him in his fury.

"Bloody hell!" The scream came from the hall as Richard bolted back into the study, pale and shaking like he had seen a ghost. "There are creatures out there."

Lucien groaned. His brother was an idiot. Weeks spoke up, "My lord. That is what I wished to advise you of. This person has animals with them."

"What is so odd about that, Weeks? Most people have animals. Did you ask them for a name?"

His butler looked affronted. He sniffed, "Of course. I can't tell you though, for aside from asking for you, they said nothing except that I was to give you this." Weeks crossed the room and handed him a money pouch on a silver platter. It was his. He knew that from the seal. "I was told there was a note inside, my lord."

A headache loomed. Lucien rubbed his temples as he asked, "What did they look like, Weeks?" He opened the bag and took out the note.

"Couldn't tell you, my lord."

"What kind of butler are you? All you have to do is look at them and then..."

"Enough." Lucien snapped. "Not another word out of you, Father. Emma, close your mouth because I am not in the mood to hear it from you either. Continue, Weeks." He opened the note, and the words that jumped off the paper at him, made him shaky.

A promise once made Has been fulfilled.

It was unsigned. It didn't have to be signed, for he knew whom it was from.

"They are wearing a hooded cloak, and I can't see what they look like."

Lucien's knees gave out, and he sat down heavily in his chair. "Weeks, what type of animals?" It couldn't be. After all this time, after seven years, could she really be here? Or was he just imagining what he dreamed of so often, what he longed for?

"Horses, what looks like a wolf and a..." Lucien jumped up and sprinted through the doorway. His family followed simply because he acted so unlike himself, so unlike a marquess ... he was showing emotion.

Lucien stumbled through the open door to his manorial home and looked down the steps. The sight he saw almost made him weep.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Nineteen

There were three horses, two grown, and one small one, a black with a white jagged mark on his haunch that was visible when the horse turned sideways. A figure, garbed in a black cloak, hooded so that the folds completely obscured the face, stood waiting. At one side of the silent figure was a glossy black wolf, with a dark green collar and on the other side, a mature mountain lion with a silken coat of ruddy brown that sported a deep blue collar. Both animals were ominous looking, and as Lucien gazed upon them he had never seen a more welcome sight.

His He heard his family come up behind him. They all muttered about the strange group standing at the door. His father spoke loudest, "I would like to see those horses. Who is that? What kind of person goes around with those kinds of wild animals?"

Lucien walked down the steps, completely ignoring his family and the noises they made. Her pull on him too strong to disregard—like a bee to a flower—and stopped a short distance away from the figure that was well protected by the animals. He could have heard a pin drop, for the first time his entire family was silent as they watched the scene unfold before them.

"Hello, Wolf," the husky voice tinged with velvet floated from beneath the hood enveloping his wounded soul like the coolness of a summer breeze on a sweltering day.

"Ciara." He spoke the word almost reverently as if she might disappear, and he would wake to find it was all another dream.

"As promised, the first colt out of Nyama and Epona." The hood nodded in the direction of the colt between the mares.

"Take off your hood. Let me see you." His order was quiet, but everyone heard. Everyone watched as the command was obeyed.

Ciara stood tall and pushed her hood back. She raised her eyes to stare at the man that had given her Brenden.

When her hood fell back, Lucien drank in the sight of her. She was just as beautiful as he remembered. With all the regality of a queen, she stood for his perusal and the others as well. Her eyes stayed wary, and he saw that the animals had not relaxed their guard either.

"Faolan? Kosse?" Lucien got down on one knee. He had to focus on something else, or he would grab her. Both animals looked at Ciara, and at her minuscule hand gesture, she released them. The animals swarmed him. Faolan wagged his tail, and Kosse purred. Lucien's stepmother screamed and fainted—for once not a fake swoon for she hit her head hard. His brother paled even more and retreated behind the nosy servants. Ciara spoke a single word, and both animals were back on either side of her.

"Who are you?" the duke yelled as he came down the stairs. "Where did you get these horses?"

Lucien and Devonna were mortified by his atrocious behavior, and yet it didn't come as a surprise, for the duke always did what he wanted. Ciara never even blinked. Her

eyes followed him, and only when he got close to the horses did she speak, her voice impassive as if he were not worth her time. "Those are not your horses. Keep away from them."

"Wench, I am a duke. I do whatever I damn well please."

Lucien saw the flash in her eyes and stepped forward to intervene when she flicked her hand, and Faolan placed himself between the duke and the horses.

"He does not ask. You will get no more warnings. Step away from the horses." She turned back to Lucien, her voice soft once again. "The bay mare next to the colt is a gift for your sister. Her name is Angel, Epona's second daughter."

All present were shocked by the fact that she had brought a present for the sister. Devonna was shocked as she looked upon the woman her brother held in such high regard. She walked down the stairs and past her brother, who was trying not to run up and grab this woman, and stopped in front of the bronze skinned woman, completely ignoring to the large cat next to her.

In a soft voice she asked, "Are you Ciara?"

"Aye. I am. You must be Devonna." A slight nod of her head was all the deference she acquitted her, regardless of her station.

She blushed. "I am. Thank you for the horse. May I see her?" Lucien was shocked to see his sister speak so openly with a stranger like that, as was the rest of the staff.

"Of course." She gave a low whistle, and Angel broke away from the group and trotted up to Ciara. Picking up the rope, she placed it in Devonna's hand. "She is very gentle. I hope

you find happiness with her." She smiled at this sad sister of Lucien's.

Another whistle brought Artemis and the colt to her. That left the duke facing a large wolf. Ciara untied the colt and placed the rope in Lucien's hands. It was a lot of work to make sure that her hands weren't shaking. "My promise has been fulfilled."

"Where are you going?"

"I am staying ... that is none of your business. I have to go. It was wonderful to see you again, Wolf. I hope you have found your happiness." His aroma filled her nose, making her legs quiver. She wanted nothing more than to touch him and run her hands all over his body, to allow herself one more moment of indulgence with him. One more moment of bliss.

"Wait." He couldn't let her leave, not now after all this time. "Would you like to see my stables? I mean, after all, you helped with the planning."

"Just let her go. She is obviously not of your class." A high nasally voice reached everyone.

"Emma. Shut up." Lucien turned on his family. "In fact, if the two of you, and you as well Richard, can't be nice to her then you will be kicked off the property. That is it. If you stay, you will be polite." He turned back to Ciara. "Well?"

"Fine. Can I water my horses?"

"Your horse?" He bit back the urge to grin like a schoolboy. She was within his reach again. He didn't intend to let her go this time.

"No, horses." She made a sound like a bird and out of the trees came another horse with a small person on its back. It

was a nice gelding, chestnut in color. It was the passenger that caught Lucien's attention though.

A boy, lanky with youth, rode tall on the horse. He was golden skinned but not as dark as the woman he was with. His hair was thick and wavy, an inky black. As he stopped beside her, he swung down with agility, despite the height of the horse, which bespoke his familiarity with horses. He stood beside Ciara and spoke, "Are we here to rest for a bit, Mama?"

Mama? A sword pierced his heart. She did have children, which would explain the cool reaction she gave him. Here he had been dreaming of a woman that had a child.

"You have a son? Congratulations." His voice came sharp and tense. Even he heard the pain. The knife settled between his ribs as he saw his dreams leave his reach. "How old is he?"

"Yes. This is my son. Brenden Kumi McKay. Bryn say hello to Wo ... His lord, the Marquess of Heartstone."

"Good day. Thank you for allowing us to rest our horses." The boy was polite even though his address to the marquess was not correct. His voice was like a gentle rain, falling anywhere without fear. And why should he fear, he was well protected.

"You are most welcomed." Each word killed him a little more. The boy even sounded like her, with an accent on certain words. He looked at Ciara, and saw her gaze turned on her son, full of love.

"Bryn, go play with Kosse and Faolan. I don't think his horses are used to them." She turned her amber gaze back to Lucien. "Is there a place they can play?"

"By the lake."

"You heard him, Bryn. What do you say?" A small victory as Lucien noticed that she didn't ask if he would be safe.

"Thank you." The child that went by the name Bryn looked up at him and smiled. Lucien stared in shock, his heart coming to a halt, as he looked into a mirror image of his own eyes. Thick dark lashes framed them giving the child an exotic and innocent look. His eyes were going to be a big attraction for the ladies when he got older.

Lucien's gaze did not leave the boy until he was headed to the lake. "How old did you say he was?" It couldn't be. It was impossible, wasn't it?

"I didn't. But a little over six years." Her amber eyes were guileless as she looked at him.

"He's mine." He swore. He grabbed her arm and pulled her up flush against his chest. He heard the gasps of shock from his father, stepmother and the rest of the vultures listening in on them. "Deny it! Damn you, deny it." His entire body quivered with rage. Rage that he had been denied his son.

Faolan looked back and turned as he saw Lucien reach for her. Ciara sent a word to him. The large black wolf continued on with Kosse and Bryn.

"I can't. He *is* yours." Ciara still spoke with the calm assurance that he had always admired about her. Now it just added fuel to the fire.

Meeting his gaze head-on, she asked, "I thought you were going to show me your stables. Has that changed?" She was unflappable; her calm settled over her like a suit of armor nothing could get through.

Eyes hardened. "No, it hasn't. This conversation isn't over." He knew she didn't lie about him being the father; it wasn't in her to do so. But she had kept it from him for seven years. She hadn't even sent him a missive. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that Weeks still watched. "Weeks, see that the green room is made up for her. She and her son will be staying the night."

He swung off toward the barn, never once letting go of her arm. He entered the stables, stopped a stable boy and gave him the reins to Artemis. "Take care of her horse. It needs water and some grain. The others need some as well."

He stalked to the back of the stable where lithe light was dim, found an open stall and pushed her through then followed. He snapped the door shut behind him and glared at her. "Explain yourself." The edge in that tone could have cut steel. That tone made him good at being a marquess; it demanded an answer. He was beyond angry. He shook with untold anger as he tried not to put his hands on her. Truth was, he wasn't sure he wouldn't do her bodily harm.

"I don't owe you any explanations."

"You don't owe me any ... You can't believe that? That's my son, damn you! I had a right to know he even existed. You had no right, none, to keep that from me." Lucien's voice had risen, and he shouted with no regard to who might overhear.

"Perhaps not. Maybe I handled that badly..."

"But surely you gave some thought to what happened between us. You never once pulled out of me. Or did you forget that when you got back here to your 'golden haired' beauties with their 'skin the color of cream.' Don't take this out on me." Ciara's own bitterness cracked through her normally calm demeanor. "I never held any idea of trying to get money from you or anything for him. I love my son. I came to fulfill my promise and to let you know of his existence. I will not let him come to harm in your society."

She meant to leave him. Fresh rage swept through him. "I could keep him with me. He is my son. I have the right to keep him with me."

Ciara's eyes flashed dangerously as she advanced on Lucien. He had found the chink in her armor. Her entire body trembled with fury. "Don't you dare threaten me with taking my son from me. He is mine."

Lucien found himself retreating a step under the wrath of her vehemence. When he saw the fear in her gaze, he understood what he had done. He held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. Bloody hell, this woman, his woman, was magnificent.

Ciara stopped when he put up his hands. Her breaths came short and fast, and it wasn't only from the yelling match either. She was aroused. His scent filled her nose, and her eyes darkened as she imagined his hands on her body once again. His lips. His everything.

[&]quot;Maybe? There is no maybe about it, you..."

Lucien saw her eyes darken, with desire this time. His eyes flared, and he grabbed her into his arms and kissed her. Kissed her with all of his worry and love stored through the past seven years. His arms crushed her to him as he imbibed her smell.

"Umm. Humm." The sound of a throat being cleared brought them back to earth. Lucien snapped his gaze to the door and saw Rafe there with a smug grin on his face. "As the rest of your family is on their way, perhaps you would like to put some light between your bodies."

They stepped out of the stall just as his family came down the aisle. All speaking, all demanding, at once so it was hard for him to tell which person was yelling at him.

"Who is she? What is this about a son?"

"Where did she come from?" Richard asked.

"What is she to you? What is her family line?"

"Where did she get those horses? I want some stock like them." That from his father.

Ciara stood erect between the two men and faced the storm that was his family. Lucien placed his hand on the small of her back and stared at them until they quieted. "I will answer your questions, inside. One at a time." Once again he had become the unflappable marquess, no task too great for him to handle.

The family glared at her but stepped to one side of the aisle to allow them to pass. When they got back outside, Ciara stopped. Lucien tried to nudge her forward, but she wouldn't move.

"What?" He asked in a low tone.

"I go to check on Bryn."

"Do you intend to leave?" She stared out toward the lake where her son, their son, played and didn't answer. "I would have your word, you won't leave."

"Very well. I will not leave until I speak to you again."

"No. You will stay the night. Your word, or I drag you with me." Lucien knew that his family was shocked by his behavior. He didn't care. He wanted her word of honor.

"It is just a woman. Who cares if she leaves? Her word is useless to you," his father snapped. Lucien ignored him, instead keeping his attention on Ciara waiting for her response.

"One night we will stay." She pinned a look on him and added, "As long as he is safe."

Sketching a bow to her, he smiled, "Until later then." He strode off to the house while his father continued to berate him. Lucien didn't even take offense when she had said that he might not be able to keep them safe. She was here. After seven long years, she was here, with him. And he had a son.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty

Devonna began to follow her family, but at the sight of her stepbrother, she stopped. She turned to Ciara, who watched Lucien walk away, and with a longing gaze, asked, "Could I go with you? To the lake?"

"Of course."

Richard glared at his stepsister as she moved closer to the guest. "Coming to the house, sister? I would be glad to escort you."

Devonna sucked in a breath and tried hard not to cringe. Ciara's gaze flickered between them before she stepped forward to place herself between Devonna and her brother.

Richard hesitated at the look, the silent challenge that he saw flame up in eyes of the woman that infatuated his brother. Richard nodded as he stepped back in momentary defeat and called for a horse. It was time to invite Lucien's mistress to the house. It would be an interesting night.

Devonna followed Ciara to the lake while Rafe stood there, somehow knowing that this was something Devonna needed to do. He claimed to have compromised her only to protect her. He had been in love with her for as long as he could remember. If she would only give them a chance, he knew he could make her smile again. Rafe headed for Lucien's library for he knew once the parents were done, it would be his turn to face the questions.

* * * *

As they walked to the lake, Ciara snuck glances at the woman beside her. Although not in the start of her youth, she was still beautiful. Ciara saw fear flash in Devonna's eyes when her brother looked at her.

"How did you meet my brother? He said you saved his life." Devonna's voice was raspy from lack of use.

Ciara smiled. "Yes. A bear had attacked him. I found him in the woods and took him back to my cabin to heal him. He caught the fever, and for two weeks, it was uncertain whether he would pull through. Good thing he was a healthy man. He has scars, but other than that I think he pulled through fine." She picked up her son and held him close, inhaling his clean scent until he struggled to be let down.

"Weren't you scared with him alone in the cabin?" Her question asked a silent one that instinctively Ciara knew she was too ashamed to ask.

Ciara kissed her son and sent him back off to play with Faolan and Kosse. Then she sat and answered Devonna's question. "At first it was difficult. I had an advantage though, since I had Faolan—he's the wolf. One night after Lucien was walking again, he came to my room." At Devonna's shocked gasp, she hurried on, "I was having a nightmare, and he only sought to wake me from it. When he touched me, I knocked him to the floor and was in the process of sliding my knife into his throat when I realized who he was and what he had been doing." She did not look at Devonna but stared after her son.

"That night he asked me to tell him why I had reacted like I did. I couldn't tell him for it hurt too much. Sometimes

though, it helps to tell someone who has experienced the same thing. If you wish to talk about it, Devonna, I am here to listen."

Devonna swung toward Ciara, but she was looking at her son. "How did you know?" Her voice filled with shame.

Ciara turned the full intensity of her whiskey eyes on Devonna. "Don't ever feel like you have anything to be ashamed of. I know because I was raped a long time ago."

Devonna crumbled. Sobs racked her body as she laid her head in Ciara's lap. The story came out among the sobs. "It started when I was sixteen. He would come on different nights when he stayed at the house, claiming that I had been screaming in my sleep and how he was worried for my safety. I was forced to do things to him, touching and kissing him. He said that my father would never believe me, so not to tell." Her body shook with fear, but she continued, determined once and for all to get it out of her system.

She had not even told Lucien, the only one that she did trust, and that had taken lots of hard work, but he never pushed, just accepted her progress with smiles. "He started to give me to his friends, and they bragged about me to others. I know the only reason they want to marry me off is because I am on the shelf, and they don't want me in the house. Since I have been here with Lucien, that awful man hasn't been able to touch me. He would never dream of touching me with Lucien around." Ciara put two and two together, after watching Devonna's reaction to her brother and hearing her comments, and figured out whom she spoke of. Her brother, Richard, had committed the ultimate sin.

"Rafe told them today that he compromised me. He sought to protect me. I have always thought he was a wonderful man, and now I know it. But I can't let him marry me. I am spoiled, used, worthless to him."

Ciara stroked the head in her lap, her calm words hiding the fact that she was furious. Where had Lucien been during this time? "You are not used or worthless. That was taken from you, not given. You are still pure, and when you find a man who loves you and you love, it will be like your first time. It will be wonderful."

Violet eyes looked up at her. "Like you and Saint? Your boy there, Bryn, he is my brother's son, isn't he? He has Lucien's eyes. Males in our family get those vivid blue eyes."

"Yes."

"Do you love my brother?"

* * * *

Lucien looked at his parents as they sat on opposite sides of the room from one another. It seemed the only thing they did together was glare at him, as they were doing now. His stepmother interrogated Lucien, "Who is she? What is she to you? What were her parents. Her skin is too dark."

"She is the one that saved my life in America. From the bear. She owns the sire to the horse that you got from over there."

His father jumped in, "Did you bed her? Is that why she is here? To try and pass off that boy as your own. Don't let her. All she wants is money. How can you be sure it is your son after all this time?"

Lucien's hands slammed on the desk as he spoke firmly. "This is none of your business. She is none of your business. She is my guest and will be treated with the respect due. I will not have you disrespecting her or her son in this home. Now, what are your wishes about Devonna and Rafe?"

His father spit, he was so angry. "I will not be paying a dowry for that slut. She isn't worth it." His stepmother seemed to agree although with a small hesitation.

"Fine. I will give a dowry. If that is all, I would like to go and speak to my guest." He headed for the door. "If you kill each other, try not to make a mess of my house." Lucien found Rafe sitting in the library, holding a glass of brandy but not drinking, just staring at the amber liquid.

"Why? Why did you do it, Rafe? You know that she is not quite right mentally. I won't have you hurting her more than she has been hurt." There was menace beneath his words. He wanted to be furious with Rafe, but Lucien's mind was on the whiskey-eyed woman by the lake.

Rafe looked at his friend and took a deep breath before he made his declaration. "I love her. I have always loved her." His voice spoke volumes.

Lucien smiled as he walked to his friend. "I guess I should have known that from the looks you were giving her. Congratulations then, my friend. Welcome to the family. Care to walk with me? I am going to find some females."

Rafe stood and asked Lucien, "Have you told her how you feel?"

"Who?"

"I am not blind nor am I stupid, Luc. I saw how you looked at her. In all of our trips to visit professional women, I have seen the looks you give. Looks to seduce, looks to scare people but never like the one you gave her. It was tender, for lack of a better word. If I didn't know you better, I would also say I saw tears, but I don't wish to anger you."

Rafe walked out on his friends' stunned expression. Lucien followed and they walked in companionable silence to the lake. What they saw when they got there surprised both. It took a moment for the men to regain their composure.

Devonna was screeching and laughing as she chased Bryn around. Faolan and Kosse chased her. Ciara observed in affectionate silence while standing protectively over her charges. Ever the guardian.

Lucien heard Rafe's sharp intake of breath at the sight of her. Jealousy swarmed him. Ciara still wore her buckskins; if anything, having a child filled her out more. She was still firm, but he knew what lay beneath that hard exterior. Passion. Endless inexhaustible passion.

Bryn turned and ran toward his mother and launched himself at her. She caught him and spun him around. A tight hug for him before she set him down and sent him once again on his way.

Ciara felt Lucien's presence and didn't turn to face him, just waited until they got close enough to speak to. "Hello again, Wolf."

"Why do you call him Wolf? I'm Rafe, by the way," the pale haired man with the green eyes spoke. He was almost as tall

as Lucien, but Lucien was big and broad while Rafe seemed leaner and just as dangerous.

Her lips turned up slightly as she looked at the man that Devonna was to marry. "It is nice to meet you Rafe. I am Ciara." There was kindness in his eyes; theirs would be a good match.

"You can call her Miss McKay." Lucien snapped. He wanted nothing more than to hide her luscious body from Rafe's eyes.

With a negative shake of her head, she contradicted Lucien, "Call me Ciara. I don't know how to answer to anything else."

"Yes, you do. I have seen you, Princess," Lucien purred. He didn't like that she didn't include him in the conversation.

Ciara arched a brow at his comment as she continued her conversation with Rafe. "This is why I call him Wolf. He is ornery and pushy, always thinking that he should get his way." She waved a hand in the direction of Faolan, in the process of tripping Devonna. "You see, pushy." She looked at Lucien. "What do you want? What was so important for you to be rude to your friend?"

Lucien stood in silence. It was nothing to her to admonish him in front of his friend. "I want to show you your room. Come with me."

Ciara turned toward Devonna and Bryn. She motioned with her hand, and all four of them—humans and animals—came up. Devonna curtsied to her brother and to Viscount Harrington, her face flushed and full life for once.

They all walked up to the house. She entered the house, and Ciara's breath caught in her throat. It was huge. Her

entire cabin could fit in the entrance. Everything was large and clean. There were servants by doors that opened them before people got there.

"I put you in the green room. Come, I will show you." Lucien spoke as he interrupted her study of the house.

Mrs. Ashley, the housekeeper, came up and stopped at the sight of the animals, her hand clasped over her throat.

"Mrs. Ashley, I would like you to meet my guests, Miss McKay and her son Bryn."

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss. And you, little sir." She had always liked children, and as she smiled at this one, she noticed his eyes. They were the same as the master's. Hope flared in her breast that maybe he was going to calm down and fill this house with babies like he should. "Perhaps the young lad is hungry? We've some sweets in the kitchen."

Bryn looked up at his mom. With a smile, she nodded. As he took Mrs. Ashley's hand and skipped alongside, he heard his mother.

"Bryn?"

"Yes, Mama?" He turned and looked at her before he ran back to her and jumped into her arms.

She spoke to him in a language only they knew. Placing a kiss on his head, she sent him back to Mrs. Ashley. "Bryn, remember your manners. Say 'please' and 'thank you.'"

"Yes, Mama."

"Speak English, Bryn."

"Yes, Mama. I love you."

"I love you, too, Bryn. Have fun."

Lucien watched their relationship with longing. What he would have given to have such when growing up. Rafe and Devonna headed somewhere to spend time together. Since they were officially engaged, they could be alone regardless of how the duke felt about it. He took Ciara's hand, headed up the stairs, her animals and smiles from the staff following in their wake.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-One

Lucien pushed open the door then stepped back to let Ciara enter. The room was very spacious. The colors were a forest green with amber edging. On one wall were paintings of mountains. It was almost like home. The windows were large and open, which allowed the cool country air to come in. Large cushions lay scattered on the benches under the windows and on the floor by the fireplace.

"It's beautiful. Thank you. We will be very happy here tonight."

Lucien didn't even tell her about the adjoining rooms. His rooms. He stepped in the room behind her and shut the door. Given that he stood at her back, he let his gaze flow over her body. Her top fit looser than he remembered, over her usual buckskins. He draped her cloak over a chair and watched as Faolan and Kosse lay down under the windows.

Ciara looked around the room lovingly. How she missed her home. She turned and watched the man that seemed to fill a room just by standing there. Desire hit her hard as she stared at him. She wanted him. She stepped toward him and grabbed his waistcoat, pulling him toward her. Not expecting the attack, Lucien stumbled forward. Before he knew what hit him, she had latched onto his lips with her own. Her hands moved up and pulled on his hair, as she tried to pull him in closer.

With a growl, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back. His hands jerked at her shirt, and she shook her head as she whimpered her need into his mouth. "Now."

As he braced her body with one hand, he freed himself from his breeches and lowered hers seconds later. With his breeches open, he turned and placed her back against the wall by the door. She slipped off her buckskins and eagerly wrapped her legs around his waist.

He felt her moisture, and the head of his member swelled as it bobbed up and down. She yanked his hair and pulled his mouth back to hers as he lunged into her with one fierce thrust.

She bit his lip, drawing blood as she tried to keep quiet. He pounded into her, pressing her harder and harder into the wall. Neither of them seemed to remember that the windows and curtains were wide open in the room, exposing them to the outside world. They reached their pinnacle within moments of each other, like an explosion had gone off. Both were breathing hard as their gazes met.

Panting with exhaustion, Ciara smiled at him as she unlocked her legs from around his waist and slid carefully to the floor. "Sorry. I didn't expect that to happen." She pulled her breeches on, still shaken from their passionate encounter. Regardless of the roughness of the liaison, she believed that it was needed. She had needed to rid herself of the pent up sexual tension for him somehow.

Lucien looked down at himself, covered in their combined juices and shook his head. He had treated her no better than some dockside doxy. He took her up against the wall like

that. He smiled as he touched his lip and saw the blood; maybe she didn't care. Perhaps she had wanted it as much as he did. That quick liaison left him more breathless than a night with one of the mistresses he had used over the years.

He found a cloth and cleaned himself and then refastened his trousers before he tugged her down on a green and amber chaise. Lucien snuggled her in the crook of his arm. He sat in silence as they brought their breathing under control.

"Why didn't you tell me about Brenden?" One hand absently stroked her arm. There were wide bands under the sleeves of her shirt by her wrists, and he wondered what they were.

"Marie said I should. We come from two different worlds. I guess I was scared."

"I know what I said, but I would never take our son away from you. Tell me about him. What was he like as a baby? Why did you name him Brenden?" A pause, "Thank you for that." His son carried his name, and for that he was grateful.

"Bryn was a very happy baby. He still is. I am sorry that I kept the knowledge from you, but I am not sorry that I didn't bring him here. Your family is so full of hate. I wanted him to grow up with the love that I had. As for his name, I don't know. It just fit. I have liked it ever since I heard it in your name."

"You don't think that I would have loved him."

"I wasn't thinking of you at all. I know that is selfish of me. I remembered the hate in your eyes when you spoke of your family. I did what I thought was best for my son..."

"Our son."

"Our son and I would do it again in an instant."

"Where are you staying?" He changed the subject, not wanting to think of her leaving him again, especially since he now knew about his son.

"I am staying in the country with some people."

"Who?" This was all country.

"Friends. Leave it at that. You have no claim on me, so don't pretend to be jealous of something that you have no right to." Faolan rose from under the window and gazed at the door with a stance that made her rise immediately.

"What do you mean by that?" He had every right to place his claim on her. "Where are you going?" Ciara swung on her cloak and opened the door, following her animals down the stairs without giving him a response. He felt the change in her; she had become cold and withdrawn in a second.

Lucien followed her, not sure what had happened to illicit this abrupt change in her demeanor. The servant, Weeks, saw her approach and opened the door, and by the time she hit the bottom of the steps, she was in a full run. The animals matched her strides. Toward a small shed by the stables her powerful legs carried her. Lucien ran after her.

As she neared the building, she heard a cry that sent waves of fury ripping through her. Her sharp eyes followed Faolan as he stopped in front of the door. His growls sent chills up Lucien's spine as he neared Ciara. Kosse's low growl echoed the wolf's with frightening menace.

Lucien watched as Faolan and Kosse crouched in position to attack. He heard cries coming from the inside of the shed

accompanied by adult voices. His father came up behind him, followed by Rafe and Devonna.

Ciara flipped her cloak back so that her arms were free. Before anyone could move, she had kicked the door to the shed. As it splintered under the force of her single blow and fell to the ground, five adults could see into the shed. What they saw shocked them all.

Four of the duke's coachmen had Bryn trapped in the shed. They were beating him with whips, calling him names like Gypsy boy and much worse. Ciara moved with blinding speed, Lucien saw, as she flicked her arms and sent the daggers that had been concealed in her sleeves, flying toward the men that were hurting her baby. Faolan and Kosse hadn't even waited for the door to hit the ground before they attacked.

Each animal took a man, and her daggers found their marks in the other two. A rage, unlike any that Lucien had known before flowed through his veins. They had attacked his son. He stepped forward to intervene as well, but just like at the cabin, she didn't need his help.

Ciara yelled a command, and the animals instantly surrounded Bryn. He didn't even cringe away from the blood on their mouths, just delved his hands into their thick pelts. He stood tall and silent as tears fell from his lapis eyes.

An unholy light burned within the amber eyes of his mother, turning them almost yellow. She flew across the room and picked up the man that had been doing the actual whipping and threw him across the small shed.

Consumed with rage, her strength knew no bounds as she picked up the men that had touched her baby and tossed

them out of her way. "Mama?" The voice pierced her veil of hate, and she spun about, opening her arms to him as she sank to her knees on the floor. Bryn threw himself in her arms and shook with fear and pain. None of the marks had broken the skin she noticed, as she did a quick check on her son.

Lucien got the four rounded up and turned on his father,
"These are your men. This is on your head. They will die. That
is my son they were whipping." A wind picked up, bringing
with it a chill that coincided with his tone.

His father was speechless. They all were. Ciara rose and strode out of the building, her son once again safe and protected in her arms, flanked by her loyal guardians. The iciness in her gaze could have frozen hell. Her gaze flicked to Devonna who silently stepped forward and took a very reluctant Bryn from her.

A motion of her hands sent Faolan and Kosse with them. She continued on her path toward the men. She picked up one of them and punched him in the face before Lucien got behind her. It took both him and Rafe to bring her under control.

His father spoke, "You slept with that. She is a freak. No woman should be that strong. Why would you want to claim her son? She is no better than a servant. Not to mention she is an American. Look at her. She is even wearing trousers." A mistake he surely would never repeat, for now he was the object of her anger.

"You! You bastard," she seethed. "Of course a woman should be weak. That way they can't defend themselves

against you. I hold you responsible for this attack against my son. My son. He has done nothing to you." She raged against Lucien and Rafe and their hold on her, but their combined strength defeated hers, barely. "Unlike you, I love my child. You heartless bastard of a man."

Her voice lowered so it was barely noticeable. "I swear by all that's holy if you come near my son again I will kill you. That goes for your servants as well. Heed my warning, for it is my vow." She turned her head and spoke a sharp word to Faolan. The animal sprang away and disappeared into the shadows of the forest.

The duke's face grew mottled as a person he considered an upstart insulted him. His eyes went dark with anger as he raised himself up to his full height and glared at her. Sebastian pinned her with the look that quelled many people who might dare question a duke. "You little bitch. Do you know who I am? I can have you imprisoned. You are threatening a member of peerage. You are nothing. Do you understand me? Do you think I am scared of you?" His finger jabbed the air toward her to punctuate his statement.

Ciara hissed at him as her eyes spit venom. "You are so brave when they have a hold of me. Say those words to my face when two men aren't holding me back. I would love to show you just how scared of me you really could be. Tell your son to release me. I am not nothing. I am a mother, and you ... You threatened my son. I would chase you through the deepest, darkest pits of hell for that alone." Her voice chilled all those present. Still she strained against the two men that restrained her.

"You don't have the first idea of what it is to be a parent. And you have no idea of what I am capable of. I am not scared of you. You, I would bet, are petrified of me. I may be a woman, but I will not cower before you." She struggled again, "Damn you. Let me go." They loosened their grip. As soon as their arms lightened the pressure, she made for the duke with her hands curled into claws. Lucien and Rafe barely retrieved her in time. She was inches away from harming, if not killing, the man.

Lucien watched in amazement as his father paled at her words and stumbled back from her actions. It was the first time he had ever seen fear flash across his father's face. Lucien met Rafe's gaze over Ciara's head and saw his shock and admiration for the woman he helped to restrain.

Sebastian St. Martin, Duke of Stokley, blinked as he absorbed what this woman had said. *Growled* would be a better word. He took in the scene before him. His men, for no reason, had whipped a boy. Two strong men were forcibly holding her, and they were straining to do so. Was it true? Was he a monster? His own daughter cringed from him; his eldest son wanted nothing to do with him. His wife and his stepson barely seemed to tolerate him. Had he been so wrapped up in money that he had not been a father?

His son claimed the boy that his daughter held close for protection. That meant he had a grandson. True, his son wasn't married, but it was a start. His own men had whipped his grandson. For no other reason other than his skin color.

"Let me go. Let me go! I want my son." Lucien and Rafe let her go, but stood ready in case she lunged for the duke

again. Their fears were for naught, this time. She went over to Devonna, took her son out of her arms and held him. She walked away from them with Kosse and sat down on a bench, and rocked him back and forth as she hummed to him.

Lucien turned his gaze to his father. "Leave. Now." Now that the danger was past, his anger surfaced again.

The duke had the grace to look ashamed. "I will see that they are punished. Let me stay for a week. Please, son. We should talk about this. I will make it better. I will take care of it."

"Son? I am not your son. You have never been anything but a tyrant to Devonna and me. Stay if you wish, but stay out of my sight." He turned and walked over to where Ciara sat with their child. *Their* child. He had not been able to protect his own child from his grandfather's anger and hatred.

Rafe took Devonna by the hand, and they left as well, which left the duke alone in front of the mansion.

"I'm sorry Ciara. The men will be punished. Is he all right? Is he hurt?" Lucien sat down on the bench next to her.

"I can't stay here. We are leaving as soon as Faolan gets back."

"You said you would stay the night."

"That was before my son was attacked. I told you I would do whatever necessary to protect him. It is obvious that he isn't safe here. Your father's hatred is too much when it includes my son." Bryn's eyes were closed as he was snuggled against his mother.

"Our son, Ciara. Don't forget that."

"Keep your mouth shut. He doesn't know," she snapped at him.

A new pain washed over Lucien. His son didn't know about him. She hadn't told him. He was losing her for a second time, but this time there was something more to lose. A son.

Bryn stirred in her arms and mumbled something that he couldn't understand. She answered him in the same language. He cuddled up closer to her in a manner that broke Lucien's heart.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Two

A shadow fell over them, and they looked up to see Mrs. Ashley standing there, wringing her hands. "My lord, my own son is about the same age as Bryn, and I would be happy to give some clothes for him."

"Yes please. Thank you, Mrs. Ashley."

She curtsied and headed off to send a footman to her house.

"Mama, I'm sleepy." Bryn spoke into her chest.

Ciara looked at Lucien. "Can he have a room to sleep in until Faolan returns?"

"Of course. We will put him in the room for you." Lucien rose and reached out to take him. When Ciara pulled him tighter against her chest, he blinked back the unexpected sting of tears.

"I just want to carry him for you, Ciara." Her name came out a plea. "I only wish to hold him." *I wish to hold my son* was his unspoken request.

"Bryn." When her son looked up, she smiled as she brushed a hair out of his face. "This man is going to carry you to a room for a nap. He won't hurt you. Kosse will be beside you, and I will be right there as well."

"Okay, Mama."

Bryn turned in her arms and reached out to the tall man, without fear. Lucien saw that and smiled at him. The weight of the boy in his arms felt right. Bryn laid his head on Lucien's shoulder, and he knew the boy had fallen asleep. This felt so

right. Ciara walked beside him, and so did Kosse. When they reached the green room, he didn't want to put him down.

Ciara pulled back the blankets and motioned for Lucien to lay him down. As she undressed her son, she saw that Lucien watched every movement she made. "Would you like to do this?" Her whispered question came.

Lucien stepped forward and finished undressing him. He made sure to cover him up with the blankets. Kosse jumped up on the bed and placed himself between Bryn and the door. Lucien stroked his son's soft cheek before he stepped back.

"It kinda gets you right in the chest doesn't it?" Ciara asked.

He nodded. "I don't understand why..."

"Why your own father was the way he was? I don't know either." Ciara sat on the chaise, patted the spot next to her and waited for him to sit down. She leaned on him to soak up his quiet strength. "I am guessing maybe he was just scared. But isn't how you were raised, the way most of your class does it?"

"Yes. Ciara. I'm sorry I couldn't protect him today."

"What's done is done. If they had broken the skin, I would have killed them all. He has been shaken up, but overall, he will be fine. I trust that you will take care of it from here."

"Then why are you leaving? Stay." She trusted him enough to make sure those men were punished for their actions. That was one the ways she amazed him; when riled, she would defend with her all, but when it was over, it was over.

"I don't belong here. No matter how mean your father is, he was right about one thing. I don't belong here. I have some business to complete, and then we will be going home."

He pulled her onto his lap and slid back into a position where he was in the corner of the chaise with her cuddled up to him. "Where are you staying? You are welcome to stay here."

"No. Don't make this any harder than it is." A low growl from Kosse came just before a muted knock.

"Enter." It was Mrs. Ashley. She set the clothes on a chair and smiled as she saw the once elusive marquess sitting with the mother of his child on his lap, looking quite cozy.

They must have dozed off as well, for both started when another knock came. It was Devonna. It was time for dinner, and Faolan had returned.

"Stay for dinner, at least?"

"Sorry, Wolf. We have to go."

Lucien sent his sister to have someone ready their mounts. Ciara roused Bryn and dressed him in the borrowed clothes. When the boy went into the room to use the chamber pot, Lucien grabbed Ciara around the waist and pulled her up against him.

"Don't do this. Stay." His mouth was inches from hers when she heard her son come back into the room. She pressed a quick kiss on his mouth before she stepped back, took her son's hand and left the room.

Lucien followed her down the stairs and paused when he heard a commotion outside. Weeks opened the door to admit his stepbrother, followed by Christie Smyth, Lucien's current

mistress. She was small and petite, with golden hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion. She was also a vindictive and spiteful woman.

"Saint." She cooed, as she floated across the floor to wait for him by the stairs. "How wonderful to see you. I miss you so when we are apart. Your brother was kind enough to invite me for dinner." She leaned against him as she offered him a view of her bosom that appeared to be in danger of falling out of her dress. She gasped and clung to him when she saw Faolan and Kosse as they walked across the floor. "What are they?"

"Come, Christie, they won't hurt you. You stay here. I have to see my guests out."

With a gaze that was all too personal and knowing, she simpered as she fluttered her eyes at him. "Take your time with that person. I can wait. I will have you all night." Then she stepped back like she would get dirty being too close to Ciara or her animals.

By the time he pried himself away from Christie, Ciara and Bryn were already at the bottom of the steps by their horses. As he stepped outside, he noticed a horse practically flying up the drive. Lather flew from the animal, and as it slammed to a halt, a man jumped off.

Bryn ran to the man who picked him up and hugged him with a familiarity that made Lucien narrow his eyes. A footman claimed the rider's horse and walked him around. The man's gaze lit upon Ciara, and he set Bryn down, saying something that the boy understood, for he climbed up on his horse and waited for them both.

The man was tall. As tall as Lucien. He was leaner but no doubt just a strong, maybe stronger. He moved with a natural grace that reminded Lucien of a wild animal. Reminded him of Ciara's easy movements. He had sandy brown hair and gray eyes. Handsome. Very much so, even with the scar on his face. Lucien's eyes narrowed to slits as he watched their interaction.

"Are ye all right, lass?" The stranger's question came in a rich brogue.

"Aye. We are."

He opened his arms, and she walked into them without any hesitation, her own arms curling around his waist to return the embrace. Lucien saw red as the man's arms closed around her.

"Who are you?" He snapped as he approached the couple.

"That is not really any of your business, lad. Who are you to let harm come to this woman and her son?" The man was tense and more than ready to battle.

"Conar. Let it go. Let us take our leave." Ciara had started to feel the exhaustion from the whole day.

"As you wish, lass." The man named Conar released her and lifted her onto her horse that spoke of familiarity as Lucien trembled with jealousy.

"Who are you?" He bit out. "She isn't going anywhere with you." The tone of one used to being obeyed.

"Aye. She is. She is staying with me. That is all there is to it. The name if you need it, is McKee."

"Ciara, get down from that horse. You aren't going with him."

"Goodbye, Wolf. Enjoy your horse." She spoke to the man beside her in a language they both understood, while he sprung onto his horse. They rode off down the road. The only one who looked back was Bryn who waved. At who, Lucien couldn't be sure.

* * * *

Lucien shut himself in his study and began to drink. He stared at the wolf carving that sat on his desk. As he ran his fingers over it, he swore. He heard the door open and without looking up snapped at the intruder. "Get out."

"Saint?" It was his sister. He couldn't snap at her.

"What is it, Devonna?"

"I was wondering if we could have the wedding here, and I could invite Ciara and Bryn. I would like her to stand up with me."

"Whatever you want. If she agrees, that is fine." He waved her away and returned to his bottle.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Three

Do you love my brother? Devonna's question ran like a litany in her head as Ciara rode away with her cousin toward the home where they were staying, her Aunt Fiona Randolph's. She had gone to Ireland to search out her kinsmen. To her immense surprise, they welcomed her with open arms, Bryn also. They had been saddened by the news of her father's death.

Her grandfather, Rory McKay, Laird of Clan McKay, asked her to stay for a while. She compromised with them by staying in the Randolph house while she concluded her business in England. Her Aunt Fiona had married an English Viscount, and they resided—much to Ciara's surprise—not far from Heartstone. Her grandfather and some of the clan had come on the journey, and she found herself surrounded by family that loved her.

Do I love him? Probably. Regardless of her being so different from him, she did love him. Her newfound family smiled at her unconventional ways and applauded her success with raising Bryn on her own. Bryn loved the attention. Being a great-grandson was a big thing for him. He was happy with his cousins, but he loved most to sit on his great-grandfather's lap and listen to stories of when his grandpa was like as a tyke.

Going back to America would be hard on him. As Bryn rode ahead, Conar looked at her. Her cousin was forever flirting

with her, but she could only laugh. "What happened for you to send Faolan to us, lass?"

"Some of the duke's men were whipping Bryn. We couldn't stay there. Nay, Conar." She laid a hand on his arm when he turned his horse to go back to Heartstone. "Head home. I took care of it. It's over."

"You've a family, lass, that loves ya. If they attack you, they attack us." Conar trembled with anger but turned his horse back around at her request.

"No. I don't want any more trouble. Please. Can we just go home?"

"Aye. As you wish it. We have the party tomorrow night. Are you excited?"

"To be paraded around like an object? No. But I will go because Auntie Fi has gone through so much to set it up. I would rather be in the open, away from these people. They make my head hurt, to tell the truth."

"I agree. But you promised to attend and dance a waltz with me. I intend to hold you to that."

"I haven't forgotten."

"I don't intend to let ye forget it."

"Conar. I would have your word that you will keep calm about this. Please. If it gets out, there is no telling what will happen. To either side."

"Are ye content with the punishment of the ones who did it?"

"As content as I can be." In her mind, there was nothing that would ever make it okay.

"Ye love him." A statement. "The marquess, he is the father o' Bryn, right?"

"Aye. He is, and I do."

"Why dinna he marry ye, lass, when he found out about the *bairn*?"

They dismounted at the house. As they walked in, Conar steered her into the study, where her aunt and uncle-by-marriage sat, unbeknownst to her. Bryn headed for bed with Kosse and Faolan.

"Well, lass? Why dinna he?"

"He didn't know, Conar. Today was the first day he saw his son. I never told him."

Conar sat hard on a chair as his breath escaped him. Fiona and her husband, Trenton, sat in silence as they listened to the story. "How, lass? How could ye do that to the man? A man has a right to know his children." His tone admonished, and that made her feel worse.

"I know what I did was wrong, but," she rose and paced the room, "damn it, Conar. When he told me about his family, I saw nothing but hate in his face. After he had left and come back here and I found out I was carrying his baby, all I could think about was the hate he said he grew up with. I couldn't let that happen to Bryn. He deserved to have love, as I did.

"I know that I'm not rich like he is, but I gave my son something that he wouldn't have gotten here. Love. If he had been raised here, he would have known his father only in passing. If that wouldn't be bad enough, to be labeled the bastard child of the marquess would have been. He is my son. Mine!" Tears streamed unchecked down her face.

"Damn him. Why do I have to love him?" Ciara crumpled to the floor and sobbed. Trenton motioned for Conar to come with him while Fiona saw to Ciara.

Outside the closed door, Trenton faced Conar. "The Marquess of Heartstone? The Black Marquess, that is Bryn's father?"

"Aye. He was the one that the duke sent after the stallion in America. He was injured, and she healed him. His thanks was to get her with child before coming back here."

"Does Bryn know?" Trenton was furious. He had known Ciara for only a few days, but she had touched his heart. His wife Fiona, Fi, was overcome with joy to have her niece stay with her.

"She says no. But I am not sure. Some of the duke's men beat Bryn today."

"What?" Fresh rage and astonishment raced through the viscount.

"She took care of it. She says it's over. Sometimes I think she canna remember she has a family now. She was content with their punishment. I'm thinking that her creatures got a piece o' some of them. I dinna ken what to do. The way she was looking at him today, it near broke my heart."

"She loves him then?"

"Aye. More than she wants to admit. Why else would she no be married now?"

"Should we intervene?" Trenton asked, because he wondered what the other man thought for real.

"I would love for her to be closer. Aye, I think we should."

"I will go tonight and see the marquess. Extend him an invitation to the party tomorrow night. Let him know where she is. Aye. I will let Fi know later." The two men parted ways, and the viscount ordered his carriage.

* * * *

"My lord, you have a visitor." Weeks walked forward with the calling card on the silver platter.

Lucien picked up the card. It read, *Viscount Trenton*.

"Show him in, Weeks." He knew of the viscount. An older gentleman who lived on property that bordered his own.

Rather a quiet man. He wondered what this could be about. Christie was somewhere with his stepbrother, and his parents had left after dinner, headed back to London. He was grateful for that at least.

The door opened, and the viscount entered. "My lord."

"Saint, please. What can I do for you, Trenton?"

"I come to you on a serious matter."

"Speak. Would you care for a drink?"

"Brandy, please." Trenton sat in a chair that faced the desk. He noticed the carving on one side of the desk. He knew the work.

Lucien made them each a drink and sat down across from the viscount. He noticed the direction of his gaze and merely waited for a comment.

"Nice carving."

"I think so."

"If I may ask, where did you get it?"

"A gift. Did you come all this way at night to ask me about a statue you didn't know I had?" Lucien raised a brow and waited for him to continue.

The viscount was nonplussed. "I have come for two reasons. The first to extend an invitation to the party my wife is throwing tomorrow night."

"I am not sure if I will be available."

"It is a party to introduce my niece to the families in the area."

Great. A matchmaking party. Just what he didn't need. He needed to find out who that man McKee was that Ciara rode off with. "As I said, I am not sure of my schedule. I may be able to put in an appearance."

"That would be wonderful. It begins at ten o'clock. The second item is of a more delicate nature. My niece fancies herself in love with you. Although she tries to deny it, my wife and I know this for a fact."

"Sir." The imperious tone of one talking down to a member of lesser status coming out. "I am sorry that your niece has such fancies. However I don't believe I know your niece, and with this new information, I shouldn't make an appearance at your party for fear of encouraging her further."

"Forgive me for being blunt, but is there someone that you do fancy?"

"You, sir, are out of line. However I will answer your question. Yes. My attentions are otherwise occupied and will not be squandered on some country miss."

Trenton rose. He set the glass on the desk and he walked to the door. With his back to the marquess, he grinned. "I do

apologize if I have offended, my lord. It's just that my niece claims you know her in a, shall we say, biblical sense."

Lucien rose from the chair. "Are you saying that your niece claims I slept with her? Sir, unless you have proof of this, you should leave before I lose my good nature. I have not slept with any country miss. Your niece, sir, is a liar. Good night, Viscount Trenton."

Trenton opened the door and slid through the opening. As he turned to pull the door shut, he looked at the marquess. The man looked angry enough to spit nails. "With all due respect, sir, my niece doesn't lie. And before you say anything else, I do have proof. A child."

"A child? I don't have children!" Except one. And he doesn't know about me.

A sad look came over Trenton's face. "That is a shame, my lord. I shall tell my niece she must be wrong. Perhaps she will come to apologize as well. I thought you knew her. Her name is Ciara McKay." He shut the door and left the house.

Lucien sat frozen as he heard the words. Viscount Trenton's niece was one and the same as Ciara McKay. Oh God, what had he done? The Viscount had said that his niece was in love with him. Ciara loved him! She loved him. And he told her uncle he didn't have children. Amidst a groan, he yelled for Weeks. When the butler came, he asked, "Did we get an invitation to the Trenton party?"

"Of course, my lord. You chose to decline."

"Damn. Can we secure another one?"

"Excuse me my lord, I believe that your sister received one as well and accepted." Lucien waved his hand, and Weeks nodded. "I will get her, my lord."

When his sister entered his study, his mission was almost planned. "You sent for me?"

"Devonna. Come sit down. Did you get an invite to the Trenton party?"

"Yes. The party is tomorrow night."

"I wish to accompany you." At her raised brows, he merely shrugged. "I have to get out sometime."

"Uh huh. As you say. Is that all?"

"What? Oh, yes."

He missed her smile as she left the room. Her brother was in good spirits. He had been humming when she entered the room.

Lucien stayed at his desk, staring at the wolf. Picking it up, he looked at the words engraved although he had them memorized.

Wolf,

Aim to the heavens for your dreams,

No matter the obstacle, you will triumph.

Oh yes. His plan was made. He spoke aloud to the room as he walked to the door and smiled. "Okay, Ciara. You said yourself, no matter the obstacle, I will triumph. You are my dreams, you and Bryn, and I will get rid of all obstacles. Your days of being single are numbered, Princess. I am coming for you."

Lucien stepped into the hall and ordered his horse. If he rode hard, he could catch up to his parents. "While you're at

it. Get my carriage, and take Miss Smyth back to her home." Rafe shot him a strange look as he headed for the door.

"Care for some company?"

"I ride to overcome some obstacles. If you care to join me, feel free."

Rafe sent word for his mount. "I feel I have to go with you, for this mood you are in is a strange one. Care to explain it to me?"

"On the way." The men swung up on their horses and set their heels to them. They rode fast and hard. After two hours of hard riding, they came up on the carriage that carried the duke and duchess.

"Stop the carriage."

"We are being robbed," a servant screamed.

"I am the duke's son. I wish to speak to him."

The carriages stopped. Lucien rode over to the window and waited for the duke to pull back the covering. "I am here to let you know that I have every intention of marrying Ciara. Her ... Our son will be my heir. If you can accept that, you will be welcome back at Heartstone anytime. If not, I never want to see you again.

"You see, I learned something when I was with her in America. She taught me that having someone's love is the most important thing. All the riches in the world are useless without someone to share them with. The truth is, I love her. If I can convince her to marry me, I will do so that very day. I will not give her another chance to turn me down."

His stepmother gasped and sputtered, but the duke silenced her with a wave of the hand.

"She opened my eyes to love. True love, something that before I met her I had no idea what it was. You never showed us love growing up. I had hatred in my heart when I spoke of you, which is part of the reason she did not let me know of my son. Now all I feel is pity. I pity the both of you, for you are bitter and hateful to those around you. You wear you title like a shield and don't allow anyone to know you have feelings. I don't understand because you sought a mistress, so you must have wanted something.

"I dream of the love that her parents had. I find myself wanting her to glance at me and smile a smile that only I know what it means. I think that the title of the Black Marquess is gone forever. I really don't care what you do with this information. Devonna will be getting married at my estate. You could try to make up your intolerable behavior to her, to show up to give her away. I am not sure what happened to her. I have been searching for seven years, and I still don't know.

"If you wish to be a part of your grandchild's life, you will do so on my terms. But if you hurt him again, I will not be held responsible for my actions."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Four

They hadn't ridden far when Rafe pulled up his horse, and Lucien followed suit. He knew that his friend would not be able to resist the questions. "Are you serious about all that you said back there?"

Rafe was closer to him than any brother, so Lucien had no qualms about letting him see this side of him. "I meant every word. I live for her smile. A smile that is open, complete and just for me. You read the inscription on the wolf. She made that for me. Those are her words. She believes it. Rafe, she carried me to her cabin when I was wounded." They started walking the horses.

"Carried you? You mean with a horse and carriage?"

"No. I mean, carried. She lived alone up in the mountains. You were there when she was trying for the duke. She is strong. Full of life. Unlike anyone I have ever met. She encouraged me to find my life and pursue it. I learned what it was like to live again. To enjoy my life. For the first time, I had someone who treated me like a person, not a title or a potential husband for a daughter. A person. An ordinary everyday person. I ran trap lines, shoveled snow. It was amazing. I found myself out there.

"She said that I had been fevered for two weeks. I still have the scars from the bear. The nearest town was days away. She didn't care. She was happy. They call her the 'heart of the mountain'. It is where she gets her life, her spirit."

They continued on, and Rafe rode in silence before he commented. "If this was before you left to go over there I would have said you were crazy. Even a month ago, but since I have seen her and you with her, I believe you. I also envy you. All this talk of marrying for duty is not right. You know that I am in love with your sister. I have told you as much. But I want her to love me back. Seeing her laugh and play with Bryn ... It has been so long since I have seen that in her. You said that Ciara helped you find who you were. Do you think she could help Devonna? I would do anything to give her that kind of joy."

"I don't know. For the past seven years, I have tried to find out what happened to my sister. She would cringe away from me when I reached for her. I asked servants, but no one saw any marks on her. Whatever happened to her could be why she's holding the world at arm's length."

Rafe laughed. "Listen to us. We are worse than women. Talking about love and feelings."

"Yes, I am in love. It is a wonderful feeling."

"I agree. So how are you planning to get Ciara back? Will you buy her something? Give her your stables?"

"She helped me design those. I don't think she would want them. I can't buy her anything. I don't know what she could want. I asked her to come back with me, and she told me that she had everything she needed right there."

"What about a statue like she gave you? Where did she get that made?"

"She made it herself. Her father taught her."

"I don't envy the work you have ahead of you. I am going to leave you here and go home. I have to get ready for the party tomorrow at the Trenton house. Will you attend? Or are you going to be busy planning on how to get Ciara?"

"I will be there. Ciara is Trenton's niece. That was one of the reasons he was at the house tonight. I will see you at the party. Goodnight, Rafe."

"Goodnight, Luc. Until tomorrow." As Rafe rode toward his home, Lucien sat and just looked at the sky. He had to get her back. He would find a way.

* * * *

The party was in full swing. Young men jostled each other to be near Ciara. She was a vision in jade. The dress showed the swells of her breasts, and the waist was high and tight. The rest of the dress fell in folds around her legs. She wore gloves that extended past her elbows. Her hair was swept up in an elegant coiffure. She was radiant.

She was going crazy.

She was standing by a table when the butler made the announcement. "The Marquess of Heartstone, Lady Devonna St. Martin, and the Viscount Harrington." Ciara's heart skipped a beat. He was here.

Lucien spotted her as soon as he entered the room. The green of her dress enhanced the bronze of her skin. Of which she showed entirely too much, Lucien determined. His sister slipped away to greet her. People that wanted to speak to the elusive marquess waylaid Lucien. He caught Trenton's look

and nod of approval before the people around him captured his attention.

"Good evening, Ciara ... I mean Miss McKay."

For the first time that night, a smile that wasn't forced crossed Ciara's face. "Good evening, Devonna. Or am I supposed to call you Lady St. Martin?"

"Devonna, please. I like to believe we are friends."

"Devonna, then. But you must continue to call me Ciara."

"Agreed. May I have a private word with you?"

Ciara followed Devonna to a row of empty chairs. They sat side by side as Ciara waited for Devonna to speak.

"As you probably heard, I am getting married to Viscount Harrington."

"Yes. To Rafe, isn't it? He seems a very likeable man. Congratulations."

"Yes, thank you. I was wondering if you would attend? Actually, I was hoping that you would stand up with me."

A look of amazement crossed Ciara's features. Followed by a smile. "I would be honored. When is the wedding?"

"Saint says that we will have it next week. Since the whole thing was rushed. Thank you. Thank you so much." Devonna squeezed her hand then left her alone.

Ciara rose, and young bucks immediately surrounded her again. Lucien watched her from across the room. He alone knew the strain behind the smile she presented. He watched when she believed no one to be looking at her, and she would gaze longingly outside.

As musicians started up a waltz, Lucien moved toward his intended prey when he saw the man she called Conar sweep

in to collect her for the dance. The smile she gave him made Lucien's blood boil and his eyes flash blue sparks. He barely noticed Rafe beside him.

"Still don't know how to handle him yet?"

"Why are you here and not dancing with your fiancée?"

"She is dancing with the host. I can't interfere with that."
Rafe was right. Devonna had a smile on her face as Trenton
spun her around the floor. "Do you know that group of men?"

Lucien found who he pointed out and shook his head. They all kind of looked like Conar. Lucien's gaze found its way back to Ciara. In his opinion, he was holding her too tightly. Conar wore black and cut a dashing figure. Lucien growled low in his throat. When the dance was over, he stalked her. He was going to spend time with her if it was the last thing he did.

Ciara stood next to Conar by an open window as she watched Lucien move toward her. He moved like Kosse, like a predator. He was dressed in black, as was Conar, with a white cravat at his throat. His hair was tousled, and he looked delectable. The look he sent her made her legs feel like pudding.

Before Lucien got to her, a servant came up and whispered in her ear. She turned, all else forgotten and hurried out of the room. She caught his glance then left, following the servant. When he saw Conar head that way, Lucien hugged the shadows as he snuck up the darkened staircase to find where Ciara went in such a rush. Was she running from him?

He heard her voice as it came from a closed room. He peered in the open crack and saw her seated on the edge of a bed as she held her son in her arms, not worried about the

condition of her dress at all. "Mama's here. It's all right, Bryn. I'm here. *Shhh*. You're fine now."

A noise in the hall made him realize the danger of his situation. He shrank back into the shadows where he would not be seen, but could still overhear Ciara.

"I was scared, Mama."

"I know, baby. Everyone has bad dreams."

"I am sorry I took you from your party."

"Nothing, nothing is more important to me than you. You are my son."

"You look beautiful, Mama."

She sighed, "Thank you Bryn. You should lie back down. Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"Yes."

"All right? What story would you like?" Lucien could imagine her hand as it stroked his hair as she smiled down into his face.

"Mama?"

"Yes?"

"Will I beautiful like you when I grow up?"

She laughed a light husky laugh, "No. Men become handsome. And you will be the most handsome of them all."

"Like my father?" Lucien held his breath as he waited for her answer.

"Yes, Bryn. Like your father."

"Do I look like him now?"

"More and more every day." Pain laced her voice with that admission. "What story do you want to hear?"

"Tell me how you met my father."

"Is that the story you want?"

Yes. Yes, Lucien cried silently.

"Yes. That is the one I want."

A sigh reached Lucien's ears. "Very well. It happened at home."

"Home in the mountains?"

"Aye, home. Home in the mountains. I was out with Kosse."

"Mama. You were out with Faolan. You didn't have Kosse yet. You forgot."

"That's right. Faolan. Are you sure you don't want to tell the story. I am old, and I may not remember it all."

"You're being silly, Mama. You're not old. You're the beautifulest woman in the world."

"Oh, Bryn. You are so sweet to say so." Lucien heard loud smacking kisses.

"Mama. The story."

"Right, sorry. I forgot you are getting to old for kisses."

"Not all the time, Mama."

"Okay. So, I was out with Faolan. I heard a bear, and I told myself, 'That is strange. Bears are usually sleeping by now.' Faolan had indicated that there was trouble so I checked the signs and saw that a horse had ridden between a mama bear and her cub. That was why she sounded so angry." Lucien hadn't known about the cub.

"So when I found them, the momma bear was tossing the man around like a doll, and I had to have Faolan's help to get her away from him, so I could help him."

"Like you did yesterday, Mama? At that man's house? When you got so angry? That man and his friend had to hold you. Kinda like that?"

Tears pricked her eyes as she gazed at her son. "Yes, baby. Like that. I am so sorry you saw me like that."

"I was scared, Mama, but I think when you kicked in the door, they were scareder."

Ciara smiled as she looked at her son, staring at her with eyes that were like his daddy's. How resilient children were. "Probably right. Do you want me to finish the story?"

"Sorry."

"After Faolan chased away, I had to get the man back to the cabin, for he was in pretty bad shape. I had to carry him. So I picked him up like I was carrying a deer."

"Over your shoulders?"

"Aye. Over my shoulders. Then I walked back to the cabin with him."

"It was snowing also."

"Right. It was snowing also. He had a fever for two weeks and..."

"You're really strong, aren't you, Mama? Did you pick him up like you did the men you threw around the yard?"

"No." For the first time, her tone was sharp. "Bryn, listen to me. What I did was wrong. I was angry."

"You were stronger than them. You threw them like they were a piece of cloth."

"Enough of that kind of talk, Bryn. What they did was wrong. What I did was wrong. Just because you are stronger than someone does not mean you should use your strength

on them. When I carried your father back, it was different. I was helping him. In that case, using your strength is important." She trailed a finger down the side of his face.

"When you are grown, you will be strong like your father. But you must only use your strength to help those in need. Those weaker than you. Never use your strength in anger, like I did. It is to be used to help, not hurt. Understand?"

"Yes, Mama. Mama, did you like my father?"

"Yes, Bryn. Very much."

"Why did he leave? Didn't he like you?" Six-year-old anger in his tone rang clear to Lucien.

"Yes, he liked me, but he had to go back home. He didn't belong there."

"He had to come back here?"

"Aye. He lives in England."

"Do you think he would like me? Would I like him? Can I meet him?"

"I know he would like you. And I am sure you would like him."

"I like Conar, Mama."

"Me too. You need to get to sleep. I have to go back downstairs, or Auntie Fi will come looking for me."

"Is Conar my father?" Lucien stiffened as he waited for her answer.

"No. He isn't your father. Enough questions for one night. Get some sleep."

"How do I look like my father?"

Ciara shook her head as she tucked her son in. "You have his hair, dark and thick."

"You have dark hair too."

"You have his eyes. The same blue like the deep part of the lake. Now, go to sleep."

"Can Conar be my daddy? I like him a lot."

Lucien's nails bit into his hands. There was no way he would let her marry that man.

"No. Conar can't be your daddy. No more questions."

"Who is my father? I want to meet him."

"Enough, Bryn. Goodnight." Her tone brooked no room for argument, and the boy obviously knew that, for he fell silent. Lucien shrank back as he saw the door open wider, and she slipped through and down the hall.

"Goodnight, Mama." He heard Bryn whisper. "I love you. Night, Faolan, night, Kosse."

Lucien was shocked. Even though his son didn't know who he was, he knew about him. He glanced in the door and saw Faolan and Kosse asleep on either side of his son. "Goodnight, son." He slipped away from the door with only the wolf and cougar as witnesses.

Lucien strolled outside. He needed time to think. He went to the gardens and walked in them. Courting couples hid among the shrubs. Lucien headed for a place he thought would be secluded, but he heard Ciara's voice. And Conar's.

"Is he okay?" Conar asked.

"Aye. He just had another nightmare. Then he wanted a story."

"Ye are a wonderful mother, lass."

"I have good material to work with. He is a wonderful son. Conar, he wants to know who his father is." She ran her hands over her face in desperation.

"Aye. He is coming into that age. He has a right to know. Are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know. He has already met his father."

"That's not fair, lass. He dinna know it at the time. I may not like the man, but he has a right to have his son know who he is."

"It's just that..."

"What's going on out here?" A tall gray-haired man came onto the scene.

"Grandpa. What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for me grandchild? Have you seen her?" His brogue was thicker than Conar's, and Lucien had a hard time understanding him.

"I thought you weren't feeling well. I'm glad you are up and about."

"That tea you gave me did the trick, lass. Give your grandpa a hug. I have years to catch up on." As Ciara walked into his arms, he asked Conar, "What are you two doing out here?"

"We were discussing the fact that she needs to tell her son who his father is."

"Aye. Conar has the right of it, lass."

"It's not fair. He is my son. Why can't I be the one to decide?" Anger sparked her tone.

"Lass, let me tell you a story about an auld man that sent his son away. The man in question was the Laird of the Clan

McKay, one of the largest, fiercest clans on the isle of Erie. He sent his only son to get some slaves from the passing trader ships. His son came back with six. One, a woman, was standing tall in her chains. Her eyes burned with pride and resistance at being a slave. Not even the journey she had endured could dampen her spirit. She was like a princess.

"I firmly believe that if she had spoken our tongue, that day my skin would have been flailed off my body with her wicked words. The son, the sole heir of the chieftain, took the slave for himself. As days passed they learned each other's language. The chieftain told his son that if he felt strongly for the slave to 'tup her and get it o'er with'. He was to be Laird, and a slave was beneath him. His son, as fiery as the hair on his head, freed the slave and handfasted with her. The Laird went into a rage. He verbally attacked his son, in front of the woman he had joined with. She stood up to the man and gave him twice what he had inflicted on his son. That night his son and his beautiful princess left for America. I never saw my son again." He shifted his weight from one side to the other.

"Never had I seen anyone so brave before. Before now. You have your mother's spirit in ye, lass. You don't back down, no matter what. Don't keep the man from his son. I regret what I did every single day. I will spend the rest of my days doing so and trying to make it up to you. You shouldna have been alone. I thought that your mother wasn't worthy of my son. She claimed to be a princess, and she was. I have since traveled to where the slavers said they got her. You are a princess. You are also my grandchild. I love you, lass.

Something I never got to tell my son or his wife. Don't deny his father the same chance. Please. You don't have to go back to America. We are your family now. You and your son will be always welcomed on Erie. Think about it."

Sniffing back tears, she kissed her grandpa on the cheek. "Thank you, grandpa. For everything. I remember Papa used to tell me stories about you. He missed you, you know. Mama would yell at him and tell him to go home. He never did. His pride wouldn't allow it.

"I just don't know what to do. Tonight Bryn asked me if Conar could be his daddy."

Conar laughed and grabbed Ciara around the waist, planting a kiss on her mouth. "Great. When do we marry?"

"Get off me, Conar." Those words saved his life, for Lucien was ready to bound through the hedge and rip him from limb to limb. "Even if I wanted to marry you, which I don't, I couldn't. We're family."

"But I could make you happy. Who cares what people would say?" He teased her now.

"Get off with you." She shoved against his chest as she grinned at the absurdity of his words. "I will think about what you both said as far as him knowing his father. It is just not fair. What if he wants to stay with his father? I could lose him forever. Then I would be alone. But right now we had better get back to the party before Auntie Fi sends the rest of the clan to find us." Her voice wobbled as she tried to control her emotions.

Ciara and her grandpa walked off arm in arm. Conar stood still as he watched them leave. "I know you're back there,

English. I know you heard. Know this, if you allow her to be hurt again, you will answer to me." Conar walked away without another word.

Lucien was surprised that Conar had known he was there and not said a word. The man was honorable. Someday he would have to thank him. She wasn't letting her son know for fear of losing him. Not because she hated him.

By the time Lucien made it back to the party, the musicians had struck up another waltz. As he approached Ciara, he heard some pimply-faced boy ask her for the dance. Before she could respond, he swooped in, "I believe that she had promised this dance to me, sir."

He swung her onto the floor, nearly groaning aloud at the feel of having her in his arms again. "Smile, love, or people will think that you don't wish to dance with me."

"I don't."

He arched a brow. "Why not? I have been told that I am a passable dancer. By the way, you look ravishing tonight. You are the most beautiful one here. With the possible exception of my sister, but familial loyalty decrees I say that." He grinned at her, once again, a marquess overly self-confident, a grin that faltered when he saw the look in her eyes.

"It seems we have come full circle. You are using your title to get what you wish, for you know that I never promised you this dance. And since you know that I am upset, you are spouting compliments to try and soothe me. Unfortunately for you, in the same way you spout them, they flow off me, like water off a duck's back. Save your pretty words for someone

else. Like maybe Christie, or whichever other woman is your current mistress."

"Jealous, Princess?"

"Like I tell you over and over, one can't be jealous of what one doesn't have. I just resent being grouped with the collection of brainless women who find your compliments endearing. When I am nothing like them."

"No, you most definitely are not. You are..."

"I know. Different. I am nothing more to these people, and you, than a freak. I am different, and they want to see how the 'wild American' will act. Don't insult me by adding to it. Just, can we finish the dance in silence?"

The detachment in her voice struck a nerve with him. He hadn't looked in the situation from her point of view. She was correct, and while no one would insult her openly for it was her aunt and uncle who hosted the party, there were titters behind fluttering fans. Men joked about how it would be to *make it* with the dark skinned savage.

The dance ended. Before she could pull away, he whispered for her ears alone. "I never thought that of you. For what it's worth, Princess, I think you are the most beautiful woman here." He thought to appease her. It had the opposite effect.

Eyes flashing fire, she glowered at him. "I know. I am beautiful, for a savage, a heathen. Anything someone would wish to sleep with just to say that they had. I know. For all your pretty words, I am still only good enough to be a mistress. Never a wife. Good night!"

Ciara spun around and pleaded a headache to her aunt then sought her room. She left Lucien with a swirl of jade silk and the subtle scent of honey and berries. Her scent. He watched her disappear up the stairs. He didn't know how to proceed. She was unlike any other. Compliments didn't work. Trinkets wouldn't work.

"She's full of fire, isn't she?" Rafe stood at his elbow. "So what's your plan? Are you going to kidnap her, take her to Greta Green and marry her?"

Lucien laughed at his friend. "No way. I wouldn't get within three feet of her."

"What's the problem? Her animals know you. Just go grab her."

"The last time I went into her room to wake her from a nightmare, her knife was sliding in my throat before she was fully awake. No thanks. I don't plan on doing that anytime soon."

"Are you sure you wish to be saddled with such a woman? Perhaps she is a little too much for you to handle."

"Silence. There is no woman alive that is too much for me to handle. In all honesty, Rafe, I am not sure what to do. I don't know how to get time alone with her. I have to consider Bryn as well."

"You are consulting the wrong man. I know nothing. Now if you will excuse me, I am going to take my fiancée away from all those slobbering fools." Rafe walked off toward Devonna.

"You know her animals are with her son tonight, English. Her room is the third on the left." The words came to him

from behind a pillar. Lucien moved off with just a nod of his head. Now was his chance to speak to her.

Ciara had long since rid herself of her dress. Damn clothes, just about killed a person. She was in her buckskins, sitting in front of the open window as she gazed out on the fields of grass that wafted in the breeze. Oh, to be free again, outside where the air was crisp and cool. To swim in her lake, ride her horses. Maybe Ireland was the answer. She knew it was untamed there. Maybe that would work.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't consciously hear the door swing open, but her body knew he was there. He approached on silent feet. The breeze blew her fragrance to him, and she stiffened like a hound on the scent.

Lucien stood in the middle of the darkened room while she sat framed by moonlight. Her dress was tossed carelessly on the floor, and she sat cross-legged in her buckskins. Her hair was braided and hung down her back.

Even from this distance, he could read her like a book. She wanted to be out there. Not trapped in this world that he lived in. It was killing her spirit. "Ciara." The name spoken like a lover's caress was soft and gentle.

"Good evening, Wolf. Why have you come here?" She didn't start at his voice, so she had known he was there.

"I came to speak to you. Will you give me a chance to explain?"

"Come sit down, and speak your piece." Tiredness was evident in her entire body.

Lucien sat beside her. Her skin shone in the moonlight. "How do you like England? It is pretty, is it not? I was

surprised to find out that Trenton was your uncle. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't any of your business."

Leave it to his princess to ignore the niceties and hit the heart of the matter.

"If I had known that this was where you were staying, I wouldn't have said anything. I..."

"You have no right. I didn't tell you because where I stay is not your business." Her voice came hard and fast. "The only reason you wondered is because you thought I was lying with some other man."

"Well, yes. I have a right to..."

"No. You don't. Whether I chose to stay with a man or other is not your concern. I ceased being your concern the moment you crossed that field back in America. Before that even. Why are you trying to lay claim to me? I am not yours." Ciara sighed, "I have never been yours."

"Damn it. Yes, you are. You always have been, since I woke up in your cabin. Nobody else can have you." I won't let anyone else have you.

"Why? Why not? I am nothing but a novelty to you. Not good enough to marry, but good enough to sleep with. Why can't I allow the same for someone else? Did you even think of me over the past seven years?"

"Every day, and don't say that about yourself. You are not a whore. Do you understand me?"

"Oh. I understand. I am just *your* whore. I see. So I am to be set up for use at your disposal but not for anyone else's?" The bitterness she spewed only fueled his determination.

"You are not my whore. Not any whore." His words fell like chips of ice.

"I forgot. I am the mother of your bastard. Listen to me. I don't understand what you are doing. I don't understand why you feel like you have the right to be jealous of someone like Conar."

"Damn it. Because you belong to me." He grabbed her and applied a bruising kiss to her lips as he hauled her up against his rigid body. With anger. Maybe fear. "I won't share you with anyone. You are mine. You always have been." There was fortitude in the force of those words.

Wrenching free, she stared at him, tears poured down her face. "You won't share me? Tell me then, since I am yours, does that mean during all this time that I belonged to you that you belonged to me as well."

"Yes." He gritted out. "You have always been with me."

"That was not my question. Tell me, did you think of me when you were sleeping with your mistresses? I assume that you had more than one, a man with your reputation. You didn't belong to me, and I don't belong to you. Don't you see?"

"I'm a man."

"So. I'm a mother. Do you understand that? Regardless of what you think, it is not flattering to tell a woman that you thought about her every time you were sleeping with another woman."

"Yes. You are a mother, of my son." This wasn't working. Maybe he should be honest with himself and her.

Ciara fell back against the window, no strength left to support her own body. "I hated you, you know. For leaving me. For leaving me pregnant. Alone." She spoke in hushed tones, almost as if speaking to herself.

"I didn't know." His voice pleaded for her understanding.

"I know. I was losing my independence, and you had left to find your dreams. Then Bryn was born, and my world changed. He is my everything. If he likes it here, I will lose him. You have the power to take him from me. You can give him things I can't even dream of. And I will be left alone again."

Oh sweetheart, what have I done to you? "No. You gave him life, and you fill his life with love. You are his mother, and I can't take that away from you. I don't want to take that away. He loves you so much. His smile when he sees you could rival the sun for brightness. I have no wish to take him from you. Ciara, don't you understand that?

"I'll admit that I haven't been a monk since my return, but I compared everyone I was with to you. They all fell short. I know that is not what you want to hear, but it is the truth." He ran his hands through his hair. This wasn't going well at all. "Ciara, there is something unique about you. You are so special. It breaks my heart to think that I hurt you. I never wanted to do so.

"What you said to me, tonight, on the dance floor is so untrue. Maybe at one time but not now, definitely not now. I don't see you as a conquest to be lorded over my friends. I don't have the words for the exact way you make me feel, but when I do, I will be sure to tell you." Lucien slid his body

between hers and the window, so she leaned on him. He wrapped her in his warm embrace as he spoke softly into her ear.

"I want you to stay with me. I want you to marry me. I want to marry you. I want to have what your parents had. I know that you don't believe me, and I will spend every day trying to make you do so. Don't go back to America without giving me a chance. Please. I will find a way to prove myself to you. I will.

"I love you. I love you, Ciara Malika McKay. One day you will believe me, and that will be the happiest day of my life. Then I will marry you. We will grow old together, and watch our son grow up with his siblings. Together. You and me. You will never have to be alone again."

He rose and wiped her tears away with his thumbs. Lucien drew her up into his embrace, buried his nose in her hair and just held her. When she relaxed, he leaned back and kissed her on the mouth, gently. He kissed her again and again until his body stirred in response. To the bed he carried her, and after he took off her clothes, he tucked her in.

Lucien pulled back and placed one last kiss on her lips. "I know my limit. I have to go. I will see you soon. Goodnight, Princess. I love you." Lucien left the room as quietly as he had arrived, leaving an emotionally exhausted Ciara alone in the bed.

Confused. Wondering. Wishing. Hoping.

* * * *

Ciara rose late the next day. She dressed slowly as though the night had added fifty years onto her life. She made her way down stairs and looked for her son. He was outside playing. With Lucien.

"Morning, Princess." His deep voice reached her as she stepped out into the late morning light.

"Good morning, Mama. I was going to wake you, but he said I should let you sleep." There was no need for her son to identify who *he* was. "I was going to go with him to name the baby horse we brought him, but he said we had to ask you first. Can I go with him, Mama? Please? I'll be good. Promise."

"Give me a minute, Bryn. Come give me a kiss first. Then I need to speak to him alone."

Bryn ran up the stairs and threw his arms around his mama. He kissed her soundly on the cheeks, hugged her and then let her go to run back down the stairs. "Well, can we? Mama? Please?"

"I need to speak to him alone first, Bryn. Go play with Faolan and Kosse for a bit."

"I promise to take care of him, Ciara." Lucien's voice intruded, unwelcome into the conversation.

"See, Mama. It's all right. He said."

"Brenden Kumi. Enough. I said go. I will not repeat myself." Ciara glared at her son, and he knew better than to add anything else.

As he walked away, he looked back at Lucien and added in a whisper his mama was not supposed to hear, "Mama's mad. Better be nice to her."

"I will." He sent the response with a wink to the boy who grinned and scampered off.

Before he could fully turn his attention back to the woman on the stairs, she ripped into him. "Damn you! I will not have you undermining my authority with my son."

"Our son."

"My son. You will not put him in the middle of this. Don't expect him to fight your battles for you. I won't have it."

"Okay, okay. It was poorly done. I just want to spend some time with him. Let him come with me."

A footman brought a message out on a tray for Ciara. She read it in silence, not so much as a flicker giving away what it said. She placed it back on the tray and spoke quietly to the servant, and he disappeared back into the house.

"What was that?"

"Nothing for you to be concerned with." She bit her lip as she watched her son. "Very well. You win. We tell him now, that you are his father, and he can spend the day with you, on one condition. Faolan goes with him."

"Why the sudden change?"

"What now? You don't want him to know?"

"No. I do, I just don't understand why you agree now?"

"I never disagreed, I just wasn't sure of the right time to do so." Ciara wouldn't meet his gaze as she walked over toward her son, leaving him to follow.

"Bryn. Come sit. There is something that we need to tell you."

He ran over and plopped down beside his mother, looking up at her with such love and trust it nearly brought tears to

her eyes. "What, Mama? Can I go with him? To see the horses?"

"Aye. You can. But first there is something I have to tell you. I should have told you a long time ago." Lucien sat beside her, rubbing the lower part of her back in quiet support. "It is about your father." Bryn sat still then and looked between his mom and the man next to her.

Eyes that were wiser than they had any right to be took in the picture. "It's you." Not a question. Just a plain statement. "You are my father. You have my eyes."

"Yes." Lucien's voice cracked as he answered, hoping that the boy would not condemn him for not saying so earlier.

Bryn looked at his mom who looked so sad. He spoke to her in the language she used to sing to him. His grandmother's language. He didn't care that the man couldn't understand him. "Did he not want me, Mama? Is that why you didn't tell me?"

Ciara reached down for Lucien's hand and squeezed it as she answered her son in the same language. "No. That is not why. He didn't know about you until the other day at his house. He wants you so much and loves you. If you are to be angry, be mad at me, not him. Give him a chance, Bryn. He really wants to be a father to you. He would love for you to go with him still today, but it is up to you."

Lucien felt lost. He had no idea what they were saying, and that scared him. Bryn seemed to be angry, but Ciara maintained her calm, like always. Bryn looked at him and seemed to size him up before he said something else to his mother.

"I like him, too, Mama. I think I will like having him as a father. Besides, Conar told me that sometimes surprises are the best things that can happen to you. We can be a family now."

"One thing at a time. Right now, we should speak English because it is rude to speak when he is unable to understand us. Are you all right?"

"Yes, Mama. I am strong." Bryn glanced at Lucien before he asked his mom, "What should I call him?"

"I think that is something the two of you should work out. Now, no more unless it is in English."

Bryn turned to Lucien and looked him in the eye. "What am I supposed to call you? Mama said I should ask you."

Lucien swallowed hard. "What would you like to call me? My name is Lucien, but some people call me Saint."

A thoughtful look crossed Bryn's face. Nothing like a sixyear old trying to figure out what to call someone. Lucien bit the inside of his lip as he waited. "Well, Mama says that you do want me and that the reason I didn't know about you was because of her. She says you love me. Is that true?"

"Yes. I love you very much." How it must have hurt Ciara to admit to her son that she was the reason he did not know his father. He was so proud of his princess.

The boy heaved a sigh. A sign that told anyone who knew six-year olds even a little that everything was all right in their world. He rose and scrambled to sit in Lucien's lap. "Papa." His decision firm. "I will call you Papa. That way I have both a mama and a papa." He gave Lucien a hug that almost choked the air from his body, and Lucien had never felt better. This

was what it was like to have a family. He had found his contentment. He hugged Bryn back and finally felt peace.

Bryn pulled back from him and touched his face. "Your face is wet. Are you hurt? You are crying. Mama can fix just about anything. You should have her look at it." He jumped into his mama's lap and kissed her. "I will go with him still. Are you coming, Mama?"

"No. There is something that I have to do. You go with Faolan. Have fun, and make sure you listen to him."

"Yes, Mama." He jumped up and ran off yelling behind him, "Come on, Papa. Faolan, let's go."

Lucien rose and pulled Ciara up into his arms. He pressed a kiss to her neck as he whispered, his words trembling with emotion, both shed and unshed. "Thank you. Thank you for giving me a son, my son."

She pulled back and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Go on. Have fun. Keep him safe."

"Are you sure you won't come with us?"

"You two need some time together." She smiled as she watched her son beckon to the man he had just learned was his father.

"I love you, Ciara." Lucien placed a caressing kiss on her lips, making her sigh and lean into him instinctively. His chuckle made her realize where they were. As she pulled back, he smiled at her. "You may not be ready to tell me how you feel, but your body is and does."

Ciara backed up to put some much-needed distance between them. "Be good, Bryn, and have fun."

"Bye, Mama. Love you."

"I love you, too, baby."

"What about me? Don't you have something to say to me?" Lucien's purr sounded in her ear.

"Take care of him."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Ciara didn't even get one complete step in before she was spun around. Her eyes wide with shock, she looked into Lucien's hard gaze. With a jerk, he had her up against him and kissed her once more. No caressing kiss, this one spoke of possession. He had made his claim, and she had just realized it was her. The kiss was fast, hard, deep and commanding. He had issued his command: remember me, and remember this, for you belong to me. Just as quickly as it began, the kiss was over. It left her shaky and wanting more.

"Have a nice day, Princess." He walked off toward their son.

Ciara watched as they left for his estate on horseback before she got ready for her appointment. She had sent Faolan with her son and had kept Kosse with her. She was going to need the support.

She rode hard. It was a little over four hours on horseback to her destination, and she wanted the confrontation over with. Kosse kept pace with her in the shadows of the trees. She swung down from Artemis and took a deep breath before she handed the reins over to a footman and walked up the steps with Kosse flanking her. When she knocked on the door, a dour-faced butler answered her summons.

"Where is he?" Ciara asked the pinched-face man.

"His Grace is waiting for you in the library." Disdain was evident in the man's tone. "That creature will have to wait outside." He spoke as if he had managed to put a crimp in her plans.

"He comes with me." She brushed past him and entered the house. *Museum* would be a more apt word. It was sterile in its cleanness, and there was no feeling of warmth present. There were many priceless items, but nothing to make it feel like a home. Ciara suppressed a cold chill as she looked around.

"He was most insistent that no creatures come with you."

"Then he will have to be upset. Where is he? You tell me, or I will find him myself." She moved through the foyer as she guessed where the library would be.

"Wait." The imperious tone of the butler came. "Follow me."

He led the way past gaping servants to a beautiful solid oak door covered with intricate carvings. Momentarily forgetting where she was, she gazed at the door as her fingers lovingly ran over the markings. It was a mythological scene depicting Zeus as he enslaved the Titans. The butler knocked and when bade from within, stood back and let Ciara enter. Then he shut the door behind him, leaving her alone in the room with the duke.

"What do you want of me?" she demanded.

"You were told to leave the animals outside."

"I would not be dumb enough to face you without someone I trusted at my back."

"Humph. Come in, and sit down. We have business to discuss." His liver-spotted hand waved her forward.

Ciara sat in a straight-backed chair while Kosse stayed between her and the door. "Why did you send for me?"

"Did you tell my son?"

"I don't need your son to protect me. No, I said nothing to him."

The Duke of Stokley gazed at the proud young woman across from him. He wanted to hate her so much. He did hate her. But he also respected her, something that she would never know. "Have you no manners? You did not even curtsy when you came in, never mind your dress. Trousers are for men."

"Why bother with niceties? I did not ride four hours to discuss what honors you believe I should bestow upon you. You called me. I came. Be happy with that much. What do you want? You are wasting my time." Ciara kept her tone hard.

"How much?" The duke rasped. "How much will it take?" When she raised her eyebrows, he cackled with glee. "I knew it, money always works for your kind. That is what you were after from the beginning."

"Enough." Ciara broke in. "What are you talking about? How much what? What is it you are trying to buy?"

"Why, your leaving, girl. I am willing to pay you to go away and not marry my son. How much? I will have the money for you before the end of the day. How much will it cost for you and that brat of yours to disappear?"

"Don't call my son a brat. I won't take your money. I never wanted your money. I never wanted your son's money. I don't need it. Is that what all this was about? You wasted my day. Goodbye." Ciara rose and headed for the door.

"Get back here. I am not finished with you." His tone caused her to narrow her eyes in response. She turned slowly and approached the desk, moving with all the grace of the wildcat that kept pace with her. Her loose-limbed gait as she stalked toward the duke made him realize what his son saw in her. She was magnificent. No cowering or simpering before him just because he was a duke. If the back of his chair hadn't been there, he would have drawn back in response to the glare he saw in her eyes. The tables had turned; he was now the prey.

"What? Why do you keep me here?" Ciara placed her hands on the edge of the desk and silently dared the duke not to back away from her gaze.

"I could have you thrown onto a ship never to be seen or heard from again."

Her voice dropped to a purr as she leaned in closer. "Aye. And I could have Kosse kill you here and now. Your threats don't scare me. You are a lot of talk. You hide behind your title and use it to intimidate people. That doesn't work for me."

"Why did you come here?" This sudden change in conversation almost caught her off guard. Almost.

"To fulfill a promise I made to your son."

"And the child." She noticed he didn't say *brat*. "Was he an attempt to get money?"

"No. If that was the case, I would have said something when he was born."

"My son wishes to marry you. Regardless of how I feel about this, I can't and will not have the family name hurt. Soon this will be just another one of his scandals that will blow over. The wedding will take place here. We will show our support."

That did catch her off guard. "I have not said I would marry your son."

The duke continued as if she had not said anything, though he had heard what she said. Perhaps there was something more to her; maybe his son was the one after her. "After the novelty of you wears off, he will be back with his mistresses and forget all about you. Perhaps leave you in the country or send you away somewhere. Then we could just forget about you." The duke leveled a stare at her that shot fire. "He's changed, you know. When he came back from your bloody country of upstarts. What did you do to him?"

"Do you even know what your son went through?" Ciara backed off and stood, arms crossed, as she looked at the old man in front of her.

"He said that he was injured for a bit. Unimportant, I was concerned with the horse he was bringing."

Ciara shook her head in disbelief. No wonder Lucien was the way he was. "He almost died. Did you know that? Died. Dead. As in, no more son. Can you comprehend that?"

The duke's mouth shut with a snap. This was news to him, she could tell. "What are you talking about? He said he got knocked off a horse. Stupid boy never could ride like he

should." The duke narrowed his eyes as he watched for her reaction.

"Aye, he did get knocked off his horse. Because a bear attacked them. When I found him, he was being tossed around like a rag doll. He was near death for two weeks." Indignation rose along with her voice. "You should be ashamed. You are the worst kind of man. Your son almost died. Your own daughter has been tormented in her own home, and you allow it. You can't see past your own face." Hands slapped down on the desk gaining the complete attention of the duke as she lowered her face even to his withered one. "You are a bastard of a man, and if I never see you again, it will be too soon. Stay away from me. Stay away from my son. This conversation is over."

Ciara made it to the door when she heard a single word from behind her. "Wait." She turned back to the duke who looked paler than usual. "Wait. What did you mean? About my daughter?"

"I didn't speak in tongues. You figure it out. Whatever dislike you have for me, I don't understand it, but I don't care. Your daughter still loves you though you have neglected her for her entire life. And for some reason, your son wants you to be proud of him. Although why, I couldn't tell you.

"I don't know what you have against me. You don't even know me. The only connection we have is through your son and the horse he brought you. My meeting him was an accident, for I am sure that he would never have wished to been attacked by the bear. I healed him, for that is what I do. Nothing more. I am sorry that you lead such a bitter life. I

saw that in your son when he first woke up. You're right. He did change. He learned what it was like to enjoy life. Good day." Ciara left before the duke could form a response.

Striding down the hall, she walked into the entrance of the house, trying to imagine what it was like to grow up in such a place without love. Her life had been full of it, and she couldn't imagine what Devonna and Lucien went through. A shocked gasp caught her attention.

The duchess was coming down the large staircase. "What are you doing here?" She demanded. "Why are you in my home?"

"I'm not. I'm leaving." She did. Jogging down the steps, she vaulted into her saddle, turned Artemis down the drive and set her off with a touch of her heels. Soon the house and its eerie atmosphere were far behind. She rode up to her aunt's house and, instead of handing the reins over to the footman, she asked, "Has my son returned yet?"

"No, miss. He is still with the marquess. I mean, his father." The man blushed.

"Thank you." It was time for Bryn to eat his dinner. She waved goodbye to the footman, and when he raised his hand in return, she grinned, glad that the staff had overcome their initial distrust of her and her odd trouser-wearing ways.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Five

The butler, Weeks, opened the door for Ciara. "Hello, Weeks. Is my son here?"

"Good afternoon, Miss. He is out with his father. I believe they were going to the stables to name the horses."

"Thank you, Weeks." Turning, she was brought up short by a soft voice.

"Wait. Miss ... Ciara. Do you have a moment?" It was Devonna, wearing a light green day dress that enhanced her beauty. Despite that, she still looked sad.

Ciara nodded, "Of course, I was just heading to the stables. Would you care to join me?" Devonna came outside with her. Ciara watched as she worked her bottom lip with her teeth. "Maybe a walk to the lake?" Ciara continued. "I could go for stretching my legs after such a long ride."

"Yes. I would like that."

Ciara gestured for her to walk and fell in beside her. Ciara waited for her to speak.

A large black streak came running up, and Ciara bent to greet Faolan. Bryn must know she was here. "Was there something you wished to tell me?" Devonna looked close to tears. Ciara rose and opened her arms, and Devonna fell into them as her cries came out in a torrent. They stood there on the path, one a woman with a checkered past and a tortured soul, the other a woman of strength and kindness who loved a marquess, but just couldn't accept it yet.

Ciara just held her and let her cry. Devonna's legs began to shake so Ciara led her over to sit beneath a tree and continued to hold her as she would hold her own child if he were crying. Rocking Devonna back and forth, Ciara let her cry it all out, knowing she would speak when she was ready.

Lucien had seen Faolan run off and knew that Ciara was around. Bryn knew it as well. "You go in and get some food while I look for your mother."

"I want to tell her what we did today, Papa." That word still made Lucien choke up with tears.

"Fine. You tell her, but first we have to eat. Run inside, and tell cook to get you something."

"'Kay. See you inside, Papa."

"I'll be along soon." He ruffled his son's hair. *His* son. And swallowed back tears when he got a hug.

"Love you, Papa." Then he was gone, off running with the spirit of a child.

Lucien looked toward the lake and saw Faolan so he headed that direction. What he saw when he arrived was more than he expected. His sister was sitting in Ciara's lap like a little child. Her head was tucked up under Ciara's chin, and Devonna was shaking.

Ciara rubbed her back as she began to sing a quiet song. It was not in English, but Devonna seemed to understand the feeling of the song. Her sobs slowed until she was almost silent. Ciara didn't stop but simply continued as if she were doing something ordinary, as if it was normal for her to hold a grown woman in her lap as she cried.

Faolan rose, and Ciara followed his gaze to look into Lucien's blue eyes. One eyebrow rose in silent question. Without stopping her song or the rocking, she shook her head slightly. Lucien nodded as he stepped back. Now was not the time for him to find out what was going on. He headed back to the house. His sister needed something that he was unable to give her, and obviously, Ciara could.

After Lucien disappeared from sight, Devonna raised her head, her face streaked with tears, red and blotchy. She scooted off Ciara's lap and hung her head in shame. "I am so sorry," she stammered. "I don't know what came over me."

"Everyone needs a shoulder to cry on from time to time." There was no censure in her tone, only quiet understanding.

Devonna realized that Ciara wasn't going to press her for the problem. "Why aren't you asking me what's wrong? Or telling me to stop crying because a lady never shows her emotions?"

"If you wish to talk about it, you will. And I am the last person that can be telling you what a 'lady' would do. I'm wearing breeches." Ciara turned to Devonna and took one of her hands in her own. She looked her right in the eye and spoke softly, "I am here if you do wish to talk about it. But I will never force you to do so."

"I feel so bad about deceiving Rafe. I mean Lord Harrington."

"Why? What are you deceiving him about? Are you not going to marry him?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. I am so excited about marrying him. I have always had a crush on him." A girlish smile

crossed her face. "No, about him marrying someone who isn't a virgin." She blushed at the word.

"Look at you. You blush just saying it. How can he think you are anything but a virgin?"

"But I lost proof."

"No. It was taken from you. Devonna, do you trust me?"

"Yes. I'll admit I don't know you very well, but I think I trust you." She nodded. "I am sure I trust you."

"Tell your brother." The look of horror that crossed Devonna's face made Ciara reach out and hold her arm to keep her from bolting away. "Listen to me." Using a tone that she used with Bryn when he was being stubborn. It worked like it did with her son. She stayed even though she was nervous. "Your brother loves you. I have seen the look of pain on his face when you pull away from him. He would never hold that against you. And I don't believe Rafe will either. Lucien took you away from them seven years ago. In that time, has he ever done anything that would make you think that he would be like Richard?"

"How did you know who?" Her breath came in short gasps.
"I figured it out. Answer me. Has he?" Her tone was sharp.
"No. He hasn't."

"Then why are you punishing him? All he sees is a sister who can't stand him. And yet, he still stands by you. He stood up to your father when he wanted you to marry that other man. You trusted him for that, why not with this? He won't turn his back on you.

"Think about it. In the seven years that you have been here, have you ever felt threatened by him? Has he ever

made you uncomfortable? I would bet not. I know that what Richard did was horrible and inexcusable, but that was Richard, not Lucien. Don't punish the brother that loves you for something the other one did to you."

"I am going to the house to see my son. Think about what I said. I think that you also should tell Rafe. If you wish to tell them I will be there with you should you desire it. Both your brother and fiancé are good men, and don't forget that. Don't let Richard win by ruling your life with fear."

* * * *

"Mama." Bryn jumped at her and hugged her. "I missed you today. Where did you go? What did you do? I had fun. I got to name the baby we brought for Papa. Guess what I named him? Guess, Mama!"

She set him down and ruffled his hair. "Give me a minute, Bryn. You are asking too many questions at once. One at a time. I missed you too. Now, what did you name the colt?"

"What fun is that? Guess, Mama." Hands on hips, he looked affronted that she would dare to take his fun away.

"All right. A guess. Let's see."

Ciara chewed on her bottom lip as she pretended to think hard on this question, while Bryn danced from foot to foot with impatience as he chanted, "You'll never guess."

Lucien stood in the doorway to the kitchen and watched interaction between mother and son. "Humm. I think ... no I'm going to say," she leaned down to his ear and said in a stage whisper, "Storm."

Astonishment crossed his face, Lucien's as well. Bryn stamped his foot and demanded as his lower lip stuck out, "How did you know that? Who told you?"

"No one told me. No one had to." She placed a kiss on his scrunched up face. "I'm your mother. I know all." She winked at him and stood. "How was he today?" The question was directed to the man in the doorway that took up more space than he had a right to.

Lucien entered the room, making it feel even smaller, "He was a very well behaved boy. My son did wonderful." He watched proudly as Bryn darted off to play with Kosse with a wave to them both. "How did you know what he would name the colt?"

She gifted him with a rare full-blown smile. "Like I said, I am his mother, and I know."

He crossed over to her, completely immune to the kitchen staff that watched them with amazement, and drew her into his arms. "Tell me then 'mother who knows all' what am I going to do?" His voice was throaty and sent shivers flying all over her body. His passion-filled stare ran hungrily over her body.

Ciara's own body flared in response as her tone deepened with desire. "Kiss me." A plead? A wish? Who knew? Two words. Simple words. Rocked him to the core.

"As my princess commands." Growling low in his throat, he did just that. Melting into his embrace, Ciara forgot where she was, who she was. Forgot everything except the feel of his lips on hers, his body pressed intimately against hers.

A low whistle brought them both back to the present. Lucien raised his head to look at the kitchen staff that was trying not to smile and failing. Ciara tried to pull away, but his arms locked around her like chains, holding her prisoner. A willing prisoner.

"Let me go, Wolf." She spoke softly.

"Never," the word so quiet she wasn't sure she heard correctly. He opened his arms so she could step back. His gaze belied his motion. They agreed with the single word he spoke. They heard childish laughter and saw Bryn and Devonna standing in the doorway watching them.

Devonna raised an eyebrow in perfect imitation of her brother. Which caused Bryn to laugh even harder. "You two look like you got caught doing something bad," his voice full of joy.

"Bryn." The warning came from his mother. He ran off, trying not to laugh, knowing that his mother wasn't really angry with him at all.

"Saint?"

"Yes, Devonna?"

"Can you arrange for a meeting with Lord Harrington two days from now? I wish to speak to both of you."

"About what?"

"Please. In two days. Can you do that?"

"Yes. I will send a note today." Lucien was confused, but at least his sister was coming to him.

"Ciara, will you be there as well? Please?"

"Aye." Ciara answered before Lucien could ask why. She sent a look toward Devonna that spoke of pride.

As his sister left, Lucien turned to Ciara. "What did you do today?" His hand rode the small of her back as they walked out of the kitchen to a sitting room.

"Nothing important. Just answered a letter."

"From whom?" A wave of jealousy hit him.

"Don't worry about it. I have to get back. It will be time for Bryn to find his bed soon. Thank you for keeping him today."

"There is no need to thank me for watching my own son, Ciara." He sat her on a small couch then sat beside her. Draping his arm over the back and consequently her shoulders, he sat in silence, enjoying being with her. After a bit he wondered, "How did you know what he named the colt?"

Leaning her head against his shoulder, she chuckled. "The night the colt was born, a wild storm raged through the mountains. When Bryn saw him the next day for the first time, he asked me if the storm had left him a baby to play with. I knew from that day on he would always think of the colt as Storm."

"Was he disappointed that he didn't get the colt?"

"No. He had Toka, and since he was allowed to play with all of them, it never occurred to him to want the colt. He loves horses and is very good with them."

"I know. I was amazed the first time I saw him on that horse. He handles him like he has been schooled in horsemanship."

"He wants to race them. Maybe if you helped him then I wouldn't feel so nervous about it. Or talked him out of it. From what I remember, the races can get nasty at times.

When it's just the two of us, I don't worry cause we are just racing for fun. Not money."

"You let him race? Are you crazy, woman? He is too young to be racing."

"He has been on horseback since before he was born. Toka would never hurt him nor would any of the other horses I've put him on. Don't you think that I would be the first one to tell him no, if I thought he would be in danger? Look, life in the mountains is dangerous. He needed to know how to ride. Besides a growing boy likes adventure."

"All right. You're right. You wouldn't put him danger. I could take him to a race with me tomorrow. I have two horses racing. You could come as well." A family outing.

"No. I need to get away from people for a while. If you are sure you wish to have him with you, and he agrees then I see no problem with it." Except she did. Every moment father and son spent together would make it harder for her to take him when the time came to go home. *So stay,* the voice in her head spoke.

"We can ask him." Pulling her back when she stood, he tucked her in along his side again. "When he comes in. I don't want to share you right now. Just let me hold you."

It was nice to be in his arms. She relaxed against him and watched the sun start to set. "Mama. Mama." The childish yell reached her long before the child did.

"Brenden Kumi. What have I told you about yelling inside?"
"Not to do it. Sorry, Mama." He looked only a little put out
as he climbed up on her lap. "I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

Lucien shook with silent laughter. *Always hungry. What a child.* "Dinner will be served in three hours."

"That long? I'm hungry now."

"Bryn, that is when the adults eat. You will be sleeping," Ciara spoke softly.

"Mama, why can't I eat with you? I miss eating with you."

"I miss eating with you, too, baby. Normally I would have eaten with you, but you are here, remember? I will have dinner with you tonight, but we should go now."

"Why don't you eat here? That way, Bryn can spend the night, and we can leave in the morning?" The words were out of Lucien's mouth before he knew he spoke them, and he blanched at the look on her face.

"Where we going in the morning, Mama?" The promise of an adventure overrode the immediate need for sustenance.

"Your father wanted to take you with him to a horse race. He has two horses entered. What do you think? Would you like to go?"

If bouncing was any indication that he did, he was ready now. She stilled him with a touch as he repeated, "Yes. Yes. Yes." Over and over.

"Don't tell me. Tell your papa." She had a hard time getting out the word *papa*, Lucien noticed.

Bryn jumped over onto his lap and hugged him hard. "Can I go with you, Papa? I will be good and all that other icky stuff mama makes me promise to do."

"Yes, you can come with me. Are you going to sleep here tonight?" Lucien asked his son, deliberately avoiding Ciara's gaze as he tried to stifle a grin at his son's words.

"That will be fine. Mama and I can share a room." He looked to his mother for confirmation.

"No, baby. I won't be staying. It would just be you. I have to go back to Aunt Fi's." Ciara watched Lucien's face. It seemed to crumble as he noticed his son withdrawing from him and leaning back toward his mother.

Bryn looked at her, scared. "I don't want to stay here if you aren't going to be here, Mama."

This was it. Her chance to sever all ties with his father and make him depend on her. She couldn't do it. No matter what her reservations about England, it was not fair to her son, to make him feel the same. She spoke in her mother's tongue to her son.

"I know you are scared, honey. This will be good for you, time for you and your father to get to know each other. You will be fine. You are my son, and you are very brave. If you get scared in the night, he will tell you stories. He can rub your back. Okay?"

Her son digested what she had said and looked at his father, who, to Ciara, appeared as though he was sitting on a bed of nails, then cuddled back up to the man before chastising his mother, in English. "Mama. You said we were only supposed to speak English around Papa, cause he couldn't understand. 'member? You said it was rude."

"You are right, Bryn. I apologize." She rose from the couch. "Come give me a hug. I have to go." Her son hopped off Lucien's lap, ran over to her and wrapped his arms around her neck as she knelt on the floor. "You'll be fine. Have fun." She rose and blinked back tears.

Lucien rose as well. "What about dinner? You said you would have dinner with him. We can have something within a few minutes." He implored with his gaze.

"Will you stay for dinner, Mama? I am not quite as brave as I thought." Her son spoke quietly, but she knew Lucien had heard.

"I will stay for dinner. Then you need to go to bed."

"Will you show him how to tuck me in? He might not do it right." Bryn spoke as if that were a cardinal sin.

"Your papa is a very smart man. I'm sure he will learn the proper way to tuck in little boys."

"With your help, Mama, maybe he will learn. It's just that you've done it much longer, and I know you do it the proper way." Bryn tucked his hand into Lucien's and led him to the door, chatting about the 'proper' way to tuck a boy in.

Two hours later Ciara stood by the door as she watched Lucien tell their son a story, after properly tucking him in. When the story was over, Bryn looked at her with tired eyes and smiled even though his eyes filled with tears.

"Mama?"

"Yes, baby?" She walked over and stood next to Lucien who still sat on the bed.

"I love you, Mama."

"I love you, too, baby. Goodnight. Have fun tomorrow. Mind your father and..."

"Mama. I will." His lower lip trembled. He spoke rapidly to his mother in another language as a tear leaked from the corner of his eye.

Ciara leaned over and wiped the tear away. Rising, she placed her whiskey gaze on Lucien as she answered her son in English. "Aye, Bryn. I trust him. I trust him with my life." Then she leaned over to give her son one more kiss, and she was gone.

Lucien said goodnight to his son. As he left the room he realized what Bryn had asked his mother. Did she trust him? She said yes, which banished the last bit of fear her son had about staying with him.

He strode swiftly down the stairs, hoping to catch her. She was swinging up into her saddle when he finally did. "Ciara. Wait."

"What is it, Wolf? I have to go." Her voice tight, controlled.

"Thank you for that. You could have taken him from me forever. Instead you gave him the strength to stay with me."

* * * *

The next day Ciara stayed busy. She rode all over the property with Faolan and Kosse. She had never felt so alone. This was the first time she had been separated from her son.

A warning growl from her animals alerted her to a rider coming up. It was Richard. He stopped his horse beside her; it was covered with scars from whippings. Even now, the horse was lathered and blowing hard.

"A word?" His tone didn't escape her.

"What do you want?" There was no civility in her tone, for she didn't see the need. She didn't like him, and she didn't trust him.

"I was just wondering why you were allowing your son to be the subject of ridicule." At her blank look, he continued, "I was at the races, where I saw my brother conversing with not one, not two, but three of his old mistresses. He introduced your son, as 'just a boy' he was bringing to the races for a day. He even made some assignations." He looked as if she should be upset by his claim.

"Why should you care what he does to my son? Isn't it true that if he claims him, you have even less a chance of inheriting the dukedom? So why would I believe you, for all I know you just want him out of the way so you can get your nasty hands on the title?" Ciara didn't let him see how those words he spoke hurt her. She would deal with Wolf later.

"Your son is still a bastard, since you aren't married. Not to mention he is just a young boy and children are prone to accidents." Richards's attitude raised her protective instincts immediately.

"I know he is a child, which is why he is well watched. I will know of any harm that would befall him. I will allow nothing nor anyone to hurt my son."

"Are you threatening me?" He seemed almost incredulous.

"No more than you are threatening my son." Her words spoken laid down the stakes. At his raised eyebrows, she nodded, "Good. I see we understand each other." She rode off, thinking the sooner she left this country the better.

When she got back to her aunt's house, there was a note from Lucien waiting for her. It read:

Bryn did well. We had a wonderful time. My horses won (in case you wondered).

He decided that he would stay the night again. I said it would be all right. If you wish to come over, I have room in my bed for you. Maybe you could tuck me in properly.

We miss you. Some of us are lonely for your company. On the chance that you will decline to join me in bed the meeting my sister requested is scheduled for ten o'clock.

I will see you then, if not before.

Love,

Your Wolf

Ciara crumpled up the note and threw it into the fire. He was teasing her. He wanted her to rush over there to see her son. She wouldn't do it. She trusted him. Her son would be safe.

Ciara spent the night carving a statue. Her uncle had given her the wood, and she was making him a statue for his desk. Her grandfather and cousin were spending the evening with her so she was not lacking in company. It just wasn't the company she wanted. If they noticed her agitation, they made no mention of it.

"We will be leaving at the end of the week." Her grandfather broke the silence.

"So soon?"

"We need to get home with the winter coming on. You know that you and Bryn are always welcome on the Isle. Come for a visit. Please, the rest of the clan would love to meet you and my great-grandson." Pride shone in his eyes. "He is a wonderful boy, and my boy did a wonderful job of raising you. I am proud of you, Ciara McKay. Don't ever forget that. And don't e'er forget that we are family."

Ciara nodded as she gave him a hug. On impulse she gave Conar one as well. Conar whooped and grabbed her for a long kiss on the mouth.

"Get off me, oaf."

"Here now, lass. I thought you were coming with me." The rest of her cousins laughed.

She looked around; there were twelve men present plus her grandfather. All of them tall and brawny. A good-looking lot. All cousins, all family. All clan. They all began hollering for a kiss, and soon she was being boldly handed from one to the next as they claimed their kisses. By the time she was back on solid ground, her aunt and uncle were in the room, and they were laughing along with everyone else.

She gave her grandpa a carving of a mountain lion that her father had started, and she finished. There were tears in the old man's eyes as he accepted the gift. She went to bed with a happy heart. It had been a good night.

* * * *

She rode into Heartstone a little before ten o'clock. Bryn was waiting on the steps and came running before she had dismounted. He looked so happy.

"Good morning, Mama. I am going to take Toka for a ride. Can I bring Faolan and Kosse with me?"

"Of course, baby. Have fun and be mindful of the men riding with you."

"Bye, Mama. Papa says that you are having a meeting. Are you going to marry him so we can all live together?" Bryn ran off before she could even think how to answer his question.

"Yes, Ciara. Are you going to marry his papa so you can be one family?" Lucien asked from the top of the steps, the serious gleam in his eyes belying the smile on his face.

Yes. I would love to marry you and live with you forever. Her heart spoke; her mouth said nothing of the sort. "Good morning, Wolf. Stop putting ideas in his head." She brushed past him and didn't get more than two steps away before she was pulled back.

"Uh uh, Princess. I need a good morning kiss." He tugged on her shirt, reeling her in, slowly but constantly. He lightly touched her lips with his before begging entrance to her mouth with his tongue. When she opened, he sucked on her lower lip until she shuddered in his arms. He made a broad sweep of her mouth and then pulled back, leaving her wanting. Again.

Grabbing her by the arm, he propelled her into the house. "They are in the library waiting. Do you know what this is about?" Lucien was nowhere nearly as calm as he was portraying. He was as hard as the stone his home was made of. All he had to do was inhale her honey and berry scent and he was as randy as a goat.

Damn her pride. He knew she wanted him, every response he got said as much. She wouldn't, or couldn't, let go of wanting to go back to America. He was about ready to abduct her and take her Scotland.

They entered the library to find Devonna fiddling with her hands and Rafe looking as confused as Lucien felt. They waited in silence as the servants brought in a tea service which Devonna served.

Finally Lucien looked at his sister and said, "Well, Devonna? What is it you have to tell us?" Devonna had moved and was sitting alone in a chair closest to the door. Rafe was in a settee facing her. Lucien sat in a tall backed chair alongside Rafe, and Ciara was on a couch with her back to the large windows in the room.

"Devonna. Come sit by me." Ciara issued the order, and to the surprise of the men, Devonna didn't hesitate but came right over and sat next to her. Ciara then turned her gaze to the men. "You two need to hear her out before you say anything and before you judge." That was also a command. Lucien recognized this Ciara, the protector. Both men nodded.

With a little prodding from Ciara, Devonna began, her voice so low both men had to lean forward to hear. "First, I want to start off by saying that I understand that you may wish to cry off from the wedding after you hear this, Rafe."

Christ, she's pregnant. The thought ran through both men. True to their word though, they remained silent.

"I have to thank you, Saint, for taking me with you seven years ago when you left Stokley. I know I didn't make it easy for you, with my flinching from you every time you came near me. I am sorry for that and wish I could take it all back." Her voice shook with each word she spoke.

"I just feel that it is not fair, especially to Lord Harrington, to marry me under such pretenses." Rafe felt as is the bottom fell out of the floor and swallowed him. "I don't know how to say this, but..." her voice faltered.

Lucien looked at Ciara for an explanation, but she pinned him with a glare. Obviously she had meant what she said

about hearing her out. "Go ahead, Devonna. Tell them." She offered her hand, and Devonna latched onto it so hard she winced.

"I'm not a virgin." She never raised her voice, but they all heard.

"What!" Lucien roared. Devonna cringed as tears began to fall. He spun on Rafe who had the same look on his face, so Lucien knew his friend hadn't done it. "Who did it? Damn it, Devonna, who? Quit cringing, tell me who did this." He stood, flexing his hands as though he would like to hurt someone. Since his direction was focused on Devonna, she shrank back even farther. The marquess was back in full form.

"Enough. Sit down. Let her finish." Ciara spoke softly, and Lucien ignored her words but not her intrusion.

"Keep out of this. It is not your business." He was so mad. How could Devonna have done this? "How could you have done this? Were they right when they called you a slut?"

"Enough, Luc. I will still marry her. It doesn't matter to me, and there is no need to put her through this." Rafe spoke, and Ciara flashed him a smile although her eyes were still shooting sparks.

"Of course you will. You would never go back on your word. But Devonna, how could you? With whom? Damn you, tell me!" Lucien watched as his sister flinched back and tried to hide behind Ciara.

"Luc, enough. Leave her alone." Rafe had risen as well, facing off with Lucien.

"I will get to the bottom of this, Rafe. Stay out of this."

"That is my future wife you are yelling at. I have every right to be in it."

"She behaved like a whore. She gave herself to someone, knowing that she should go to marriage still a virgin." Lucien grated out his judgment, with an accusing finger jabbing at his sister.

"Enough! Sit down both of you, and keep your mouths shut." Ciara had risen and was in full fury. When the men looked at her, she narrowed her eyes, pointing at the chairs they vacated and snapped, "Sit!"

When they did as she ordered, she pinned them each with a glare that froze them to their seats. "Both of you promised to hear her out. So listen."

Lucien spoke, "Emma was right when she called her a slut. She just..."

"Shut up, St. Martin. Listen to your sister." Ciara's tone and words made him take notice. She never called him St. Martin.

Devonna amended her last statement. "Ciara says I still am a virgin since ... since it was not given away freely. I am sorry that I had to put you through this." She sank to the couch and covered her face with her trembling hands. "I can't do this, Ciara. Will you tell them?"

Ciara rounded on the men. "Don't the two of you idiots realize what she is saying? She isn't a virgin anymore, but it wasn't by choice." Pinning a glare on Lucien, she snarled, "Your sister was raped. And has been since she was sixteen. Until you took her away. That was why she cringed from you.

For if one brother would do it, why not the other? It's not like her father helped her." She waited for the meaning to sink in.

It hit both men like a ton of stone.

"I'll kill him," Rafe growled.

"Not before I do." Lucien echoed his growl. It all made sense. He had been so blind. Ciara was right; he was an idiot. How could he not have known? He looked at Ciara, "Have you always known?" His tone was tortured.

"I figured it out."

"How?" He begged to be told how he could have missed this.

Ciara swallowed. She had come this far; now was no time to turn back. "Like recognizes like. I knew the signs."

Her meaning sunk in to both men, but only Lucien spoke, "That is why your parents...? Oh God, Princess. I am so sorry."

He reached for her, but she waved him off. "Tend to your own. I will leave you all alone for a while." Ciara offered a tiny smile to Devonna before she left. She saw Lucien enfold his sister in the first hug she received since she came to live with him. Rafe stood, waiting for his turn. They would deal with Richard afterwards.

Ciara called for her horse and rode out to find her son. She caught up to them deep in the woods. He was trying to get the footmen to race. She sent them on their way and spoke to her son. "We need to go to Auntie Fi's. We can race on the way there."

"Why, Mama?"

"Your great grandfather and all the cousins are leaving. We need to say goodbye."

"Will we see them again?" He fell in beside her as they rode through the woods.

"Aye. We could go visit them in Ireland. Would you like that?"

"Could Papa come?"

Ciara looked around for Faolan and Kosse as she got control of her emotions. "We'll see." They were slinking through the shadows of the trees, present but hidden.

"Mama? Can I ask a question?"

"Of course, baby? What is it?"

"Well, I know that Auntie Dev is getting married to Uncle Rafe. They say that if people are to be a family the parents should be married. When I was at the races with Papa, he had lots of women coming up to him, asking when he was going to marry them. They sent me evil looks. Why aren't you and Papa married? Auntie Fi loves Uncle Trent, and Auntie Dev says she loves Uncle Rafe. Do you not love Papa? Is that why we aren't a family?" Bryn had stopped the horse and was looking at his mother with a sadness that tore her heart out of her chest.

"It's not that simple, Bryn. Your papa and I have some things to work out between us."

"I want to be a family. Like you always talked about. Is it me?"

"No. Never think that. England is different than back home. Your papa is a very wealthy man, and over here there

are certain rules about whom he should marry. I will talk to him, all right? I think it is time the two of us had a chat."

"Okay, Mama. You look sad. I didn't mean to make you sad. Please don't be sad."

"I'm not sad. Just thinking. Have you thought of what you would like to give Auntie Dev as a gift for her wedding?"

"No. I don't have anything. Maybe you could carve something from the both of us." He sounded so hopeful all she could do was laugh.

"Maybe I could. We'll see. Let's race to the other side of the clearing. Stay on the road though."

"I'm gonna win."

"Ready. Set. Go." Both horses took off like a shot. Toka was running all out. Ciara knew that she could win, but she let her son have his victory.

* * * *

Lucien rode hard to Stokley. It was time for some answers. He had convinced Rafe to stay with his sister while he conferred with their father. "I promise not to confront Richard without you."

"I will hold you to your word, Luc." Rafe was furious, but he remained behind with Devonna.

Lucien was entering the house before his horse was led away. "Father!" he bellowed.

"My lord, the duke is in his study." The butler spoke. "He is not to be disturbed."

"Good. See we aren't disturbed." He brushed past him, knowing full well that wasn't what the butler had meant, and

headed off to confront his father. At the door, he stopped for two seconds before he ripped it open.

"Damn it, didn't I say I wasn't to be disturbed?" There was a lot of shuffling in the chair that was turned from the door.

"I heard something to that effect."

The duke spun his chair around in surprise at his son's voice. "What are you doing here? Did that bitch whine to you about me sending for her a few days ago, or was it the fact that I offered her money?"

So that was where Ciara had gone. "Neither. She had not spoken of it to me. Thanks for telling me. This is about Devonna. Tell me you didn't know."

"Know what? Is this going to take long? I'm busy."

"Did you know?" His voice was dangerously low.

"Know what? And watch your tone with me." He raised his walking stick and shook it at Lucien.

Snatching the cane, Lucien broke it over his knee and threw the pieces back at the duke. "The fact that your daughter was being raped by your stepson. Did you know?"

If his father had paled when his walking stick was tossed back to him in two pieces, it was nothing compared to the paling his face showed at Lucien's blunt announcement.

"What ... What did you say?"

Sebastian may not have been the best father in the world, but he loved his children even if he couldn't find a way to show them. When his first wife died after bringing Devonna into the world, bitterness swamped him. He held the child responsible. When he remarried Emma, she brought with her into the marriage, Richard, a child by her first husband.

Richard was younger than Lucien but older than Devonna. Sebastian always noticed how Devonna tried to avoid him, but he would find her. Could it be true? Had he let his anger for his wife's passing and his dislike for his second marriage allow his daughter to become the injured party? It was hard for him to look at her for she so resembled her mother. The same long black hair, rounded face and violet eyes. His son had gotten his vivid blue ones. But his wife had left hers with their daughter.

"You heard what I said. Answer my question. Did you know?" Lucien was shaking, he was so angry.

"No. I had no idea. Are you sure about this?"

"I have no reason to lie. Even you must have noticed that she pulls away from men."

"How do you know it was Richard?"

"She told me. Where is he?"

"I don't know. He left yesterday, saying he had something to take care of." The duke suddenly felt old. His shoulders slumped, and his heart hurt. "Is she all right?"

"I don't believe you have the right to ask that. You have despised her since she was born."

The cut hit home. "I was mourning the loss of my wife."

"And ignoring your child. She has endured the hate-filled stares and your comments about her with a quiet pride. You have ignored her for her whole life, and now you wish to play the hero. Forget it. If and when you see Richard, you tell him I am looking for him." There was no mistaking his meaning.

"Why are you looking for my son?" Emma asked from the doorway.

Lucien spun around, "For what he did to Devonna." The expression that flashed across her face was not one of curiosity, but one of fear. She knew. She had known. "You knew. You knew what he was doing to her. How could you?"

"He said that she came onto him. It was not my place to say or do anything." She spoke with the authority of one used to being a duchess. "Boys will always take what is freely given."

"You bitch. Were you a man, I would call you out for this and kill you." He spun on his father. "You are to blame for this. You." He strode to the door, his penetrating gaze making his stepmother jump out of his way. He spoke over his shoulder. "I will find him. He will pay for harming my sister."

* * * *

Lucien rode hard to the Trenton house. "Where is Ciara?" He asked the butler as soon as the door opened.

"I believe she is up in her room. Shall I let her know you wish to see her?"

"I'll go tell her myself." He started to brush past the butler when he saw Trenton come into the foyer.

"Good day, my lord. Was there a reason for your visit?"
"I need to see Ciara. Now."

"This is my home. If you will follow Potter to the sitting room, I will let her know you are here."

Lucien struggled with his desire to simply march up there and kick in her door. "Very well." He followed Potter down the hall to an amber sitting room.

"I will bring refreshments, my lord." Potter bowed and left the room. He waited about a good five minutes before the door opened and two servants brought in trays with food on them. Still no Ciara.

Pacing the room, he munched on a sandwich. About to go get her himself, he turned and saw her. The vision walking toward him made his knees weak, and he sat down on a chaise. She was clad in a dress like the one she had worn at the cabin. Her feet, bare, peeked out from beneath the flowing hem. It was mostly green with colorful designs on it. The fringes dangling off a belt accentuated her narrow waist. Her hair was braided tightly and threaded through with ribbons and beads. She looked comfortable. She looked beautiful.

"Good afternoon, Wolf. What brings you here?" She offered him a slight smile as she approached.

This was the woman he knew. The woman he had fallen in love with. The one that made nothing seem impossible to accomplish. He needed to hold her. He needed to be held. He didn't know how to ask, so he just sat there and looked at her.

Ciara walked up to him, slid between his thighs and wrapped her arms around him. She pressed his head to her breast and let her strength flow into him. Neither of them spoke.

Lucien drank deeply of her warmth and her scent. She had known. She always knew. "Emma knew. My stepmother knew what he was doing."

"It wasn't your fault. You did what you could. You are there for her now." She began to pull back so she could look at him, but his arms tightened, and he kept his face buried against her.

"I failed my sister. I failed my mother." He sounded so desolate. She massaged his shoulders and as he relaxed, she pushed him back. His face was haggard. He looked exhausted.

The door opened, and Auntie Fi entered in a swirl of yellow silk and flowers. "Ciara. Take him up to your room, and let the poor dear get some rest. I am having tea soon, and it wouldn't do for them to see the marquess like this. Then you two need to have a talk." She walked over and patted Lucien on the cheek. "Dear boy. You look so tired. Treat my niece right." Then she was gone, leaving behind petals and the feeling of being run over by a carriage.

Lucien looked up at Ciara. "Did I hear that right? Did she just tell you to take me to your room?"

"Aye. We'd better go. Come on." Ciara led the way out the door and up the stairs. She had known that her aunt wanted her to marry him, but if she were setting them up, Ciara would never forgive her.

Entering her room behind her, Lucien shut the door. "Where are Faolan and Kosse? Where is Bryn?"

"They are with him in his room. He is sleeping. He was up late last night, saying goodbye to his cousins." She directed him the chaise beneath her window. "Here, sit."

He sat on the chaise and watched her from lowered lids as she moved around her room. She sent for some hot water

and lemon for herself and some brandy for him. She had such inborn grace.

She brought him the brandy then curled up next to him, drawing her legs underneath her as she sipped her drink. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Not right now. Why didn't you tell me my father summoned you?"

"Because it wasn't important."

"Did he really try to pay you to leave?"

"Aye. He was pretty sure he knew why I had come to England. We reached an agreement of sorts." Without looking, she knew Lucien had raised an eyebrow at her statement. "He will stay out of my way, and I will let him live."

He couldn't help it. He burst out laughing. "I can just imagine you confronting him. I would love to have seen it. Does no one frighten you?" He hugged her hard as he shook with amusement.

Ciara kept her gaze facing the fire that was burning in her room. "You do. You frighten me."

"Why?"

"Because you make me feel things, things I can't control. I don't want to control them when I am with you. And because you have the power to take my son from me."

"I would never do that." His hand tipped her face around to see him. His eyes filled with love as he looked down at her. "I hope you believe that."

"I do. It is just hard for me to share him. He's all I have." She looked away.

"Don't look away from me." He set down his glass and took her cup from her. Lifting her, he set her on his lap. He placed her legs on either side of his hips, which made her dress ride up mid-thigh, exposing her smooth legs to his gaze. Clenching his teeth, he tried to ignore the fact that his body was responding to her and focused on his words.

"I am willing to give you everything I have. I promise not to take every bit of your freedom away from you. I want to be what you have." His voice dropped to a whisper as he drew her mouth within inches of his own, "Marry me. I love you. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, a marchioness and future duchess of Stokley?"

Your son has a right to know his father. Do you not love Papa, is that why we aren't a family? Do you love my brother? All those questions ran through her head. Someday Ciara, you will find a man that nurtures your soul. When you do, don't let him go. A love like that is rare for people to find. Hold onto it. Hold onto him. Like I did your mother and she did me. Love knows and keeps no boundaries. No person's color, no person's rank from servant to king, nothing is immune to the force of love. Remember that, daughter. Her father's words ran in her head and her heart.

"Yes. I will marry you."

Lucien had gone cold when she fell silent for so long. When her answer came, it was like having a fog lifted from around his eyes and heart. The world looked brighter. He kissed her lips. "I love you."

Ciara kissed him back, not ready to admit that to him. She rose and pulled him with her to the bed. "Time for a nap. You

still look exhausted." After drawing back the covers, she helped him out of his boots and shirt.

Sliding into bed in only his trousers, he was enfolded by her honey and berry scent. Fatigue took over his body. As he closed his eyes, he felt her slide in next to him. She cuddled up to him like she had done in the cabin. One hand over his heart and her head on his shoulder. They fell asleep like that, not even stirring when Aunt Fi and Uncle Trenton peeked in the door, smiled at the sight and left to keep Bryn busy.

Ciara woke later feeling safe. She opened one eye and saw that she was curled up next to Lucien. The room was dark except for the fire that was burning in the hearth. She had not even heard the maid come in to light it. Slipping silently out of bed, she changed into her buckskins and slipped down the stairs to find her aunt and uncle.

Lucien woke to the bed bouncing. He smiled as he recalled that Ciara had said she would marry him. They were going to get married as soon as he got the special license, for he wasn't going to give her a chance to change her mind. Speaking of Ciara, the warmth that had been next to him, was gone, but the bed was still bouncing.

His eyes opened into mere slits as he heard childish laughter. His son was sitting on the end of the bed between Faolan and Kosse, staring at him. Every now and then he would bounce and shake the bed. Bryn obviously was trying to stay quiet but was losing his patience. Lucien opened his eyes and blinked as he saw the smile cross his son's face. "Finally. You woke up. Mama said I couldn't make any noise to wake you. I didn't. But I bounced some. That should be

okay cause she didn't say I couldn't bounce, only that I had to be quiet. Are you awake now?"

Sitting up slowly, he looked at his child and nodded. "I'm awake. What can I do for you?"

"Why aren't you wearing a shirt? Why are you in Mama's bed naked?" The child's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not naked." Was this the sort of conversation one should have with a child? "Where is your mother?"

"She is with Aunt Fi, and they are planning a wedding. Or rather Aunt Fi is. Mama looks like she has a headache. Are you marrying Mama? Does that mean we will be a family now? I asked her, and she said she would talk to you about it." Bryn bounded into his lap and continued to chatter.

She was marrying him for her son. Not because she loved him or wanted to. It was for her son. The joy that had been his when he woke disappeared like a puff of smoke. Was he going to have a marriage like his father, after all?

"Bryn, leave your father alone. Go find something to feed Faolan and Kosse. I have to speak to your father for a minute."

"Okay, Mama." He reached up and kissed Lucien on the cheek before running to his mother and kissing her as well. Full of happiness, he left with Faolan and Kosse after both animals stopped by Ciara to get pats as well.

Lucien stared at her with mistrust in his eyes. Sliding out of bed, he put on the shirt she held out. When she sat down on the bed, he remained standing.

"I am pretty sure that Bryn has spoken to you about what he asked me. I felt that you should know, while I did do this

for him it wasn't all for him. I do want to marry you." She caught his gaze and held it with her own. "I would only hope that you realize I can't change overnight, and some of your customs will take me a while to get used to. That is all I have to say, so I will let you finish dressing. I'll see you downstairs." She rose and slipped out of the room before he could formulate a sentence.

* * * *

Lucien ate dinner at the Trenton house. After he had drunk some after dinner port with the viscount, he found Ciara sitting by herself on a bench outside in the garden. She was bathed by the moonlight and looked at peace.

She was sitting cross-legged on the bench, enjoying the cool night air and the scents that came with it. Listening to the bugs and night birds that croaked, chirped and sang made her breathe easier. She was wearing a loose fitting dress, the one she had worn for dinner. It was navy blue and fell loosely around her. Lucien knew she didn't wear any of the corsets or stays that most women normally wore under a dress.

Knowing her, she probably was barefoot or wearing moccasin slippers, too. He pulled his cravat loose as he approached her.

"Ciara. What are you doing out here?"

Without opening her eyes, she answered him. "Faolan and Kosse are off hunting, and I am enjoying the outdoors. What are you doing here? I thought you would be going home by now."

"Trying to get rid of me?" The question was lighthearted, but the meaning behind it was not.

"No. You should probably know however, that my aunt wants to go all out for this wedding. If she has her way, it won't be ready for a good six months or so. She wants everyone around to know."

"And you? What do you want?" He sat beside her on the bench and smiled as he saw one moccasin-clad foot peeking out from under her dress.

"I don't really care. I don't know most of the people she says she wants to invite anyway. I don't like the idea of being put on display." Her voice was heavy with a passiveness that was not like her; it was full of resignation.

"Are you having regrets about saying yes?"

"No. It's not that. Well, not in the way you are thinking. I am giving up my freedom. That is hard for me to accept. But no regrets about marrying you." Her lids raised, and ensnared him with her whiskey eyes. "Never about marrying you."

"Would you like to have a quiet ceremony? I am afraid that you will have to go to breakfasts and such as people will want to meet you. But I can have a special license by tomorrow if that would make it easier on you."

"Tomorrow? You can do that?"

"For you. Anything." He pulled her into his arms. "I want you to be happy. We will have to go into town for a while, but we can come back to Heartstone if you wish."

"And Faolan and Kosse?"

"They will come with us, of course. You will have to ride sidesaddle and never faster than a trot while in town." He finished quickly at her look of horror.

"And my dress?"

"In the house you can wear anything. When going out, a dress benefiting your station." He searched her face for the glint of defiance he knew his pronouncement would bring. It came, but disappeared quicker than he would have thought.

"I will have to take this one day at a time. Can't I just stay here?"

"And have people laugh at me that my wife stays with her family instead of me?" He raised his voice with censure, "No. Your place is with me."

Ciara kept her voice calm. "I meant at Heartstone. Instead of going to London, couldn't I just stay there?" Her hands gripped her dress in a motion that showed how distressed the conversation was making her.

"We will have to go to London, for a little while at least. You may like it there. Rafe and Devonna will come with us and will be in Rafe's town home." He dropped a kiss on her temple. "I have to go get the license. We will wed tomorrow. I will bring Rafe and Devonna to stand as witnesses. All right?"

When she didn't answer, he turned her and tipped her face up to his. She was at war with herself. Silently she nodded and slipped off his lap and walked to the edge of the garden.

Lucien followed. Something was wrong. She was not as happy as he thought she should be. He gathered her in his arms and placed a very thorough kiss on her lips. Eyes darkened with yearning and bodies responded. He set her down reluctantly and walked away with only a "Goodnight, Princess."

* * * *

Lucien strode into the Trenton house accompanied by Rafe and a very excited Devonna. Potter met them at the door and smiled as he opened the door to admit them.

"Where is my fiancée, Potter?"

"My niece is out riding." Aunt Fiona swept into the room, looking bright in her orange dress.

"Well, we are early. Where is she riding? I will go meet her." Lucien looked down at the woman who was to become his aunt through marriage. She was vibrant, and if her brother, Ciara's father, had been anything like her it was not any wonder that Ciara was so full of life.

"Perhaps she needs to be alone for a bit. We need to talk. Perhaps Lord Harrington would like to take Lady St. Martin to see the gardens, while we chat."

Rafe bowed to Fiona and led Devonna off to the gardens. Lucien followed Fiona into a sitting room that was bright yellow in color. At her wave, he settled onto a settee and waited for her to begin.

Fiona sat across from him, clashing horribly with the room. "Do you plan on allowing my niece to keep her freedom?" Brows rose in amazement. Scanning the room, he looked for the viscount. "Trenton's not here. This is between you and me. She is the only link to my brother, and I will not have her hurt."

"I don't plan on hurting her. Some of her activities will have to cease, for she will become the wife of a marquess. I am allowing her to keep her animals, and that should tell you something right there. When we come out to Heartstone, I

probably will allow her to assist with the horses. She will not want for anything. I will provide for your niece."

Fiona looked at the young man across from her. She bit her tongue as she kept from responding to his words. He was in for a rude awakening if he thought he was being grand to allow her things or privileges. Rising from her chair, she walked to the door. "You will find her out riding past the lake. One of the grooms can give you directions." She didn't look back at him when she added, "Don't forget who she was when you met her. Ever." Then she left in a swish of silk.

Lucien let her words wash over him. He had to go find his wife-to-be. The minister would be here this afternoon. The special license was in his pocket. He had witnesses, sent a note to his father letting him know what he was doing. All he needed was to see his son and his future wife.

He swung up into his saddle and got directions from the groom. When he rode up to the field, he stopped as he saw Faolan and Kosse lying in the sun. Bryn was not with his mother who was riding across the field, her hair was loose and flowing out behind her.

Ciara was riding low, and they were moving fast. Artemis was moving swiftly and smoothly across the grass. Her hooves pounded the ground, sending up chunks of earth in their wake. As they approached the edge of the field they moved as one into a smooth turn and headed back across. Riding into the sun, Ciara sat up and reached her arms out to the warmth. Her head fell back, and she moved as one with her horse, holding on with her legs. Lucien saw that she was riding bareback with no bridle. His breath caught in his throat.

A whistle reached his ears, and as he watched, Faolan and Kosse jumped up and ran after her. Without slowing, she turned Artemis toward a fallen tree. Urging her horse on to greater speed, she sent the mare flying over the tree, followed by both animals and was soon out of sight.

Shaking with fury at her daring, Lucien rode his horse down to look at the tree. It reached the chest of his horse. She could have killed herself. Wheeling his gelding around, he headed back to the stables. Ciara wasn't there when he arrived.

She had ridden off into the trees. She loved this, running fast and free. As she found herself on the road, she slowed Artemis to a walk and followed the winding path. Glancing at the sun, she realized she needed to get back to prepare for her wedding. Her wedding. That struck a nerve.

Turning Artemis around, she noticed that Faolan and Kosse had slipped back into the woods, and Artemis was tossing her head. She heard it then, an approaching horse and rider. Moving Artemis over to one side, she continued walking on.

Phillip Vallence, Earl of Edais, pulled hard on the reins as he came around the corner, surprised to see a woman standing along side the road, apparently riding a horse without a saddle and wearing breeches.

"Good morning. What are you doing out here, and who are you?" He pulled his horse up in front of hers so she had to stop. She was dark skinned and took his breath away. She was beautiful and exotic looking. Cool eyes, the color of whiskey, ran an assessing gaze over him. He preened. He was very good looking and knew it.

Ciara looked at the gentleman in front of her. He was built like Lucien but with sandy brown hair and gray eyes. His face was more pointed, more hawk like. Lips were thinner. He was broad shouldered and fit. He was a handsome man. Problem was, he knew it.

"I am riding. I am Ciara. You need to keep your horse moving, he is too hot to stand still. Who are you?"

Arching a brow at her comment, he moved his horse alongside hers and walked with her. "I am Phillip Vallence, Earl of Edais. I am on my way to see the Marquess of Heartstone. He is getting married today." He smiled like she should be heartbroken at the news. Or shocked to hear it.

"Oh. How nice for you. Excuse me, I have to go." She turned to head Artemis off the road and onto a path when his voice stopped her.

"Do you know this chit he is supposed to marry? There are rumors all over London that she beat up the duke's men for no reason. They say that she is a heathen from the colonies and..." A dawning hit him. To his credit, he did blush.

"Looks like they say a lot in London. I believe you will find the marquess at Viscount Trenton's house, for that is where the wedding is supposed to be. Good day." She rode off into the trees without another word.

"Wait. Where are you going?" Phillip turned off the path and blanched as he saw the animals in his way. His horse rolled its eyes in fear and bolted off down the road, leaving him on his butt on the ground.

The animals stalked closer and closer. The low growls from their throats made him break out in a sweat. "Faolan. Kosse. Enough." The voice made him look up.

Ciara turned her horse when she heard him hit the ground. This was not how she had wanted to spend her last free day. She saw her babies, stalking the man. Calling them off, she looked down at the man on the ground. "Are you all right?"

"Are they friends of yours?"

"Aye. They won't hurt you, unless you attempt to hurt me. Are *you* hurt?" She swung down from her horse and walked over to him. Artemis began to eat the grass.

Phillip rose slowly, keeping an eye on the animals that were watching him. "I'm fine." He took a step and winced as his ankle flared with pain. "Ouch. That hurt."

Ciara was by him in a flash. "Sit down. I need to look at that."

Phillip sat. This woman was like a whirlwind. She examined his ankle swiftly. As she slipped his boot back on, she spoke, "It's not broken, just sprained."

"How would you know?"

"I just do. I will help you to the Trenton house, and there someone can summon a doctor if you prefer." She spoke with calm assurance.

"I can't walk on this, woman. It hurts. Send someone to help me. I will wait here."

"I can't leave you here. You will ride my horse with me." She spoke so matter-of-factly that Phillip almost thought she was joking. Until he looked at her face.

"No way. Your horse has no saddle. For that matter, why is it still here? Why didn't it run away from those animals?"

"They are friends. I will help you on her back and then I will ride in front of you." Her decision made, she rose and held out her hand to the man on the ground.

Shaking his head, he refused her hand. How was he supposed to get up there? Ride with her? Luc's future wife? No way. He valued his life. He would stay right here. "I will stay here."

"Look, the nice weather will not last. There is rain coming. You can do this the easy way or the hard way, but I am not leaving you here. Come on. Let's go." She pulled him up with an ease that made him wonder just who she really was.

Calling her horse to her, she looked between them both and made her decision. She spoke low to the horse, and it knelt on the ground. She looked at the man standing next to her and gestured to the horse.

"You get on now. After she stands, I will get on. I would help you up, but I think you might suffer apoplexy if I put my hands on you. Come on. Get moving."

Phillip was helped on to the mare's back, and Ciara held him steady as the mare rose. He was shaking, his ankle was hurting a lot more than before, and he was not sure about this.

"Slide back. I will swing up in front of you and then you will have to scoot back up so you can hold onto my waist."
When he complied, she pulled herself up and brought her leg over the other side of the horse's neck. Waiting until she felt

his arms go hesitantly around her waist, she spoke and they were off.

Phillip found that the smooth trot was an easy ride. He looked down and saw an animal on each side of them. "Are you really marrying Luc?"

"That's the rumor," Ciara answered.

"You don't speak much for a woman." He gripped her tighter as they went around a corner.

"I speak when it's important. Hang on, we are almost there." They broke from the covered road and saw the Trenton house in the distance. Phillip tried to hold himself upright as they rode in, but he couldn't find it in himself to release her completely. Lucien was waiting at the top of the steps with thunderclouds in his eyes. Rafe and Devonna were there as well.

Halting Artemis, Ciara looked until she saw the footman she was searching for. "Go fetch a doctor. The earl has hurt his foot." The man ran off. Spying Lucien and Rafe, she commanded, "Don't just stand there. Come help him off the horse. He can't stand on his own."

To Phillip's amazement, both men followed her orders. Lucien speared her with a glare. "You have some explaining to do. I saw you in the field." He grabbed his friend and pulled him down asking, "What are you doing here? Why are you riding and holding onto her? Stay away from her."

Ciara turned Artemis toward the stable and rode off ignoring the look of disbelief on Lucien's face. She would deal with him later, for now she had a horse to tend. While she

was in the stall brushing down her horse, she felt rather than saw the door slide open.

When she looked up, she was staring into a very angry man. "Good morning, Wolf." She kept on brushing.

"What in the hell do you think you were doing, riding around like that?" He was so angry, his words just poured out of him. "I saw that jump. For God sake, woman, you weren't even using a saddle or a bridle. And then to come back riding with another man."

"Would you have me leave him in the road, injured?"

"Yes. It would serve him right for falling off his horse. He should learn to ride better."

"Funny, your father said the same about you. Should I have left you where you fell?"

"That wasn't the same thing."

"How do you know? His horse spooked. He fell. He was injured. There is a storm coming, and regardless of your feelings about it, I couldn't and wouldn't leave him there." She walked past him out of the stall. "Now I have to go and get ready. Excuse me." Head high, she glided from the barn, leaving him with the same astounded feeling that he usually got from her.

That was it. She hadn't apologized, just explained, not even caring what he thought about it. That would have to change. The wife of a marquess could not ride around like that. She needed to understand that.

* * * *

When Ciara appeared in the doorway of the room where the ceremony was to take place, Lucien had to blink. She was incredible. Her dress was made of a filmy material that was light sea foam in color, covered by a thin veil of topaz gossamer. While the neckline was not plunging, allowing only the glimpse of the tops of her breasts, it enhanced them entirely too much for Lucien's comfort. The dress was simple in design, but he believed that she could not be more beautiful. The pale green brought out the bronze of her skin and the golden color of her eyes. All of it enhanced by the topaz covering. The waist was high and allowed those present to see her figure. The length of the dress covered her feet and he wondered if she was wearing shoes.

The light shone and flickered as she moved. Her hair was raised off her neck and was entwined with dark green ribbons and beads. There were tendrils hanging free to frame her face, which highlighted her high cheekbones. She moved with her calm assured grace that he found so alluring. Her uncle was giving her away, and he heard both Rafe's and Phillip's breath catch as they watched her walk toward them.

Her gaze was steady as she kissed her uncle before he placed her hand in Lucien's. The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur, for she was staring at the man next to her. Ciara thought that Lucien had never looked so handsome. He was wearing all black, having forgone the cravat. His hair was hanging over one eye giving him an even more rakish look. Her heart sped as she imagined what the rest of the day would bring. When he pulled her in for the kiss, he smiled as she tried to not look surprised.

Aunt Fiona had a decent sized meal waiting for them. They sat at the head of the table, and the small group ate and joked.

"Where are you going for a honeymoon?" Phillip asked Lucien.

"We are going back to Heartstone for the present, and after Devonna's wedding, we will be going to London."

London. A cold chill settled over Ciara. She did not want to go to London.

"We should be going." Lucien rose and pulled her to her feet amidst the sly looks of his friends. He had arranged for Bryn to stay here with Devonna for one night, and they would return to Heartstone tomorrow, for Devonna's wedding was at the end of the week.

"Bye, Mama. Bye Papa. I will see you tomorrow." He hugged his mama and whispered something in her ear.

"Yes Bryn. They will stay with you. Take them with if you ride Toka. I love you, baby. See you tomorrow." One more hug and she turned to the rest of the family. "Thank you, Fi. It was very nice." She kissed her uncle and said goodbye to all.

Lucien handed her up in his carriage that had been sent, and they set off for Heartstone. He couldn't believe it. He had just married Ciara. "Well, how do you feel, Lady Heartstone?"

"I think I am in shock. It seemed to happen so fast. What about you?" Ciara smiled at him.

"Happy. You are mine now. I will never let you go."
[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Six

"To the Marquess and Marchioness of Heartstone. Cheers." Everyone in the room echoed the shout and raised their glasses in a toast. Lucien took a drink, looked to his wife of two month and sent her a smile.

The townhouse was filled with members of the *monde* that made an appearance at the wedding breakfast of the future Duke of Stokley and his duchess. The Black Marquess had finally been tamed. Or had he?

Ciara felt like screaming. She had been married to Lucien for two months and for six of those weeks they had been in London. He had changed. There were so many rules for her to follow.

At least Bryn was settling in well. He went with his father to the races and spent most of his time shadowing his footsteps. Lucien was gone until the wee hours of the morning, and if and when he finally came home he usually smelled of drink and women.

Through it all, Ciara smiled. She kept her own counsel and ventured out rarely to see Devonna and Rafe, who also newly married, were in his town home. The smile that she had on her face felt like it was etched in stone. When would this end?

Endless invitations came to the St. Martin house. Each one Lucien accepted on her behalf, as if she were an idiot and not capable of doing so for herself. Her new husband seemed to avoid her unless there was a function to attend during which

he preformed his obligatory duties and then left her alone to fend for herself.

Most of her days passed in the large gardens in the back of the house with Faolan and Kosse. His friends would stop by to try and catch a glimpse of the elusive animals, but she always had them hidden away. This was what she had feared beyond all measure.

Ciara sent a smile back to her husband and nodded. She schooled her face into a pleasant mask as she listened to the ramblings around her.

The Duke of Stokley watched his daughter-in-law as she picked at the meal in front of her. He had expected her to make some huge *faux pas* during the dinner. He may not have agreed to this, but he would have no one say that he didn't support his son, so he and his wife had hosted this dinner.

They were still looking for Richard, but he had vanished, it seemed. The duke's wife claimed she didn't know where her son was either, but Sebastian still had her watched when she left the house.

His new daughter seemed to be uncomfortable. Sebastian had seen his son out at night without her. Maybe there was trouble in paradise. One could always hope. He bit back a grin and helped himself to more food.

Ciara felt the duke's gaze on her. Enough was enough. Rising she left the room, heedless of the gazes on her. Lucien was right behind her.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't feel well. I'm going to lay down."

He placed his hand on her head; she was overly warm. "Should I call a doctor?"

"No." Brushing off his hand, she walked away without looking back.

What was wrong with her? He had tried to stay out of her way while she became acclimated to the life in London. He had kept Bryn with him, in hopes that she would make some friends. He spent his nights with Phillip, something that Rafe frowned upon. He accepted all invitations that came for her. Maybe she was coming down with something. He sent Foley for a doctor and then went back to the room to join the meal.

A knock on her door surprised her. She opened it and found herself looking at Foley, her husband's man of affairs, and a bearded man with a nasty look on his face. Arching a brow, she asked, "Can I help you?"

"I'm Doctor Roman. Your husband sent for me to check on you." He tried to push his way into the room.

Ciara slapped her arm across the opening. "I don't need a doctor."

"Your husband sent for me."

"Then go check on him. I don't need you." She shut the door in his face. Then she locked it. Sitting on her bed with Faolan and Kosse, she looked out the window. The air was thick and blackened with coal smoke. A pungent odor in the air made her want to choke. I want to go home. I want to ride in the clean air and swim. Covering her face with her hands, she turned her back on the window and curled up against Kosse with Faolan at her feet.

"I called the doctor to check on you. Why did you not let him?" her husband asked.

"I don't need him." Ciara didn't even open her eyes.

"You don't feel well. You need a doctor."

"No. That's not what I need." Her hand clutched as she tried to keep from breaking down.

"What then? There are things to do tonight, you know. We have places to go."

"Why don't you go? I feel like staying in tonight."

"Ciara, what's wrong?" She felt the bed shift as he sat next to her back.

"I just need a break. I am not used to all this. All this dirt and congestion."

"I know. I forget that you are used to the country. I suppose it can be overwhelming. Maybe I will just go to White's with Phillip then, if you are staying in." He patted her on the back. Like a child. "You rest. I will see you later. Maybe a walk in the park will do you some good." Rising he left the room.

"Getting me out of this damn city will do me some good." She snapped at the closed door. "I hate it here." She was a prisoner. Her son had a governess and otherwise spent time with his father. She, on the other hand, couldn't go outside without people following her and telling her what to do and where to go. For being a marchioness, there certainly were a lot of people that got to order you around.

A walk. Maybe that was what she needed. If only she could take Faolan and Kosse. She changed into what Lucien considered a proper walking dress. She considered it

uncomfortable. After telling Faolan and Kosse to stay, she opened the door, peeked out and came face-to-face with a pair of violet eyes. Devonna.

"Where are you going? I saw you leave. Are you feeling all right?"

"I am going to the park for a walk. Would you like to come?"

"Are you sure you should? Lucien said he sent for a doctor."

"I'm going out."

"I'm going with you. Let me just get our maids."

Ciara rolled her eyes. How she hated this, but she waited. Before long the two women were off walking toward the park. They walked in silence until they reached the park.

Devonna looked over at the woman next to her. She seemed different. Not as vibrant as she had been when they first met. "Is everything all right, Ciara?" She glanced at their maids, not close enough to overhear but not far enough away to be improper. "You seem different. Are things all right between you and Saint?"

The women came to an open section where other couples sat on the ground and kids flew kites. Ciara sat down. "I don't think I fit in here. I hate the city. My husband is gone all the time and sets up all these appointments for me to attend without asking me first." She ran a weary hand over her face. "I miss riding, I miss being able to go outside by myself. I miss my son." She turned her face up to the sun and shoved the bonnet off her head. The warmth on her face almost brought her a smile Almost.

Two women stopped by them so intent on their conversation they didn't notice the two sitting on the ground. "Then what happened?" one of them inquired.

"I'll tell you," replied the other. "Phillip said that he would bring a friend with him back to my house and that I should just go home and wait with Christie. Sure enough he brought his friend the marquess with him. Imagine that. I spent the night with the Black Marquess, even though he is supposed to be married. Well, he is. I mean they are having his wedding breakfast this morning. She must not be very good for him to be with me at night. He is supposed to be back to my place again tonight." The women laughed and walked on.

Devonna made as though to jump up and confront them only to be stopped by Ciara. "Let it go." They waited until the women were gone and headed back to the house.

Devonna and Ciara walked back into Lucien's townhouse and saw him in the foyer with the Widow Levon pressed up against his arm, offering him a clear view down her dress front. The shock he had at seeing his wife come in from outside flashed across his face, but he didn't move.

"Saint." Devonna's voice was sharp with disdain. "Lady Levon." She brushed past without any further comment to find her husband.

Ciara looked at both of them. Her heart may have fell to her feet, but her expression didn't change or even offer the slightest bit of emotion. She nodded as she walked silently past them, headed off after Devonna.

"Luc. A word." Rafe spoke to him from the other side of the foyer.

Lucien stepped away from the widow as his thoughts were on his wife. She looked like something was bothering her. Following Rafe into the room, he raised his gaze to find that his brother-in-law was shaking his head in disappointment. "What? What is that look for, Rafe?"

"What are you doing? Ciara doesn't deserve this, not here in her own house."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Lady Levon?"

"What about her? We were talking."

"Luc. Your wife walked in the door to her house, on the morning of her wedding breakfast and finds you with a known paramour hanging on you. What are you doing?"

Lucien swallowed. He hadn't thought about it like that. "We were just talking..."

"I also heard that you and Phillip have been seen with Christie and Polly. At their house, in the early morning, coming down the steps before heading to your homes. What is going on with you? You rode after your father like a man possessed to tell him about this woman that you love, yet now you shame her. I am ashamed of you, Luc. We won't be by to see you again until you can treat your wife right. I never thought that you would be like your father." Rafe walked out of the room to collect Devonna.

Lucien stood alone in the room as Rafe's words flowed over him. Was that what he was doing? He hadn't slept with anyone since he got married. Did she know? Is that why she was so cool toward him? He turned and set off to find his wife and explain.

Lucien got as far as the entrance when the widow waylaid his progress. "Saint. Will you be coming to my party tonight? Can I count on you being there?" Her voluptuous body draped over his arm for a second time that day.

Untangling her from his body, he set her away and shook his head as he tried to walk around her. She stepped toward him and tripped. It was very graceful for an intended fall. Being a gentleman, he stepped forward to catch her.

Her full chest met his and, as she threw her arms around his neck presumably to hold on, her lips pressed to his. Lucien jerked back and met the emotionless gaze of his wife as she stood on the stairs along with his sister and Rafe, Faolan and Kosse flanking her.

"Ciara," he mumbled as he set Lady Levon away from him, "I need to talk to you."

"I am spending the day with the Harrington's. I will be accompanying them to the opera tonight, so you can go with your friends. Have a nice day." She walked past him and out the door, her back ramrod straight.

"I will accompany you to the opera."

Spinning around, she flicked her eyes over him in a dismissive way, "Don't bother. It appears to me that you are busy." She walked down the steps without looking back and joined Rafe and Devonna in the carriage with her animals.

Lucien heard his father's laughter and saw the look that Lady Levon sent him as she curled up next to him. "Now you are free to come to my place."

"It would seem so."

The opera was interesting. Ciara didn't pay much attention for she was thinking about her husband. She saw him sitting with the lovely widow in his box. His gaze was on her, however, and not the play, or the lady next to him. Keeping her own eyes fixed firmly on the performance below, she barely noticed when he left. At least that is what she told herself.

Rafe was swearing under his breath. Lucien was ruining his marriage. Phillip was helping him. As they left the opera house, Rafe helped the women into the carriage. "I will drop you off first and then escort Ciara home." He told his wife. Soon it was just Rafe and Ciara in the carriage.

"Rafe, will you take me somewhere?"

"Where?" He didn't really want to know the answer to that question.

"Lady Polly's. I assume that you know where it is."

"Why do you want to go there?"

"Will you take me there or not?"

"Yes." *Lucien, I hope you aren't there*. Rafe sent instructions up to the driver, and as they moved forward, he studied the woman across from him. "He is a good man, you know."

"Don't defend him to me. I don't want to hear it." She waved him quiet.

They pulled up across the street from the house, and as they watched another carriage pulled up. Out stumbled a very drunk Phillip followed by a scantily clad Christine. Lucien came next, just as drunk as Phillip, perhaps more so and

lifted Polly down. Their lips met as his hands roamed all over her body.

"I have seen enough. Take me home." Her voice was dead. Rafe knocked on the roof, and the carriage rolled off, leaving the patrons to their business on the street.

As they pulled up in front of the town home, Rafe stretched out a hand to assist her. After he walked her to the door, she smiled at him and spoke, "Thank you for such a lovely night. I really enjoyed the opera."

Rafe knew that she was only speaking like that because of the butler. Once in her room, Ciara stripped out of her clothes and dressed in her buckskins. She woke her son and readied him for the ride. She sent for a horse, and the footman looked surprised but did as she ordered. Within the hour she was riding back to Heartstone.

Lucien came home the next afternoon. "Where is my wife?"

"She is gone." The butler spoke quietly.

"Very well. When she returns, tell her I wish to speak to her. Is my son with her?"

"Yes, my lord." The butler wondered if he understood what he meant by *gone*.

That was the routine for the next couple of months. Lucien immersed himself back into his old life and seemed to forget that he had a wife. He asked about her rarely and didn't seem overly worried about his son either, for he was with his mother.

* * * *

One day a message came from his father's house. The duke's health was failing. As Lucien entered the house, he saw the same doctor that had come to see his wife, the one that she had turned away. The man was dirty and scruffy looking.

"How is my father?"

"He is very sick. He should be bled, but he is asking for you. You need to tell him to let me bleed him." The doctor glared at the son as he entered his father's room.

"Father. You sent for me?" Lucien was shocked. His father looked horrible. His skin was pasty and pale. It didn't look like he had any blood in him to be let.

"Where is she?"

"Who? Where is who?" Lucien stood by the bed, wondering if the man was finally delirious.

"Your wife. Ciara. I want her. You said that she could heal. This old croaker wants to bleed me. Get her here." He collapsed back against the pillows, gasping for breath.

"My wife?"

"Yes, you idiot. Your wife."

"All right. I will have her come here." Rising, he went to the door and sent a footman with a note to his wife. Then he shut the door on the pacing doctor and went to sit by his father. His wife, he hadn't seen her for a while; he had been avoiding her, almost.

"Where is she?"

"I just sent for her. Why do you want her? I thought you didn't like her."

"If she healed you after what you went through, she can help me. I am being poisoned. I don't trust the doctor."

"Poisoned? What makes you think that?" How long had it been since he had been with his wife? Too long. He missed her at night ... Well, the ones he was sober enough to remember.

"Pay attention, boy. Don't let that doctor near me or my wife. Understand?" The words broke through and caused Lucien to actually look at his father. He was not playing; he really thought that he was being poisoned.

There was a knock on the door, and he opened it to admit not his wife but the same footman with a missive for him. He opened it and all but roared in fury.

My lord, your wife is where she has been for the past two months, at Heartstone. I have sent a rider for her and hopefully she will return before the morning. Foley

"Well, where is she?"

"Heartstone. She is at Heartstone." Two months. How had he not noticed? No, because he had been out with Phillip and the courtesans. God, he was such a fool. That was why the staff looked at him so strangely when he asked about his wife. He hadn't even gone into her room. He was so angry that she didn't want him at the opera that he hadn't spoken to her. Just drank, nothing else. Rafe and Devonna had not been around to see him either. Had Rafe been right?

He knew he had not been unfaithful in the manner of cheating, except for that first night when he kissed Lady Polly. Other than that he only gave off the appearance of cheating, but his body wouldn't perform for another woman.

His sole source of release had been by his own hand. And that he wouldn't admit to anyone, especially his wife.

Yelling to the room, he sent a note to Devonna and Rafe to come to him. And then he tossed out the doctor and paced the room as he waited. Devonna came alone.

"Saint?" Her soft voice hit him.

"Where is she?" He grabbed her arm and shook her.

"Saint, please. Don't do that." He dropped her arm and looked down at his sister. She was pregnant and about at the time where she should be going into seclusion. "I don't know where she is. I haven't seen her since the night we went to the opera. That was two months ago."

"You think I don't know that?" He roared at her.

"What did you want me to come here for?"

"Father thinks that he has been poisoned." He searched her eyes for sympathy and found none.

"Oh. That's too bad. Is that all? I am tired and wish to go home." She nodded her head coolly at her brother and left as silently as she came.

The duke was worsening. It was predawn when the bedroom door silently swung open to admit a woman dressed in buckskins, accompanied by a black wolf, smelling of fresh air, honey and berries. Ciara. She walked toward the bed, completely ignoring her husband, and focused on the man lying there.

"You came. I didn't know if you would." The duke's voice was rough from all of his coughing.

"I wasn't sure I was going to." Flicking a glance at Lucien, she spoke, "I need hot water, clean bedding and towels."

Lucien sent the order to the servants waiting and then went to stand by his wife. She was moving efficiently around the room as she stoked up the fire and then opened the windows to let the smell of sickness out.

When her items came, she made the duke drink two cups of liquid and then she put him in a lounge in the sunlight, wrapped tightly in blankets. While he dozed there, she stripped the bed and remade it quicker than any of his servants could have done. She carried the duke back to the bed and placed him in it. She didn't ask Lucien for any assistance, just did it on her own.

"He is very sick. He also lost a lot of blood. Did they bleed him?"

"I think so." Lucien spoke quietly as she made sure his father was sleeping soundly.

"He has a fever. I can't promise anything. I will do my best." She settled down into a chair beside the bed, completely ignoring the fact that her husband, whom she hadn't seen in two months, was in the room.

"Where have you been?" He asked as he pulled up a chair next to her. He would be calm and get his answers.

"Heartstone."

"Why did you leave?"

"You didn't need me here. You have your mistresses. I hate the city, I tried to tell you that, but all you did was push me to more appointments, to meet more people that wanted to stare at me. I left."

"You didn't tell me." His voice was growing hard, as was his body from seeing his beautiful wife and being tantalized by her sweet scent.

"Humph. I doubt you even noticed I was gone. Probably just thought I was out in the garden or something like that."

"Damn it. You are my wife. You belong with me. You will stay here after my father is better."

"No. I will stay until your father is better and then I will leave. There is nothing for me here." Slanting him a glance, she added, "Bryn is doing fine, thanks for asking."

That hurt. He had forgotten to ask about his son. Only because he had been worried about her and what she had been doing. "What have you been doing there? Who have you been seeing?"

"I can't believe you are going to act like a jealous husband now."

"You are mine. I won't tolerate anything but faithfulness from you."

"Leave. Leave me to nurse your father." She rose and checked on Faolan who had come with her and then sat down and stared off into space.

Lucien erupted. Jumping out of the chair, he stomped over to where she sat and yanked her up to her feet. He pulled her along out of the door, ignoring the word she mumbled to Faolan and yelled to a servant that they would be back soon.

Shoving her through the door ahead of him, he slammed it shut. "Damn you. You are my wife. I did you a favor by marrying you. Do you understand that? If I find out that you have not been faithful, there will be hell to pay."

Ciara bit her lip so hard it began to bleed. *Control the temper. Control.* She nodded and moved past him toward the door. "I have never been unfaithful to you." Came the quiet and calm reply. Reaching for the door handle, she swung it open before she was stopped by a low growl. She turned to face the man emitting it.

"I did not say you could leave yet." He was advancing on her.

"Enough of this. I came for your father. Not to fight with you." Her own voice was growing hard as her hold on her temper unraveled.

"You are mine, and you would do well to remember that." Lucien was angry with himself but taking it out on Ciara. Two months she had just left him alone, apparently not caring what he did or whom he did it with. "Don't you even care what I have been doing?" Not that he had done anything.

"I have a good idea, but no, I don't. I saw you that night, you know. The night of the opera." She noted his blank look. "You were all over that woman, Lady Polly, was her name I believe. I don't have to listen to this or you. We have nothing more to say to each other."

She had seen him? From what he remembered, he had been kissing and groping her in the street. "I didn't say you could leave. Maybe I wish to claim my husbandly rights."

"Perhaps you should go drink some more. I don't think you are quite rude enough yet." Ciara turned back toward the door. "Don't even think about it. I won't stop Faolan this time." Her voice was hard and lethal.

Lucien looked down into the full fury of a raging wolf. Faolan stood between him and his mistress. There was no sign of recognition in his gaze. He wanted to hurt the human he faced. Lucien stopped. What kind of man tried to terrorize his wife? "Go then. I don't need you. There are plenty of other women that would like my attentions."

"I am sure there are. Good bye, Wolf." She and her now silent wolf slipped through the bedroom door, and as it shut, Lucien felt the walls close in on him.

Ciara battled the duke's fever for the next seven days. She rarely ventured out of the room, and when she did she left Faolan to keep watch over him. She made the food for him herself, not trusting anyone else to make it.

On the eighth day, she sat looking out the window when she heard his voice. Gravely and rough. "You did it. You came."

"Aye."

"Will I live?"

"For a while yet. Are you hungry?"

"Yes." He sat up slowly in bed, looking drained, like he could sleep for a week. "Was it poison?"

"Aye. It was in your drink. You should be more careful who you trust." She set a bowl of broth by him with some soft bread. "Eat slowly."

"Where is my son?"

"Don't know."

"Are you leaving now?" He watched as she gathered up her herb pouches.

"Aye. I did what I came to do. I must return to my son."

"What about my son?"

"What about him?"

"Is he going with you?"

"Don't know." She headed for the door that flew open before she got there. Lucien stumbled in. He was unshaven and unkempt.

"You are all right?" The slurred question was aimed at the duke on the bed.

"Yes. Your wife cured me."

"Ah yes. My wife. The one who doesn't care what I do or with whom I do it." He leered at her but kept his distance as he spied the wolf. "Who never goes anywhere without her protector."

"You're drunk."

"How nice of you to notice, Father. Yes I am."

"I will leave instructions with your butler. You should be on your feet in a few days." Ciara spoke to the duke, completely ignoring her husband and slipped out the door.

"Are you going after her?"

"What for? She is just going home. I will see her later. I brought her son to town." Lucien chuckled as he thought about his plan to keep her in town. Her son was in the keeping of Foley at his town house.

Unfortunately for him, she heard his words as she was leaving. Swinging astride Artemis, she headed for his town home and retrieved her son. She took him with as she headed back to Heartstone. Ciara was the object of many stares as she rode through the streets of London, in trousers, astride a horse, with a wolf and mountain lion keeping pace with her.

Lucien found his man, Foley, nursing a bump on his head when he returned to the house. Bryn was gone, and there was no sign of his wife. Cursing, he spun about to go get her, but got sidetracked by Phillip and an invitation to go to Polly's house.

* * * *

A few mornings later a screaming woman, his sister, awakened him. Devonna was standing in his bedroom, raising the dead with her screeches. It was as if she had never been scared of him in her life. She was on the warpath, and he was, unfortunately, in the way.

"Bloody hell, Devonna. Get out of my room and shut your mouth."

"Get your lazy butt out of bed. I can't believe you. I have let this go for too long. Now you have done it. Get up. Get up!"

He stood up, naked as the day he was born, hoping that would send her running from the room, but all she did was arch a brow at him and toss him his robe. Pounding head, sore muscles and in desperate need of a bath, Lucien glared at his sister. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to keep you from making any more mistakes. Get dressed."

"I need a bath. I need to shave. You need to leave."

"She's gone." Devonna sat her pregnant body on the bed he just vacated.

"Who's gone?" The light was so bright. It was too early for this. "Look, I don't know what you are rambling on about. I didn't get in until this morning because I was, well..."

"I know exactly what you were doing. With whom and where. What happened to you? I thought you had changed. She was perfect for you, you know."

"Who, my wife? She left me. Get that through your head, little sister."

"Watch your tone around my wife, Luc." Rafe's deep voice entered the conversation as he stepped forward and moved next to her.

"You too? What do you want?" Could the morning get any worse? Morning? He needed to sleep until late afternoon at the very least.

"Nothing. I wouldn't be here at all if not for my wife's insistence. I think that you are getting everything that you deserve." Disgust laced his tone and his stance.

"What are you talking about?"

"I am supposed to give this to you. It came to me because she said she didn't know where you were staying." Devonna flipped the note on the bed beside her. "She didn't leave you Saint. You pushed her away." His sister's voice had softened.

"What are you talking about? I'm still here, she's not." He didn't want sympathy from her. That would make him think about her.

"You dragged her to London. When you got here, you dumped her to the mercy of the *monde*. She couldn't go riding. She couldn't go for a walk with her son, without five people following her.

"You made her an object that people wanted to see. She tried to change. She wore the dresses and other clothes you said she had to wear. She let you take her son away and put him with a governess. You took her freedom from her.

"My God, Saint. Don't tell me you didn't notice it. She wasn't happy. You told me yourself that they called her the 'heart of the mountain.' What did you think was going to happen when you tossed her into town? Then you abandoned her. You started hanging around with Phillip. The morning of your wedding breakfast, on our walk, before we came in to see you holding the Lady Levon in your arms, we heard two women bragging about how they had lain with the Black Marquess even though he had just married."

"All she did was try to make you happy by changing for you. All you did was make her life miserable and make her a laughingstock. 'The American heathen that couldn't keep her husband satisfied. The one with all the awful manners, which is why he sent her back out to the country, so she wouldn't embarrass him.

"I hope you are proud of yourself, brother. For I am ashamed of you. Take me home Rafe." His sister and her husband left him there in his room.

Suddenly stone sober, he raked a hand through his hair and looked at the bed where the note lay sealed. Hands trembling, he opened it and read:

I have come to the realization that you do not need a wife. You have an heir and so now you can go about and do that which every other member of your class does.

I am taking my son somewhere for him to learn about life and love. I don't think you will need to reach me, but if for some reason you do, give the note to my Aunt Fiona.

She will see that it gets to me. Don't bother them, for they will tell you nothing. I hope the life you are leading brings you happiness. Take care, Wolf.

The note fell from nerveless fingers as the reality of what he had done came crashing down on him. She was gone. Truly gone. He felt empty in a way he never knew that he could. He cleaned up and called for a mount. He had some serious work to do. He had to find a way to win her back. He had lost her once, and he wasn't about to do so again.

* * * *

Three months later, Lucien attempted to put a plan in effect to regain his wife. He must start with Fiona and Trenton. As he knocked on their door, he straightened his cravat. Potter opened the door and stepped back to admit him. "They are in the library, my lord."

"Thank you, Potter. I know the way." He waved off the butler and walked down the hall. Knocking softly on the door, he waited until he heard a voice from within.

"Enter."

Lucien pushed open the door and faced a very somber woman and her husband. For once, Fiona was wearing dark colors. "Lord and Lady Harrington. Thank you for seeing me."

"Come in, and sit down, my lord." Trenton spoke. Fiona sat silently, watching Lucien.

"I came to ask if you would tell me where I might find my wife?"

"No," Fiona spat. "She said you weren't to be told.

"She is my wife."

"You dishonored her." Green eyes narrowed in challenge.

"Fi, enough. Let him say his piece." Trenton patted his wife on the arm, and although he received a glare for his words, she clamped her mouth shut.

"Since I got the note from her, I have done nothing but worry. I am staying out at Heartstone and haven't drunk a drop. If that matters. I feel horrible about the way I treated her and wish to make it up to both her and our son. I miss my wife. I just..."

"Did you miss her those two months she was here and you were out with your women? Or the two months that she has been gone from here?" Fiona's eyes flashed with fury.

Lucien couldn't meet her gaze. It was embarrassing. He had behaved like his father and worse. "I just would like to send her a note. Can you do that for me?" He felt the chasm between him and his wife deepening.

"Yes. We can do that. Leave the note on the table." Trenton spoke before his wife could. "Do you have one ready?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

Lucien handed over the note and flinched as Trenton dropped it on the table. The man didn't even want to hold it. His gaze cut back to Lucien. "Was there anything else?"

"Have you heard from her? Is she all right?"

"Potter." The butler came and took Lucien's note along with one from Fi. When the man had gone, Trenton looked back at him. "Yes. I have heard from her. She is well, as well as can be expected. Lucky for us, she is a strong woman."

"I never meant to hurt her." Lucien's voice was low; there was a note of something in it that struck true to Trenton.

"I would have a word with him, Trenton. Leave us." Lucien was surprised at Fiona's tone and even more so when her husband stood.

"Go easy on him Fiona. He realized what he did was wrong." Trenton left them alone.

"I was sorry at first that I encouraged the two of you to wed. I should have realized that it would never work. She tried to tell me over and over again. Regardless of her feelings for you, she knew she could never fit into your world. And yet she tried." Fi glared at him.

"You took everything away from her. How could you do that? You tried to make her into one of the simpering fools that parade around trying to land a rich husband. You hurt her. I warned you not to take her for granted." She pointed a long finger at him.

"Regardless of the rumors she heard, and the stares that she endured, Ciara stood by you and defended you against those that would slander your name. She is only human, but when she saw you with that 'woman,' it was too much."

"I don't know why I am telling you this for she didn't want me to. But I will. When she arrived here two months ago, she was carrying your baby. When she took care of your father, she was carrying your baby. She was always ready to give

you another chance. But you destroyed her hopes. You threatened her." Fiona stood and stared down at him.

"I hope you realize what you lost. There will never be another woman, like her, for you. She can't be caged. If you had just showed her that you cared after the wedding, she would have tried. You didn't. You pushed her to do things that she didn't want to do. I hope you realize what you have done. You killed her spirit. Her heart." Fiona left the room.

Carrying your baby. She was carrying his baby. What had he done? He had to find her. Ireland. He would head to Ireland.

* * * *

A very tired, very dirty English marquess stood in the great hall of an old castle in Ireland as he waited for the laird, three and a half months after he had set out from Heartstone.

"Papa! Papa! You came. Mama said you might."

Lucien grabbed his son as he jumped on him. He held him tight as he blinked back tears. God, he had missed holding his boy. He had grown, but his eyes were still the same.

"What brings you here, English?" Conar. The large man strode into the great room. The man still looked larger than life, and he didn't seem too pleased to see Lucien.

"I am looking for my wife. Is she here?"

"Bryn. Run and find your grandpa." As the boy scampered away, Conar looked at the man standing by the fire. "I thought you would be here sooner, English. Your wife is not here."

"Don't lie to me. I know she is here. Our son is here. Where is she? I just spent three and a half months finding this place." He was rigid with fury.

Conar was also furious. Lucien found that out when he went down with a grunt, from the fist that came at him out of nowhere.

Bryn and the laird came into the room. At the sight of Lucien on the floor, the laird grinned. "Ye're late, lad. She's gone. Come sit, we will eat and drink."

Within moments, Lucien found himself in the middle of a meal with his in-laws. It was quite unnerving. His eye was swollen and painful. The McKays were large and stared at him like they would love to tear him limb from limb. The food was good, and the drink warm. Rory Cormac McKay, Ciara's grandpa, didn't seem to be in any hurry to answer his questions.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Nae. I don't know."

"Papa, did you come to take me home?"

"Would you like to come home with me?" Hoping the desire wasn't to plain for his son to hear in his voice.

"Aye. Mama said you may not wish to take me, but I could ask. She dinna say I had to wait here for them to return."

"Them?"

"Aye. Mama and my sister."

"Sister? I have a daughter?" Lucien looked at her grandfather, Rory, for confirmation of the news.

"Aye. A daughter. She is like you in every way, except for her eyes. She's her mother's eyes, she does. Keely Lucina St.

Martin. That is the name she gave her bairn." Rory let the man digest the news.

Lucien smiled broadly as he ran the name over in his head. Keely Lucina. She was named after him. A daughter. "Where are they? When are they coming back? How long ago did she leave?"

"I don't know. There is a note for you. She left it in case you showed up here. She left close to a month ago. Conar, get him the note."

Lucien ripped open the note and read:

I must admit I am surprised you cared to make it this far. That must mean something. You have a daughter of which I am sure you have been made aware. I hope you take Bryn with you, he missed you so. I have been doing a lot of thinking and believe that I am ready to try again. I will be back and we can discuss what we are going to do. Take care of my, our son. Go home and spend time with him. For what it's worth, I forgive you.

I forgive you. He could do anything with her beside him. He would make it right. Lucien looked over at his son who was chatting away with a cousin and nodded. It was time for him to get to know his son. He looked at Rory and watched the old man for a bit. He was proud like his father, but he loved his grandchildren.

"Did she take Faolan and Kosse with her?" Hoping that she had some protection with her.

"Papa, Faolan died. She took Kosse with her though." Bryn spoke of his old friend with sadness.

"How did he die?" Lucien winced as he realized that he should have been there to support her during the loss of her friend.

"Protecting her." Conar spoke up, not disguising the fact that he blamed Lucien for that either. "When do you leave, English?"

"In the morning, if there is an invitation to stay the night. My son and I will leave in the morning. Protecting her from what?"

"You are family. Of course, you can stay." Rory rose and stopped by Lucien's chair, completing ignoring his other question. "Don't hurt her again. I won't stand for it." Waving a hand around the room, he added, "None of us will. We love the lass. If she had not made us give our word you would not be breathing right now for the pain you caused her."

"So too do I love her." As he said it, he realized just how much. He had always loved her, but now he needed her love in return. "Bryn, care to show me around?"

"Sure, Papa. Let's go." He took his father's hand and dragged him off to parts unknown.

Lucien ended up staying in Ireland for a week. When he and Bryn left, Rory had given them a pair of wolfhound pups, named Thor and Loki, for the siblings to have. With his son riding on Toka, Lucien shook the hand of the Laird of Clan McKay, his grandfather by marriage. His eye was only a little swollen now, and he realized how lucky he was that Conar only hit him once. That man had a fist like a hammer.

"Take care o' my great-granddaughter. And her mother."

"I will." When I find her. "Are you sure you don't know where she went? America?"

"I don't know. I would tell you if I did. Safe journey. Be good, lad, mind your father."

"Bye, grandpa." Bryn waved as they rode off followed by thirteen members of the clan escorting them to the ship that would take them back to England.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter Twenty-Seven

England, ten months later

A black horse, bearing a hooded figure cloaked in black, trotted up the long drive made of crushed rocks and shells, coming to a stop at the large house that sat at the apex of the curve. The rider trailed a string of horses behind. It was like they just materialized out of the lingering mist. Eight horses roped together followed the one in front, all of them had steam blowing from their nostrils and rising from their burnished coats in the early morning sun that was melting away the last remaining fog. They were an amazing looking bunch of horseflesh.

Loping easily beside the lead horse was a tawny mountain lion and a small gray pup of some sort, doglike in appearance. A silent footman took the reins as the rider and its bundle dismounted, smiling not only to himself but all those present as he led the horses to the stables. It was promising to be a wonderful day.

Entering the silent house, the cloaked figure nodded at the butler that stood in shock at the sight. It was as if his serious demeanor had never existed, for his mouth was hanging open. After hugging and kissing a passing child for a few moments, and handing a small bundle to him as well as the care of the two animals, the figure walked down the hall toward the steps to the study, sure and yet silent. Stopping outside the door, a bronze hand reached out from beneath the folds of the cloak and knocked sharply on the door.

"Enter." The deep voice called through the door that sent ripples of desire and longing through the person hearing it.

Swinging the door open on soundless hinges, the figure stepped into the room, saying nothing, just searching. The man at the desk was facing the window, looking out toward the forest, looking for something lost. A carved statue sat on one corner of the desk; an image of a leaping wolf.

"What did you need, Weeks?" He still faced the window but stilled as a familiar scent flowed to his nose.

"Hello, Wolf." The smooth husky voice made him drop the papers on his lap then hit the floor as he jumped out of his chair and headed toward the vision.

"Ciara. It's you. You're really here?" Lucien moved around the desk but stopped right in front of her. His movements became hesitant, as if he wasn't sure his touch would be welcome. As if after thirteen long months it would just turn out to be another figment of his imagination. "Take off your hood. Let me see your face."

She pushed back the hood, with one hand and raised her gaze to the blue eyes of the man that held the key to her soul. Her heart. Her being. When he reached for her, she stepped back. "Wait."

Lucien didn't want to wait. But he did. His look filled with love and tears. "What?" The agony in his voice was clear to her and to him. He didn't care.

Ciara reached beneath her cloak and pulled out a carved box. She set it on his desk and stood back. He recognized the box; it was the one from her parents, the one that had been filled with gold and gems, the one with the mix of African and

Celtic cultures etched on the sides. "This box must adorn the place I call home." She stared unblinkingly at him as she waited for the meaning to sink in.

His voice shaking with emotion he asked, "Does this mean what I think it means? Are you coming home to stay?"

"Aye, if you will have me. Us."

Releasing a breath, he enfolded her in his arms. "Always. Oh, always. I love you." He pressed his nose into her hair and inhaled her scent as the tension flowed out of his body after so long. "I love you, and I will never let you go again. I am so sorry for the way I treated you. I never did anything with those women."

"I'm sorry as well." She pulled back and reached up to cup his face. "Would you like to meet your daughter?"

A wide grin split his face, and he looked around anxiously. "Where is she?"

"With Bryn, Kosse and Remy." At her words, the study door swung open and admitted his son holding a small bundle, followed by Kosse and the one who must be Remy. It was a gray wolf cub; Lucien chuckled, for his home would never be the same. Bryn walked over and placed the babe in his father's arms, stepping back to be held by his mother.

Lucien flipped back the blanket and saw her sleeping. She was beautiful. She had her father's facial features, but they fit her. She would grow up to be like her mother, strong and graceful. As he stared, she opened her eyes. Whiskey gold.

Keely's face wrinkled, and her lower lip trembled as she tried to decide whether the man looking down at her was worth crying for. Lucien ran a finger down her soft tan cheek

and was rewarded with a smile that made his knees weaken. She had her mother's smile.

Looking over at the woman who had given him two children, he saw her holding her son and speaking to him in her mother's language which Bryn had begun to teach his father. They were speaking way too fast for him to understand. The one thing he did understand as he sat down on the couch, with his daughter in his arms, a mountain lion and wolf cub lying at his feet, was that he had his family. Completely. And he was going to keep them. They were his heaven.

Lucien watched as his daughter fell back to sleep. He smiled at his son when he sat down by Kosse on the floor, rubbing the thick pelt of the friend he had missed. Ciara sat down beside him and looked at him. "I know that there are things we still need to discuss."

"It is all over. I have you back, and that is all that matters to me." He reached out one hand and cupped her face. "I love you, Ciara. I will tell you that every day until you believe me. I am sorry that I was not there for you when you lost Faolan. I know that I killed your spirit and your heart. We will stay here at Heartstone. If you wish to wear trousers or breeches then you will do so. All that matters to me is your happiness. I want the woman from the wilds of America. The wild, untamed princess that I lost my heart to. The woman that taught me how to live life. My wife. My heart."

One of those rare smiles crossed her face, making it light up. "I do believe you. For the longest time, they called me 'heart of the mountain.' I found that you are my mountain,

and if I am not with you, I am without my heart. I love you as well, Lucien."

It was a good thing he was sitting down. *Lucien*. His eyes widened as he looked at her. "Lucien, you called me Lucien."

"Aye, husband. That is your name, is it not?"

"What about Wolf?"

"I don't sense that wildness about you anymore."

"Say it again."

"What? That I don't sense that wildness about you anymore?"

"No, the other. The part before that."

"I love you, Lucien."

He leaned in to kiss her. "Never stop saying my name. I love hearing it upon your lips. Do you think that I can welcome you home in private now?"

Ciara shook with anticipation. "Aye." Turning to her son, she spoke to him, "Bryn. Watch your sister for a while. She can be outside in the sun if you wish to go. Nyama is here along with the rest of the herd, Epona as well."

"Okay, Mama." Rising, he took his sister out of his father's arms and left with Kosse and Remy following.

The second he was gone, Lucien gave his wife that predatory look. He swept her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs, ignoring the cheering that was coming from the staff. They were also glad that she had returned.

Kicking open the door to his room, he set her on the bed. "Will you stay in here with me?"

"I will stay anywhere with you." She breathed as she tugged his head down for another kiss that scorched him all the way to his soul.

The marquess and his wife stayed in their room for several hours. Bryn gave his sister over to the housekeeper when she woke and began to cry. Even he knew not to disturb his parents.

Lucien and Ciara came down the stairs for the midday meal. They ate with their children. After dinner, they sat in the large receiving room and watched as their children lay napping on the floor.

Ciara was curled up on a chaise next to her husband, and she was delighting in the security, warmth and tenderness of his arms around her.

"Where did you go?" His voice broke the silence in the room.

"After I left Ireland, I went back to America. I had to get some things before I came back."

"Like Nyama and Epona?"

"Aye. Among other things. When Faolan died, I realized that there were some things in life that were more important. Letting our daughter grow up with her brother and father was the most important. I kept Bryn from you. I couldn't do that again.

"I took everything from the cabin, and what I didn't give to the town I brought with me. They will be delivered here tomorrow. I brought the horses with me and came here."

His arms tightened around her. "Why did Faolan die? What happened? How did you get all the horses here?"

"I made an error in judgment. That's all. I paid a large sum for it. It helped that your name was mentioned. Did you mean what you said about staying out here?"

"If that is what you wish. I like it better out here anyway. Besides I want to challenge you to a race. I want to know what happened to you and Faolan. You will only delay my finding out."

"Not a good idea. I will win." She elbowed him playfully in the stomach, "you are too big."

"You weren't complaining about my size a little while ago." He nipped her neck as he whispered into her ear.

"Not now either. Just stating a fact. But I will be glad too. If the wager is worth it."

"Woman. Watch your tongue. I am still the master of the house."

"Uh huh. Whatever you wish to believe." She snuggled deeper into his chest, contentment flowing over her body.

Lucien stole a glance at his son and daughter and saw that they were still sleeping. He slid his hand down the waistband of her pants and flicked his finger over her *mons*. When she shivered and moaned, he shushed her.

"Shhh. Don't make any noise. You don't want to wake up your son, do you?"

"Stop it. Don't do this here."

"Why? I want it, and from the feel of things, so do you."
He pushed one finger deep within her and smiled as he watched her stifle a moan. She was hot, wet and tight. Her body was sucking on his finger, and he grew hard as stone in response.

Lucien's other hand worked its way up under her shirt to cup a full breast. This time a moan did escape. As he glanced over the back of the chaise, he saw his children were still sleeping. Even if Bryn woke, if he stayed on that side, what they were doing was still hidden from his view.

Lucien rubbed her with his thumb as he dipped into her with two fingers. Within moments, she was riding his hand and biting her lip to stay silent. Her breath coming short and fast.

A knock at the door froze them in place. "Enter." Lucien spoke but didn't remove his hand, just turned his head toward the door. When she tried to pull away, he flickered his fingers deep within her and made her shiver all over again.

Weeks stood in the doorway. "Sorry to disturb you my lord. There is a man here to see you."

"Who is it, Weeks?" Lucien asked calmly as his fingers brought her to the peak of an orgasm. He kept her hovering on the edge, the danger of being caught adding to the pleasure coursing through her.

From their place on the chaise, there was no way that Weeks could see where his hands were. To him it only looked like they were cuddled up on the couch. He had no way of knowing that Lucien's fingers moved intensely within her most private parts as his other hand teased her hardened nipple.

"He is from London, my lord. One of His Grace's men. He has a note from your father that requires a response. Shall I put him in the blue room, sir?"

Faster and faster his wrist moved, making his fingers go deeper and deeper. "Yes. We will be there shortly, just as soon as we wake the children. Give him some food and drink. That will be all."

"Very good, my lord." Weeks pulled the door shut.

Pinching her nipple, he whispered, "What do you want?"

"Please, Lucien. Let me cum." Ciara panted and shook with need.

"Very well, Princess. You were good, you stayed put even though my fingers didn't give you any rest." He flicked his thumb and sent her flying over the edge. Her back arched, and she dug her fingers into his legs.

As she regained her breath, she noticed that he was not anywhere near to being soft. Payback would be fun. She rose and cleaned herself and his hands. Slipping on her cloak, she woke her children.

She sent Bryn outside to play and gave Keely over to a housekeeper then she followed her husband into the blue room. She stayed by the door as he took the note from the livered messenger and read it.

After reading the message, Lucien waved Ciara over. She needed to see this and decide what she wanted to do. As she sat on his knee, she read the note. The duke requested their presence in London. He was giving a party and demanded his son attend.

"What do you think, Ciara?"

"I think we should go. He wishes you to be there."

"Very well, we won't stay with him, but in our townhouse." He quickly penned a response and gave it to the servant

sending him on his way. "Since the party is in two weeks, we will go the day before it starts. That way we will be in London as little as possible."

"Whatever you think best. Come with me, I wish to show you the horses I brought."

Lucien smiled as he followed his wife's swaying hips out the door. Once they were in the stable, he spent a good amount of time viewing the horses that she had brought with her. They were hardy stock and would add endurance to his horses.

As he left the stable, he saw his son running around toward the lake with four animals in tow. Kosse, Remy, and the two wolfhound pups that evidently had decided that tangling with the full-grown mountain lion would not be wise.

* * * *

For the first time in over a year, the Marquess of Heartstone spent the night holding his wife in his arms. They spent most of the night making passionate love and rediscovering each other's bodies. When Lucien woke the next morning, he was rested in a way that had been long gone from his life. However, he awoke alone.

Dressing quickly, he headed down the stairs and found no sign of his wife or children anywhere in the house.

Approaching Weeks, he posed his question. "Have you seen my wife, Weeks?"

"Yes, my lord. She and the children have left to spend some time out of doors."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, my lord. Perhaps Lord Harrington could tell you. He is waiting for you in the library."

"Thank you, Weeks." Lucien headed for the library.

"About time you got here. Were you going to sleep the day away?" Rafe asked as soon as he opened the door.

"What are you doing here? Where is Devonna? Is everything all right with your son?"

"Everything is fine. Devonna is out with your wife and the children. I was told to wait for you and direct you to the place for the day's activities. Let's go." Rafe smacked him on the back as they walked out the door to mounts that were waiting for them.

Devonna had given birth to a son, and this was the first time that Lucien had seen his sister or Rafe since the birth. Since his sister had confronted him that day in his room, he had not been welcome in their home. He didn't even know what his nephew looked like.

He had sent a gift, but wasn't sure that it had been accepted. His nephew was named James David Carson. Entering the room and seeing the look of contentment on the face of his friend and brother by marriage, he knew that past actions were forgotten, and all had been forgiven.

Lucien had not been very social after he arrived back in England from Ireland. He spent most of his time with his son, trying to prove something to himself. And to Ciara, should she ever return to him. He had vowed not to make the same mistake again. Knowing that he had found the love of his life, he needed just one more chance to prove himself. They would not be split apart again.

Riding over a hill, they headed down into the valley where Lucien had seen Ciara jump her horse. The day she rode up with Phillip behind her. There on the valley floor was his wife, his sister and their children.

His sister looked beautiful. She glowed with pride at being a mother and joy for being with the woman that had befriended her despite her past. He swung his gaze to his wife.

Ciara's head fell back as she laughed in response to something that Devonna said. Ciara still wore her buckskins but looked stunning. His son was running rampant through the meadow, where the horses were grazing and the animals were playing.

Ciara looked up as she saw her husband ride into view. He was so handsome. He could make her heart stop. "You do love him, don't you?" The question from Devonna made her blink.

"Aye. I do."

"I can tell, that look you have on your face."

"You mean one like you get when looking at your husband?" She cut her eyes to her friend.

"Yes," Devonna admitted laughing, "I would suppose so. I never thought that I would find happiness like this. I thought it was unattainable for one like me. You know, not right in the head. I know what they all said about me. It just seemed easier for me to play at being dumb rather than fending off unwanted suitors." With a loving look at her husband as he rode toward them, she continued. "I have always had an attraction for Rafe. There was just something about him. I

honestly never thought that it would have been returned. And now, with James in my life, well, I just don't know how it could ever get better."

"I am glad that it all worked out for you both. He is a wonderful man, and I can see that he loves you. Perhaps it is true what they say about reformed rakes making the best of husbands." Ciara shook her head as she smiled at the look of agreement that crossed Devonna's face.

"I have a confession to tell you," Devonna's voice grew hesitant. "When I found that you had left, I had mixed feelings. The sister in me was angry that you could do such a thing to my brother, but at the same time I realize that he was being a complete idiot. I know that what happened between you two is not any of my business, but I want you to know that I still think highly of you, no matter what happened. I am just so glad that you came back. And brought me a little niece. She is so close to James' age I just can't believe it."

Ciara leaned over and squeezed Devonna's hand. "I am glad that you don't hold anything against me. I am so glad to have you for a sister. Now I have someone to help me stand up to the men in my life. They can be so stubborn."

"Who can be stubborn?" Lucien's voice intruded.

Both women shared a secret smile and answered simultaneously, "No one," then burst out laughing much to the confusion of the husbands.

Devonna rose and embraced her brother, an embrace he returned with gratitude that all was forgiven. "It is past time for you to meet your nephew, big brother. Come say hello."

With a tug of her hand, she pulled him over to where James was sleeping next to Keely.

James had fair hair like his father. Lucien reached out to touch the sleeping child. "His eyes are like mine." His sister was gazing lovingly upon her son with her violet eyes.

"He is beautiful, Devonna."

"Thank you. Keely is quite impressive herself. She looks a lot like you."

"Do you think so? I think she looks like her mother. Beautiful." Lucien's voice rang with pride as he turned his gaze to his daughter.

Rafe stood next to Ciara as she absently stroked Kosse on the head. "I'm glad you have returned. He was not the same without you."

"We both did some things that we should have done differently." Ciara looked off toward her horses.

"Thank you." Rafe spoke sincerely, searching for her gaze and holding it once he caught it.

"What for?" Eyebrows raised in confusion.

"Devonna." He didn't need to say anymore.

"That was not my doing. There is more strength in her than you realize," she quirked her lips. "For what it's worth, you are welcome. Just remember that when I teach her to ride astride."

Rafe's eyes grew round. "Luc. Your wife is threatening to teach your sister to ride as a man. Help me out."

"No way. You are on your own. Besides, I am going to have her teach me to ride better." Lucien's voice was filled with laughter.

The four adults sat on the blanket and got caught up on past events. As they prepared to eat, Kosse raised his head to the crest of the hill, signaling a disturbance to the tranquil scene. It was Phillip, riding toward them with a companion, Polly.

Lucien stiffened, as did Rafe and Devonna. Ciara merely took a deep breath. As they rode up, their horses were not comfortable with the wild animals around so they dismounted from the rig in a hurry.

"Good day. I stopped by your house, and they said you were having a picnic. We hoped there would be enough for us to join you." Phillip spoke smoothly as Polly ogled Lucien.

"Of course. Please sit down, Lord Edais, and you as well, Lady...?" The question was there, who was she? Ciara spoke with a calm assurance.

"Lady Ward." Polly spoke with a hint of censure in her voice. "I am a very good friend of your husband's," the unspoken meaning clear.

"Aye. I have heard that you are one of his oldest friends." Ciara maintained her calm tone, but her words left no doubt that she wouldn't take anything from this woman. Devonna coughed delicately into her hand as she tried not to laugh at the look of horror that crossed Polly's face.

"Well," she snapped, not at all pleased that she was being made the joke, "you know what they say about those that are old friends..."

"Something like being so old, it should be set aside for something newer," Ciara gave Polly a scathing once over

before continuing, "younger and firmer. One that can keep up with him."

Even Lucien and Rafe had to fight to hide their smiles this time. Ciara could hold her own. A quick glance at Phillip told the same story. Polly's face mottled with rage.

Lucien looked to Phillip, "Why did you bring her here? We are not anywhere near London. What are you trying to do? Phillip, I love my wife and want nothing to do with Polly or anyone like her anymore."

"I was coming out here, and she just invited herself along. You know how she is. I am sorry. I know that part of your troubles were because of me." He sounded huffy in spite of his apology.

Lucien waved off his words. When had his friend changed so much? "It's over. You are welcome to stay as long as she remains civil to my family." Looking back toward his wife, he noticed that she had served a plate of food to Polly.

"Why don't you have servants to do this?" Polly looked around for a butler or maid.

"This was just a family picnic." The words were delivered with meaning that didn't escape her notice. "We have no need of someone to serve us."

"Oh yes, you delightful colonials. Always determined to do something on your own." Polly's eyes narrowed in challenge. She seemed to have forgotten that there was anyone else present.

"When one is capable of doing so, why not?"

"Because work like that only shows one's breeding. A true lady has people wait on her. She would never do menial tasks."

Ciara stared calmly at her, like she was looking at a picture and trying to figure it out. "I suppose that would go for how one lived one's life as well. I mean, take someone who sleeps around. Regardless of breeding, that person would be considered a whore, a high-priced whore, but a whore nonetheless. I would rather have someone see me doing a so-called menial task than have them look at me as a whore. I suppose it all depends on one's values. I, for example, was raised to think and do things for myself. And to respect my body. I guess that would be hard for one who is used to sleeping with men to get what they want." The only sign of Ciara's distress was the hardening of her eyes, but Polly didn't understand that she was treading on thin ice.

"Well, considering—things—I suppose you would be used to hard work. Aren't most colored people slaves in your country?"

Collective gasps went up from the surrounding people. Lucien narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to speak. Ciara beat him to it.

"I suppose you would think that. Most narrow-minded people do. I am not a slave, nor have I ever been one, so that has no bearing on whether I know hard work or not."

"Well, rumor has it you are a freak."

"Polly, enough," Lucien broke in.

She continued as if she never heard him. Her eyes were spitting flames, and she had risen to stand over Ciara. "They

say that you are unnaturally strong. That you can lift a man. That you kicked in a door and tossed some across the room. They say you even carried Saint." Spit flew from her mouth as she spewed her accusations. "What sort of man would want a woman like that? It was no wonder you had to trap him into marriage with that bastard kid of yours."

That did it.

Ciara rose in one fluid movement, before Lucien could. She was taller than the hateful blonde in front of her, and she didn't hesitate to use her height to intimidate. "That's it." Her voice was a deadly purr. She stalked Polly, making the woman back up step by step. "I don't care if you insult me or where I come from. However when your foul mouth insults my son, you go too far."

Polly stood still and tried to act unafraid. Ciara circled around her, as if an animal toying with its prey before the final killing stroke is delivered, as she continued, "Tell me something Polly Ward. If you heard rumors that I was strong enough to throw a grown man across a room, kick open a door and carry Lucien—alone—why would you upset me? Why would you be dumb enough to slander my son in front of me?"

Ciara tilted her head from side to side as she examined the woman in front of her. "I have wild animals as pets. I am, as you say, freakishly strong. Why do you do this? Think about it. If I could do that to a man, just imagine what I could do to you." She leaned her head in close to Polly's ear. "If I ever hear that you spoke about my children, in any way—good or bad, you will find out firsthand what I can do to you. Leave.

Your welcome has been worn out." Ciara stepped back and pinned her glare on Phillip. "You." She stalked toward him, and he rose and backing away quickly from her glowering eyes. "You brought her here. You take her away."

Lucien was so angry, he was shaking. Rafe had risen and was standing next to him as well, offering his support and desire to throw them out. A glance at Ciara gave him a short shake of her head as she told him silently that it was over. Phillip just about tossed Polly up into the seat of the rig and, without a second glance, drove away as fast as the rig would go.

"Ciara," Lucien turned to his wife, "I am sorry." He never should have let it go this far. What sort of husband allowed another woman to attack his wife?

"Don't let them ruin the day. We have a picnic to enjoy." She let loose a whistle that brought Kosse, Remy, the two wolfhounds, Thor and Loki, and her son in to the blanket to have lunch.

They spent the rest of the day having fun, playing games and riding in the meadow. When the winds began to pick up, they loaded Devonna and the two infants into the wagon along with the food.

"I should ride with my wife and handle the ribbons," Rafe spoke as he looked over at a horse that was next to Ciara.

"I'll ride with my sister. You go ride with my wife." Lucien grinned as he watched Rafe kiss his wife quickly and head over to Ciara, as giddy as if he were still a school lad. He climbed in the wagon, and, with a snap of his wrist, he and his sister headed back to Heartstone.

"I am going to ride back with you and Bryn." Rafe announced as he walked up to Ciara.

"Very well. Where is your horse? Or were you wanting to ride one of mine?"

"I would like to try one of yours." Rafe was gazing at a gelding by Toka.

"Do you ride without a saddle?"

Shock crossed his features as he shook his head. "No. I need one."

They had his gelding stripped and the other one saddled in no time. Before long, the rest of them were headed back up as well. Bryn looked at his uncle and asked, "Uncle Rafe, would you like to race?"

"Sure." He paused. "If it's all right with your mother."

"Go right ahead." Ciara smiled, as she knew what was going to happen, Rafe was about to lose to a young boy. "Line up, and I will tell you when to go." The males brought their horses side-by-side. "Both ready?" At their nods, she shook her head. "The race ends at the stables. Ready. Set. Go!"

They tore off and were soon heading up the hill. Rafe didn't have a chance. Bryn was lighter, and his horse was faster. Nudging Artemis into a gallop, she rode off after them. There was pandemonium in the stables when she got there. Bryn was running around screaming about how he won while Lucien was making light of his friend's loss to a boy. Devonna wisely was staying out of it, but she sported a grin.

Ciara swung down gracefully into her husband's strong arms. His eyes smoldered with passion as he let her slowly down the length of his hard body. When her feet were safely

on the ground, Ciara sucked on her lip, as she did when she was thinking. How she wanted him.

"Thanks for the wonderful day," she spoke softly as he picked up their sleeping infant.

"Thank you." Lucien walked toward the house with his daughter in his arms and his son at his side.

Devonna stood with Ciara as Rafe carried his son inside. Soon it was just the two women left with the animals.

"It was a wonderful day. Thanks for inviting us."

"It was past time for you and brother to see each other. Thanks for coming and bringing my nephew." Ciara put her arm around Devonna, and they headed up the steps side-by-side. "Are you going to the duke's party?"

Devonna stopped. "I don't know. Part of me doesn't want to see him, but I should."

"I think you should. Regardless of what has transpired between you, he *is* still your father."

* * * *

The night of the party arrived. Ciara was going to be at the ducal manse at the start of the party, pulling hostess duties because the duchess had come down ill and was staying in her room.

"I trust all is ready?" The duke asked from behind her.

"Aye. The servants have done a wonderful job. Your house is beautiful." Ciara smiled as she took in the glitz and glamour of the ballroom. They had outdone themselves.

Chandeliers full of candles waiting to be lit would cast a brilliant light down onto the guests. Silks covered the walls

making them flutter with the slightest breeze. The colors were a blend of gold and cream. The chandeliers had mirrors around them and cast the glow from the candles off in all different directions, making the room sparkle. The house was warm and had a welcome completely different from the first time that Ciara had crossed the threshold into the cold mausoleum.

Turning, she looked at the man who was standing in silence next to her. The duke had recovered from his battle with poison, but he still looked sad. He was dressed in fine clothes, and even at his age cut a handsome figure, until the infamous 'duke' scowl crossed his features.

The duke, in turn, observed his daughter-in-law as she looked over the ballroom. When he had said that his wife was indisposed and he needed a hostess, he didn't expect Ciara to agree being a substitute. She had though and done well.

That afternoon he met his granddaughter for the first time and saw his second grandson for the first time as well. Devonna and Rafe came with Lucien and Ciara to see how things were going for the party. They had their children with them, and the duke's eyes filled with tears to see them. Not that he would ever admit that to anyone.

The meeting had been a strained one, but it was a start. He wanted to be a part of his children's lives and know his grandchildren. Nothing like a baby to bring people together. The love he saw on his children's faces when they looked at their spouses made him remember the love he had for his first wife, his one love.

"I will see you later. I have to change." Ciara nodded her head slightly at him and walked off.

Sebastian broke into a rare smile. She was a good one. For some reason, she kept slipping past his defenses and was winding her way into his heart, odd behavior and all.

Ciara stood next to Devonna as the receiving line finally dwindled to an end. "Is it always like this?" she whispered.

"Unfortunately. At least the line is done." Devonna smiled as she looked over at her sister by marriage. Ciara was stunning and handling the hostess job as though she had been raised to do such a task.

"Have you seen my husband?"

"No. I thought he would already be here."

"He said that he might be a little late, but I thought that he would be here by now." Ciara had thought that things were better between them; had believed that differences had been settled.

"Don't give up on him yet. Let's go get a drink." Devonna pulled her off in the direction of the refreshment table.

Many who wanted to offer their congratulations at such a successful party stopped them along the way. While they were drinking lemonade, the band struck up chords signaling the start of the first waltz.

Sebastian halted behind his two daughters. He scanned the room for his son but didn't see him. As he watched, Rafe came to claim his wife for the dance, and that left Ciara alone. As he took it all in, he was aware that there were titters behind some fans.

"My dear. Would you do me the honor?" The duke asked Ciara, as he bowed before her.

Ciara smiled and performed a perfect curtsy before taking the duke's hand and following him. He was a wonderful dancer and made it easy for her to follow. The dance ended, and he took her back to where she had been standing.

Rafe claimed her for the next dance. As she whirled about the room on Rafe's arm, a shiver run up her spine. But she couldn't make out what caused it.

Lucien was late. He entered his father's house and shook his head at the majordomo who was about to announce his presence. He wanted a chance to look for his wife first. He stood hidden in the darkness of a pillar as he watched her dance with Rafe. She took his breath away.

Her dress was almost a sapphire blue, the exact shade couldn't be said, for as she moved the color changed, shimmered. Although it was cut in a more conservative way than the majority of the women's dresses, she was by far the most exquisite woman in the room. Apparently other men thought so as well, for as soon as Rafe left her alone, many single men approached her and sent what he considered leering looks at her. It didn't seem to matter to them that she was the Marchioness of Heartstone. Her husband wasn't in sight.

Her dress showed off her magnificent figure as she moved around the floor with her dance partners. Her hair was swept up in an elegant coiffeur that accentuated her striking facial features. Her eyes were kind as they looked upon the people

surrounding her, but her smile was not the blinding smile that he had come to know and love.

The satin reflected the light making her appear to glow. Magnificent wasn't the right word. He couldn't find one.

Lucien swallowed, a little nervous, and made to step out to greet his wife when he saw his father approach her. He stopped and watched.

"Ciara, would you do the honor of dancing with me again?"
With a small smile, she curtsied and took the duke's hand.
"Of course." She followed him out on the floor as her gaze scanned the room once again for her elusive husband. When the dance was over, she took a seat with Devonna by an open window.

The room fell still as the orchestra silenced. Ciara glanced at Devonna who shrugged in confusion. The conductor stepped forward to the edge of his platform and spoke.

"I am sorry for the interruptions, but we had a request. Someone wishes to make an announcement to all present, so without further ado..." The man bowed, waved his arm, and as if he were Moses parting the Red Sea, he got the people to split, and Ciara was gazing directly across the ballroom floor at her husband.

Lucien was dressed entirely in black; even his intricately tied cravat was black. He presented a commanding figure. His trousers were tight against corded leg muscles and his shirt snug across broad chest and shoulders. The coat fit his body perfectly, showing it had been tailored for him and him alone. His hair was cut short, and for the first time she could see every expression that moved across his handsome face.

There was no more lock of hair falling across his eye, no hair teasing the collar of his shirt. He was clean-shaven and close cropped. He looked damn good.

Lucien stood tall, his feet spread as if he were standing on the bow of a ship as it clipped across the ocean waters, his eyes sharp and assessing. Hands behind his back, he gazed steadily at the woman sitting on a chair on the other side of the room. His wife, his love. For no one else in the world would he humble himself so.

"I ask all those present to forgive me for interrupting this party. Father, my apologies." Lucien's voice was strong and deep as it rolled through the hushed crowd. His seductive yet unwavering blue eyes never left his wife's face.

The room was silent as everyone stared at the marquess, once known as the Black Marquess, the man who had cared for naught but his own pleasure, as he was about to set aside his dignity in front of them all. Willingly.

"As all of you know, I am married. While it has been well over a year, I still feel like a newlywed. What you probably don't know is the type of woman I married. She is amazing—intelligent, smart, kind, loving, and the best of mothers to our two children. Unlike any person, man or woman, I have ever had the honor of meeting. I could go on and on." Lucien moved slowly across the floor toward his wife. His movements smooth, almost predatory, but oh so sensual in his own masculine way. It was his signature walk. No one else had it; no one else could come close to mimicking it. It screamed *Lucien*.

"Each day when the sun comes up, I thank God that she is in my life. I didn't appreciate her at first. I heard the rumors, all of them," his voice pinning those guilty of spreading those very lies more sharply than if his gaze had speared each and every one personally. "The stories of why she went back to the country while I stayed in London. Those are lies. I have heard that people believe her to be less than worthy of marrying a marquess. Again. Lies. If anything, I am not worthy of marrying her. Her lines are impeccable. She hails from royalty on both sides of her family. She is a princess. Destined to be a queen someday. Not that what you think matters to me." He stopped in the middle of the floor and resumed his stance, daring each and every person there to defy his words. To defy him.

"There is nothing that this woman could do that possibly could embarrass me. Nothing." His eyes sent his meaning straight into her heart. "I know that it is not popular to show that one has a love match. I don't care. I love my wife. I tried to get her to fit into this society, and it nearly cost me the best thing that has ever happened to me. I will not stand for anyone to besmirch her name."

Lucien glanced behind him, and the musicians struck up a quiet and haunting love melody that only added more feeling to his words. Bringing his gaze back to Ciara, he brought one tan strong hand out from behind his back. In it was a flower.

He held a single rose, dusky lavender in color. The flower against his black clothes and sun-darkened skin was a beautiful combination. Lucien held the rose out toward Ciara,

who sat there stunned. A look mirrored on the face of every person in the room, from nobleman to servant.

Lucien's mesmerizing voice reached out to her again, ensuring that she couldn't draw away from the lure of his words that caressed her very soul, "Ciara, from that amazing day, eight years ago, that I awoke under your care, I have known. I should have married you back then for I loved you at that moment. I can't apologize enough about the way I treated you at the beginning of our marriage. What I did was inexcusable and unacceptable. I am sorry for making you and our family suffer because of my actions."

To the complete and utter astonishment of all present, Lucien St. Martin, the Marquess of Heartstone, heir to the dukedom of Stokley, dropped to his knees in the middle of the ballroom floor and held that single rose aloft.

Man and flower alone were illuminated under the hundreds of flickering candles, making his entreaty all the more poignant to those that were witness. His head stayed bowed, his voice becoming tortured, reached out to her. "Forgive me. I know that I have done nothing to earn your trust or your love. I offer you everything that I have." He sounded almost desperate.

Ciara rose in the smooth graceful motion that was her, always elegant. Moving forward, she stopped when she stood in front of her prostrating husband. "Lucien, please get up." She tugged on the collar of his shirt as she spoke with a tentative voice.

"Forgive me." He wouldn't even look at her, keeping his magnificent blue gaze down. His shoulders were quivering with each breath he took and words he spoke.

Ciara's heart broke. He wasn't doing this for himself; he was doing it for her. Under English law, she belonged to him, and he could do with her as he wished. Lucien was showing her that he would snub the very fabric of rules that he had been brought up with if that was what it took to make her happy. "Take the rose. I didn't know what to get the woman who never seemed to want anything I had to offer. I chose a rose because it reminded me of you. Simple. Elegant. Strong. Unparalleled in beauty. I will get anything for you. You are my everything. Please."

That last word, desperate wanting pleading, nudged her into motion. Ciara took the rose from his hand and brought it to her nose, inhaling its rich scent. Her eyes closed as she let the fragrant smell inflame her senses. Tucking it behind her ear she reached down, under Lucien's bent chin and nudged his face up to meet her eyes.

When she was looking into his midnight eyes, she smiled. As the tears filled her eyes, she said in a soft yet strong voice, "I forgive you. I already had. All I ever wanted was you. I love you, Lucien Remington St. Martin." Tugging again on his collar, she added in a sharper tone, "Now, off the floor, please."

With one graceful move, Lucien was standing tall over her again. His tan lean fingers cupped her bronze face as their lips met. They kissed until the cheering of the gathered crowd penetrated the haze they created.

Moving his lips from hers, he drew slightly back so there was a small space between them. "I love you, Ciara Malika St. Martin. I will always love you."

Heedless of the people watching them, she threw herself into his arms, entrusting that he would catch her as he always caught her, with those arms that made her feel so safe, so protected, so loved. Ciara wrapped her arms around his neck and placed a kiss on his lips that would have the whole of London talking for years to come.

When her feet reached the floor, Lucien made a gesture to the musicians, and they began to play a waltz. "Princess," his voice loud and clear, "would you do me the honor of a dance?"

Her eyes brimming with love, Ciara swept into a graceful curtsy as she inclined her head in a regal motion. "It would be an honor, my lord." That was the first time that she had ever used his title, and he smiled back at her and then pulled her into his embrace and swept her away in time to the music. As the crème de la crème of the *haut monde* stood witness to a rare but true love match, the Marquess and Marchioness of Heartstone danced that entire waltz, the only ones on the dance floor.

The rest of the night passed with Lucien and his wife, Ciara, being the talk of every person there. The marquess did not let his princess out of his arms. He fed her from his plate and held her closer for every dance they shared.

The women looked on in envy, as did the men. So this was what true love was like. One thing was abundantly clear to

all. The rake was forever gone. His wild princess had tamed him. Had tamed him and he seemed to enjoy the taming.

The duke smiled as he watched his son and daughter move around the floor in each other's arms. Ciara still wore the flower in her hair, and as they moved in perfect tandem, he saw the look that passed between them. His son had finally found where he belonged. Had found his way to happiness.

* * * *

Lucien kicked open the door to their bedroom, his wife firmly in his grasp. Setting her down on the bed, he once again got on his knees in front of her. "Ciara, I have something for you."

"Lucien, you have given me everything that I could ever want."

"Except a ring." He pulled a box from his pocket and placed it in her hand. "Open it."

"You gave me a ring." She held up her hand that had the plain band on it.

"That was not the one I wanted for you. This one is."

Ciara opened the box. Inside lay a ring that consisted of a wide band holding a topaz surrounded by small diamonds. The band itself had etchings on it, both African and Celtic. "Oh, Lucien. It's beautiful." She slipped it on. Perfect fit.

Eyes bright with unshed tears, Ciara reached out for her husband. Lucien moved into her arms, and as they slowly undressed each other, they knew this was what they had searched for.

A few weeks later, back at Heartstone, Lucien was working with the colt, Storm, as he half watched his son riding past going to join his mother and sister.

"Good day, Luc."

Lucien turned to see Phillip standing there. He looked sober and worried. "Phillip, what brings you here?"

"Just stopped by. Thought I should apologize again, and see if I was still welcome here."

Lucien smiled. "Of course you're welcome. How are things in London?"

Phillip leaned on the fence as he watched his friend. "You look well. Marriage must agree with you."

Taking a deep breath, Lucien turned the colt loose and walked over to his friend. "It is the best thing that ever happened to me. I am pretty sure that Rafe would also agree. When can we expect you to lose your freedom?"

Before Phillip could say anything, someone else did. "Yes, Phillip. When are you getting married?" It was Rafe.

"Rafe." Phillip smiled as he greeted his friend. "The wife let you out of the house so soon?"

"I am the man. I can do what I want."

"Uh huh. If you say so. Marriage may work for the two of you, but I have no intention of giving up my freedom. There is not a woman alive out there that can keep me interested for the rest of my life. I like the life of a rake."

Lucien grinned. "I don't look at it that way. I am happy. I have everything that I could want."

"Don't you two ever miss your freedom? I mean, going out with different women and not being tied down?"

"Yes, Lucien. Answer his question. Do you ever miss that?" Ciara's voice broke in. As one, the men turned and swallowed when they saw her sitting on her horse. Phillip blanched as he saw the woman that sat above him. Ciara shook her head at them. With a wink at Phillip and a smile for her husband, she added, "Sorry. I don't mean to intrude. Lunch will be in a few minutes. Lord Edais, will you join us?"

He stammered his answer. "Yes ... yes. That would be fine. Thank you, Lady Heartstone."

"Call me Ciara. I don't like all that formality. Rafe, I am to tell you that you and your wife will be joining us as well. See you inside." She rode off, disappearing into the stable, leaving the men in both awe and amazement as they watched her graceful movements.

Lucien smiled as he watched the woman he had the privilege to call *his wife*. She was a work of art. Every movement, every motion was beautiful to see. Sighing deeply, he slapped his friends on their backs. "We should get inside."

Phillip had never felt more like an outsider than he did at lunch that day. Not that the company he kept made him feel bad or awkward. It was that they seemed so bloody happy with their families. The look on his friends' faces when they picked up their infant children. The love their gazes as they kissed their wives. It hurt him to think that maybe Rafe and Lucien had a point. For truth, they didn't seem to be trapped into anything unwilling or undesirable at all.

Phillip looked around the table and watched his friends smile. They had never been so relaxed looking before. Rafe was holding his heir and looked perfectly content. His wife, Devonna, bent over a piece of paper that Lucien's eldest, Brenden, had drawn and was showing her.

Ciara sat beside her husband holding their daughter, Keely, in her arms. Lucien spoke to Rafe about his stables and every now and then would send a secret smile toward his wife as he looked on in wonder at his family. On the floor over by a wall lying sprawled out in complete silence were the rest of the clan, a mountain lion, wolf cub and two Irish Wolfhounds. They were very well-behaved despite the conversations going on around them.

Phillip slid his gaze back toward the woman that had snared the Black Marquess. She intrigued him. Lucien was right, there was something about her that made a person sit up and take a second look. When he glanced up at her face, he saw that she was staring at him with those unwavering whiskey colored eyes of hers. It was like she was evaluating him and taking his measure.

Ciara stared at Phillip. The man was a mystery to her. Outwardly, he seemed to be one thing, and yet at times he appeared to be completely different. In truth, he seemed to be unhappy. Like his actions were ways for him to avoid the real issue bothering him. She realized that the man was in fact still nervous around her. Ciara didn't hold a grudge against him. What happened back then was between her and Lucien.

The fact that he brought Lady Polly Ward with him that one day had been harder to forgive. She had done it, but it was not by any means easy.

Ciara turned her attention to the infant she held in her arms. Keely was a miracle. The birth had not been an easy one; she had come way too early. When she finally came, she hadn't been breathing at all. Now, she was a strong girl. Growing rapidly and smiling at everyone. Bryn looked after and loved his little sister. There was no jealousy from him. He loved being with her. Keely didn't cry much, and she followed Bryn with her eyes, grinning and drooling when he smiled at her.

The adults spent the rest of the afternoon outside. The pleasant autumn days were coming to an end, and Ciara wanted to enjoy them as much as possible.

* * * *

In the weeks preceding Christmas, Lucien was summoned to London. The duke sent the note but no other explanation.

Ciara was lounging in the salon when Devonna stuck her head in the door. "Ciara. Mind some company?"

"Come in Dev. Did you bring my nephew?"

"I left him with Bryn, Keely and the governess." She shut the door quietly and sat down on a couch.

Ciara had only just sat up to ring for tea, when Mrs. Ashley knocked and brought in tea and snacks. After she left them alone, Ciara smiled at her sister-in-law. "What's the matter, Dev?"

"Rafe was summoned to London by Father."

"Lucien as well. Maybe it means they found Richard."

The door opened, and in came Bryn followed by the governess and both babies. "Sorry, my lady. He wouldn't stay in the nursery any longer." Her disapproving tone was clear.

"That's fine." Ciara opened her arms to hug her son as Devonna rose to get hers. "I always have time for my son."

"With all due respect, milady. You should be sterner with him. The children aught to be seen, not heard, and only seen at certain times. Left to run loose like this can only bring trouble."

"My son is not causing trouble," Ciara's voice sharpened.
"This is his home, and if he wished to leave a room he may do so. I will not allow my son to feel like a prisoner in his own home," she spoke, removing her daughter from the dourfaced woman.

"I am doing what I was hired to do." Her words snapped with condescension.

"Your point?"

"That the Marquess of Heartstone hired me. My reputation is well known for dealing with unruly children. If allowed to do this my way and without interruptions, I will have him groomed into a proper child of a Marquess."

"Regardless of who hired you, I am his mother."

"My lady. Most mothers don't interfere and allow me to do my job. In the end, they are happy with the results. I don't have a biased opinion and can see the children for what they really are."

Devonna pulled Bryn down on the seat beside her as she watched the governess sign her own dismissal. "Mama's mad, isn't she, Auntie Dev?"

"I would say so." She ruffled his hair as they watched the scene unfold in front of them.

"What exactly is my son really?"

"A child. But one sorely lacking in manners. That's why I was hired."

"Exactly. Was. Not anymore."

The large woman drew herself up to all of her completely unimpressive and stocky height. Her broad shoulders quivered with indignation as she struggled to regain her composure. She was an extraordinary governess, her services highly sought after by the crème de la crème of the *monde*. She was never prematurely dismissed. This was an outrage. She said as much.

Ciara believed that the governess looked a lot like a fish with her mustached mouth gaping open and shut. "I am relieving you of your position. You claim there are many who wish for your services so you shouldn't have a problem getting work."

"You can't dismiss me. I was hired by the marquess." The woman shook with rage. "He will hear of this."

"My husband," Ciara began, her tone benefiting her station, was as regal and pompous as Devonna had ever heard, "may very well have hired you. However as the case may be, he is in London, and I am Bryn's mother. I want you gone. Feel free to send him a note, for you can be sure that I will. Weeks will send footmen to accompany you while you

gather your things and then take you to the nearest coach. Good day."

Ciara sat there with an expression that dared anyone to contradict her order. Silent footmen stood behind the exgoverness as if summoned by a bell pull and given verbal instructions, when in fact Ciara hadn't touched the rope nor called for them.

The staff at Heartstone quickly had come to love the lady of the manor. Quick with a smile for all, she was nice to all. Even her animals were well received in the household. It wasn't uncommon for servants to be seen petting the large cat or throwing sticks for the canines. They cared about her and wanted her to be safe, especially with the marquess having been summoned to his father's. The footmen had been sent by Weeks who had seen the look on the governess face as she followed Bryn into Ciara's presence.

As she left with the footmen, the governess bit back a very unladylike curse. This wasn't going according to the plan at all. She wasn't supposed to get dismissed.

Ciara's expression softened as she watched the dour woman leave. There were just some things she didn't understand about nobility.

* * * *

Lucien and Rafe weren't having much more fun in London. Richard had resurfaced, and they were trying to figure out a way to make him pay for his heinous crime without dragging Devonna's name into the open.

Richard was at the holding center while they decided what to do with him. Though Rafe had an idea of what should happen to him and while Lucien seconded it, they knew they couldn't do that to him.

The duke maintained his calm while he argued with his wife on what to do with her favorite child. The child of hers who could do no wrong in her eyes and therefore shouldn't be punished for crimes she believed had been unjustly levied against him.

As tensions escalated in the Stokley household, there were problems at the Bow Street Holding House Number Six. An explosion rocked the gaol, shattering windows and spewing shards of glass. Smoke rolled and billowed as men dressed in the scarlet clothes that had given them their nickname, Robin Redbreasts, scrambled to restore order in the ensuing chaos. The night progressed as they rounded up the detainees and tended all injuries that had been obtained during the blast. Finally as things calmed down and returned to what passed as normal in the place, with prisoners back and accounted for, they discovered one was missing. Richard Quentin Nidels. The stepson of the Duke of Stokley, Sebastian St. Martin.

Sam Whip, a veteran runner of the Bow Street constables, was sent to deliver the unpleasant news to the St. Martin house.

"What do you mean, he escaped?" The roar from the duke reverberated throughout the stone mansion.

Lucien and Rafe watched as Sam tried not to flinch under the fury of the duke. While equally outraged, the two younger men wanted to hear as much information as they could.

"Luc," Rafe spoke in a subdued voice that only Lucien could hear, "if he had realized that Devonna told what he had done to her, and now he escaped ... would he? Do you think?"

"Yes. I think he will go after her. Damn it all. I wanted to spend a nice Christmas with my wife and children, not worry about Richard." Making his decision, Lucien headed for the door, Rafe right beside him. "Let's go. I will not leave them unprotected. Father, you do what you must here. With him free, our wives are in danger."

"I will join you at Heartstone as soon as I make some arrangements." Sebastian told his son and son-in-law as he waved them off with a hand. It was time he put his family first, and he was not going to fail his beloved first wife again.

Lucien and Rafe rode hard and fast into the falling snow. Winter finally had arrived, and it had done so with a vengeance. The two men had to stop along the way to allow their animals to get warm and dry. As soon as was possible, they headed back out. The weather was foul. They couldn't run their horses, and at the speed they were going, neither of them was happy.

Plodding along at what he considered to be slower than that of a dead turtle, Lucien wished he had one of the much hardier horses that his wife had brought with her. They could handle this better than his high stepping, fancy hunter.

The upcoming Duke of Stokley rode into Heartstone Manor, cold, wet and accompanied by his brother in law, a little after the sun rose. Not that it did much in the way of warming the countryside for it was still snowing and cold.

A footman hurriedly took their tired mounts as they entered the building, taking the icy steps two at a time. The warmth that hit them stopped them in their tracks as their frozen bodies absorbed as much of the heat as possible.

Once warm, Lucien finally noticed that the ballroom doors were open and there were servants scurrying about with food, drinks and wood to keep the fires going. It sounded like there was a party going on inside. Scanning the entry way for Weeks, Lucien noticed his home was decorated for Christmas. It was beautiful, warm and inviting. The only thing missing was his family.

"Weeks, where is my wife?" The question slipped from his mouth as he spotted his elusive butler.

"In the ballroom, my lord. Your sister and children are there as well." Weeks allowed a rare grin to show on his face. "Her family has arrived." As he turned away, he stopped. Weeks spoke again suddenly solemn, "Your brother, Lord Richard, is there as well."

Those very words sent icy chills down both of their spines, eliminating the relief of hearing the McKay Clan had arrived. Long strides took him to the entrance of the ballroom.

The sight stopped him and brought Rafe to a standstill beside him. The room was full of people. People Lucien didn't know in the slightest. People not of Clan McKay.

The elegant ballroom was full of people dressed in flowing silks of many colors. They were covered with more gold than either man had seen on a member of non-royalty. They looked richer than the king. They were all striking. Their skin

tones varied from a light tan to the darkest coal. His ballroom was full of African royalty.

Richard was in the corner guarded by two men that made even Lucien feel small. They stood with their arms crossed over massive chests that appeared to be carved out of stone. Richard was sitting on the chair, making no trouble.

Ciara was sitting next to a dignified-looking older couple. The man had dark skin, wrinkled with age, his hair was white making him appear more striking. Seated next to him was a woman that, despite her years, was simply stunning. Her hair was jet black, and her skin was the color of rich honey.

They alone had on gold headbands that made Lucien believe that these two were of the highest rank in the room. "Ciara," his voice brought the room to a standstill. Silence descended.

A brilliant smile spread across her face as she rose. "Lucien. Come meet my grandparents." She pressed a kiss on his lips and then led him over.

The elder male pinned a gaze on Lucien that had more effect than he would like to admit. "Lucien, these are my grandparents, the reigning king and queen of the kingdom of Shar'al."

Lucien responded with the hint of a bow that was reserved for royalty. The queen inclined her head in acknowledgement. The king did nothing except assess with his eyes. "It is an honor to meet you both," Lucien spoke smoothly.

Lucien looked up as Bryn came running into the room.

"Papa! You're back." Bryn threw himself at Lucien and as his father caught him, the king allowed himself a smile.

Holding tight to his son, Lucien looked at Ciara, "What is Richard doing over there?"

"He made the mistake of trying to come after Devonna and me in the presence of the king's guard. They are holding him for Rafe to decide his punishment." Ciara grinned at him, "They are here for the Christmas season. They brought gifts. Two of them are with Kosse."

Lucien arched an eyebrow, "More animals?" When she nodded, Lucien threw his head back and laughed. "Then it shall be a wonderful Christmas indeed." Lucien set down his son and bowed once again to the king and queen. "I am pleased to have you in our home to share this time with us."

Dinner was magnificent. There were foods they had never had before and each one was a delicacy that tantalized senses. Rice flavored with rich spices, meats that practically fell apart in the mouth; they were so tender and succulent.

When they were enjoying an array of desserts the door opened, admitting a very flustered duke. A very angry duke. "What is going on here?" He glanced around the room that was filled with imposing dark-skinned people. The bravado that he had been emitting seemed to wither and die in the presence of those present.

Lucien turned back to his newly met in-laws. "Your majesties, may I present my father, Sebastian St. Martin, the Duke of Stokley, Marquess of Loqueal, Earl of Antliath, Viscount Tover..."

The king waved away the endless litany with a flick of one impressively adorned hand. Bestowing a nod upon him, Lucien turned back to his father and spoke to him this time.

"These are Ciara's grandparents. Their majesties, the King and Queen of the kingdom of Shar'al."

Sebastian St. Martin was suitably impressed. He offered the precise deepness of a bow to them and then approached upon the king's nod.

The night passed smoothly as the families met and mingled with each other, joy making all happy. The one, the sole one, in the house that was not, was Richard. As the hours of darkness slowly turned to the morn, he knew that his fate had been sealed.

Christmas morning came to Heartstone. The grounds were beautifully covered with snow, making the whole estate look pristine and pure. The massive tree that had been taken into the parlor sat covered with candles and surrounded with presents for the children and a few for some of the adults.

Ciara sat alongside her husband as she watched her eldest child pass out presents to the adults in the room. Bryn's footsteps dodged around Remy the wolf, Thor and Loki the wolfhounds, and the newest additions to the family, Arrow, a cheetah cub and Leah, a serval kitten. Ciara's grandparents also brought a trained black eagle with them.

Along with the animals, they brought silks and other richly woven materials and stately trinkets of gold. What they brought was nothing to them, but to the English their gifts represented a great deal of wealth.

As they opened presents and ate the immense Christmas dinner, Lucien realized that he had everything that he could possibly want, need or crave. He had a family. As his contented gaze centered on the love of his life, she winked

and smiled at him. A smile that reached up to her amber eyes and filled them with love. He knew exactly who that smile was meant for. Him alone. The smile was just for him, and it rocked him to the core. *I love you*.

Ciara snuggled up closer to her husband and soaked up his warmth. As his strong arm settled around her and tucked her in closer, he placed a kiss on her head. Heedless of the others in the room, Ciara raised her face to Lucien's and placed her lips upon his. She was home.

Merry Christmas, daughter. We are proud of you. The words echoed in her heart and head as she leaned up against the man that meant the world to her. Her Marquess.

The End

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