



Beauty and the Beast

By

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Chapter One

“The storm seems to be gathering strength.” Isabelle Dunbar looked out of the coach window as the wind blasted a puff of snowflakes against the glass. The white fluff almost obliterated the reflection of her fair hair, pale face, and fatigue-shadowed blue eyes.

“I’ll be happy when we get home.” Morag, Belle’s sister, brushed back a wispy brown curl from her lovely face then burrowed her gloved hands deeply within her red velvet muff.

“So will I.” Belle’s other pretty brown-haired sister, Ailsa, shivered and put her small feet closer to the foot warmer. “Father was mad to send us out on such a journey this time of year.”

Belle directed her gaze at her sisters. “He had no choice. He is ill, and this trip would have killed him. You know he had to get those documents and the fee, insuring his ship and cargo, to his barrister in Aberdeen. Without them, he could lose his whole fortune.”

“Well, he should have sent just you, Belle. You’re the one with

business sense,” Morag replied.

“Right!” Ailsa nodded. “We’ve no aptitude for commerce.”

Belle sighed. “Perhaps father hoped the two of you would keep me company and act as chaperones. It’s unseemly for me to be traveling alone.”

“Then he should have sent Aunt Emma with you.”

“The poor woman is eighty years old,” Belle protested.

Tired of their conversation, Belle turned her attention to the storm. Dusk had cast gray shadows over the high drifts, and the howling wind scoured over the snow, picking it up and mixing it with the flakes tumbling furiously from the sky.

“I certainly hope we leave Lord Glen Dubh’s land before he discovers that we’ve trespassed,” Morag remarked, a tremor in her voice.

Belle sighed. “As I explained before, we have cut five miles from our journey by taking the road through his estate. Furthermore, how could he know that we’ve encroached on his property? Surely, his men-at-arms will not be patrolling the area in this weather.”

Morag shook her head. “I don’t know, but they say that he has made a pact with the devil and possesses strange powers. The crofters hereabout swear that he knows things without ever having to venture beyond the walls of his castle.”

“You have to admit, Belle, this place looks forbidding,” Ailsa added.

Glen Dubh meant black valley. The way the hills rose up and the

pinetrees covered them, shade likely shrouded the narrow glen in gloom the year round. In the distance, the great crenellated towers and high curtain wall of Glen Dubh Castle were barely discernible beyond the thick curtain of falling snow.

"Perhaps evil spirits are lurking about this place, and Lord Glen Dubh is conspiring with them," Ailsa speculated.

"Stuff and nonsense!" Exasperated, Isabelle blew out a breath. "He is probably sitting by a warm fire, sipping a dram of whisky."

"I heard he is so terribly ugly and misshapen that he looks like a beast." Morag grimaced and shuddered.

"Then he is to be pitied, not feared," Belle ventured.

"Well, I will still be glad when we cross that stone bridge," Ailsa added. "Then we'll have only one mile to go before we reach that comfortable inn. I'd like a nice spit-roasted grouse for supper and a good night's sleep in a feather bed."

"So would I," Morag agreed. "But I'd like Angus to share the bed."

Belle's eyes widened as Ailsa giggled.

"Don't pretend you're so shocked, Belle." Morag shot her a look of contempt. "Angus and I are on the point of betrothal, and this is Scotland. All we need do is to declare our intentions and get on with the business at hand. The union will be legal."

"But you haven't announced anything yet," Belle protested. "Suppose he doesn't marry you."

Morag dismissed Belle's words with a wave of her hand. "He slavers after what I have to give him. Furthermore, it may be months before we are married. I do not intend to defer my pleasure or his for that long."

"You'd love it, Belle," Ailsa added with a languorous sigh.

Belle was no prude. She knew what transpired between men and women, yet she could barely believe what she was hearing. "You've lain with a man as well?"

"Of course!" Ailsa answered. "Padraig and I are close to a match as well, and I just love it when he touches me. It makes me all hot and tingly, and then when we couple, and he makes me come, I feel something that is just beyond description."

"It's as if your whole body just exploded with pleasure," Morag added.

"Just talking about it sets me afire," Ailsa revealed.

Much to her surprise, the conversation was having a titillating effect on Belle, but their recklessness frightened her. "But you're being irresponsible. You could conceive."

"Oh, you really are stupid," Morag sneered. "The men wear a French letter, you ninny!"

"A what?" Belle had to admit she was curious.

"Padraig puts a sheath over his member, so his seed won't penetrate me," Ailsa disclosed. "And if we do conceive, we shall just marry sooner."

"I still think it's best to wait until you speak your vows," Belle

advised.

"Oh, Mistress Righteous." Ailsa looked at her in disgust. "Just wait until some man excites you. You'll be begging him to make love to you."

Belle doubted she would ever be that forward.

Furthermore, she felt guilty for entertaining thoughts of her own pleasure when her father lay ill. Unfortunately, she would have to wait another three days to see him and nurse him back to health.

* * * *

The darkness of his library surrounded Haldon Lord Glen Dubh like a heavy cloak. In addition, he wore a black monk-like robe. The castle's dim chambers and concealing garb hid him, for he wanted no one to gaze upon his hideous appearance, one that inspired terror and loathing. Furthermore, he didn't wish to see his reflection either, so he ordered the servants to keep the mirrors covered with cloths.

Still, he didn't need to view his image to know how vile he looked. His teeth had become fangs. Black hair covered his tall muscular body like a mat of fur and clustered around his head and neck like the great mane of a lion. The ridge of his brow had become heavy and sloped, and his once finely chiseled nose now curved down like the beak of a predatory bird. Worst of all, a huge hump marred his once straight strong back.

He walked to the table and picked up his magic hand mirror. Peering

into it, he frowned, for the glass sparkled and showed him the outside world, a place where he had not ventured since the curse befell him. He watched with interest as a coach made its way through his property, carving a trail in the deepening snow. Who had braved his wrath by trespassing on his land? Most travelers went miles out of their way just to avoid his estate.

“Show me the travelers.”

The mirror immediately displayed the interior of the conveyance and the women who rode inside.

“They are gorgeous,” he whispered in awe.

Years had elapsed since Haldon spent time in the company of a lovely woman.

He set down the hand mirror on the table and closed his lids. In his mind’s eye, he saw the portrait of the handsome man above the mantel in the entrance hall, the picture painted of him at the height of his virility--before the curse had changed him into a beast.

Roaring in agony, he took up his dram of whisky and hurled it against the logs of the writhing fire, the alcohol causing the flames to leap higher still. Recalling how he had lost the glory of his form drove nails of pain into his heart.

He was paying a heavy toll for his youthful indiscretions. He lived in hellish loneliness, and he would suffer this fate until the day he died, unless the terrible curse could be broken.

He laughed bitterly. The spell would endure forever, for what woman

could ever love him in his present beastly form? The fairy, Lucia the Light Bearer, knew that when she bewitched him.

Still, he longed for feminine company. The horrible affliction had altered none of the needs and urges he experienced as a normal man. In fact, it made them more acute.

He took up the mirror again and stared at the exquisite women. The fair-haired female, though, was the most beautiful. Her fair locks shone so brightly they seemed to illuminate the interior of the carriage. The sight of her caused a pull in his loins, causing his male member to harden.

There was a time when she would have found him attractive, too. He knew well how to woo such a woman then. He would have danced with her, flattered her, and drew her on to the secluded terrace. There, in the moonlight, he would have taken her into his embrace, kissing her tentatively, lingeringly, and finally, he would have sought entry into her mouth. He would have slipped his hand beneath her bodice and caressed her nipples, arousing her. Then he would have swept her into his arms and carried her to his bedchamber. He closed his eyes and pictured her naked on his bed, that ivory skin glowing with the flush of passion, her blue eyes glazed with ardor, her lips swollen and red. Heart pounding, he began breathing heavily as he thought about probing her hot and very wet opening. She would shudder as he made her come. When he imagined plunging into her and feeling her slippery body glove his phallus, Haldon almost lost his seed.

* * * *

Darkness had fallen and the visibility had worsened. Still, Isabelle saw the glow of the lanterns near the stone bridge. In just a few minutes, they would leave Lord Glen Dubh's property, and her sisters would stop prattling about the poor man.

She sighed, thinking about a bowl of warm soup and a comfortable bed where she could stretch her legs. After hours of sitting in the cold carriage, Belle's limbs were threatening to cramp, and her back ached.

Most of all, she longed to go home and see her father's loving face again. How she missed him!

Suddenly, the horses neighed above the squall of the wind, and the coach lurched to an abrupt halt. Her sisters screamed and clung to each other in a desperate embrace.

"Damnation!" the coachman cursed loudly.

Belle peered out the window.

Carrying torches, six riders barred access to the bridge. The orange flames from the beacons spilled their luminescence onto the blanket of white covering the ground.

Fear tensed every muscle in her body. Were these men brigands who would rob and kill them, leaving their bloody corpses in the snow?

One man urged his mount to the coach door and opened it, causing her sisters to scream again.

“Have no fear, my ladies,” the man declared, controlling his skittish horse. “We mean you no harm. My lord wishes to extend his hospitality and give you shelter from the storm.”

Isabelle leaned toward the door. “We thank his lordship, but our inn lies less than a mile away, and we intend to go there.”

“I am afraid I cannot allow you to do that,” the man informed them. “I have my orders.”

Morag and Ailsa began to cry, and over their wailing, Belle replied, “So, in essence, we are your prisoners, even though you say we are your lord’s *guests*”

“I regret that you care to interpret the situation in that light,” the man replied, his horse pawing the ground.

Isabelle arched a brow. “There is no other way to describe it.”

“I have no choice, my lady.” The man patted his restive mount’s neck.

“And it appears that neither do we,” Belle rejoined.

“Oh, Belle, you cannot mean that we must go with these men!” Morag lamented.

“We just cannot,” Ailsa affirmed. “Lord Glen Dubh is a fiend.”

“What other option do we have? Give me a suggestion,” Isabelle demanded.

Her sisters cried harder.

Tired, cold, and frightened, Isabelle called up to the coachman, “Let us follow these men, or we shall perish from the cold while we argue.” One must accept what one cannot change, she thought anxiously.

The snow now fell so thickly and the wind blustered so furiously that Isabelle wondered if they would ever get to the castle. Finally, the coach rolled past the gatehouse and up the long tree-lined avenue. Before them, the castle loomed, its battlements lit with torches against the dark sky.

Toting lanterns, servants rushed forth, assisting Isabelle and her sisters from the conveyance, while groomsmen led the coach to the carriage house.

Stiff and numb with cold and fatigue, her breath caught as she entered the magnificent entrance hall, their footsteps echoing off the black and white marble floor. The stone walls, covered with targes and weaponry, soared up. The huge leaded casement above the landing of the wide staircase glowed in the torchlight. An enormous fireplace cast out its warmth in welcome.

Shivering fiercely, Isabelle, Morag, and Ailsa moved toward the rosy radiance.

Belle looked up above the mantel and stared at the portrait of the handsomest man she had ever seen. He possessed great height, and his shoulders spanned widely. A charming smile revealed a set of perfect teeth. His mane of luxuriant black hair shone like polished onyx. He had a wide

noble brow, square jaw, and a strong chin. In the flickering light of the fire, his large eyes appeared the color of whisky. Belle's gaze then fell on his straight short nose and lingered on his soft full lips. The sight of that mouth made her heart thump, for she wondered how it would taste.

She experienced other sensations, too. They were new feelings, which both startled and enthralled her. Belle felt her nipples hardening and tingling against her bodice. Strong spasms clenched powerfully in her lower abdomen and a copious amount of moisture oozed between her thighs. A conflagration of heat swept over her, and she felt dizzy with longing.

What was happening to her? No flesh-and-blood man had ever caused her to react this way. Why did just this picture of one affect her so? Was this the reaction her sisters had spoken about earlier?

Who was this handsome man? Surely, he couldn't be Lord Glen Dubh. Everyone said he was disfigured.

She turned from the picture, trying to compose herself.

A woman Isabelle assumed was the housekeeper and two young maids stepped forth.

"I am Mrs. MacNabb," the short chubby woman announced, her starched white mobcap contrasting starkly against her dark hair. "And these lassies are Janet, Molly, and Maud." The young maids bobbed curtsies. "They will see you to your quarters and help you to get comfortable before you dine," the housekeeper explained. "You will be expected in the great

hall at eight.”

The unsmiling woman then turned on her heel and left without giving Isabelle the opportunity to ask why Lord Glen Dubh had insisted they accept his hospitality.

Belle shuddered. She had heard about men who used women cruelly. Was Lord Glen Dubh such a man? He certainly did not enjoy a good reputation.

The maids led them to their rooms. Belle was surprised that she and her sisters would not share a room. Each had the luxury of a separate suite.

The chamber she entered felt warm and cozy, despite its large size. The candelabra held at least a dozen brightly burning tapers. A gigantic bedstead stood by the wall, a large trunk at its foot. Curtains of amethyst satin hung from the tester above, and a matching spread covered the bed. A lovely dressing table presided over the area in front of the large leaded casement.

A gorgeous full-skirted mauve velvet ball gown lay on the bed, a froth of gossamer lace falling from its tight elbow-length sleeves. Belle had never seen a frock quite so lovely, and it looked as if it would fit her. So did the petticoats, shift, silk stockings, and stays. The matching pair of satin dancing slippers, resting by the side of the bed, appeared to be her size.

On the dressing table, a necklace of large amethysts and diamonds flashed in the light, and a tub of hot water sat by the hearth, wafting the scent of heather. A blazing fire lent its warmth and blushing glow to the

chamber.

“His lordship bids you make yourself comfortable,” Maud announced.
“He asks you to wear the clothes he has provided.”

“Why has Lord Glen Dubh not greeted us himself if he cares for our company so much?”

A look of fear came over the redheaded girl’s face. “Please, my lady, he will answer your questions when he feels the time is right. Now, may I help you bathe?”

Freezing to the marrow of her bones, Belle decided that a hot bath would be the very thing to help put back some sensation in her numb limbs.
“Very well, Maud.”

* * * *

Lord Glen Dubh remained absent from the magnificent feast served in the great hall. His generosity extended to Belle’s sisters. Ailsa wore a gown of sapphire stain, and Morag’s curves filled out her emerald taffeta frock to perfection.

“These accommodations are finer than any inn could provide,” Morag asserted.

“And we each have a suite of our own,” Ailsa remarked.

“So I assume you are over your fear and loathing of Lord Glen Dubh,” Isabelle ventured.

“Perhaps we should not have listened to gossip,” Morag capitulated.

“I could get very accustomed to this life,” Ailsa remarked.

“Could you, indeed?” A deep baritone voice emerged from the shadows.

Belle started, and her sisters gasped, their green eyes wide with terror.

Although shocked, Belle thought sound of the male's voice was very intriguing. It had a timbre as rich as syllabub, and his accent lilted musically.

“You have nothing to fear,” the man, still unseen, remarked. “You will not be harmed.”

Gathering her courage, Belle stood. “Then why do you not show yourself? Why do you skulk in the gloom like a thief.” She wanted to see the man that harbored that wonderful voice. Surely, nothing ugly could produce such a sensual, provocative sound.

But a roar echoed off the walls, and her sisters screamed. Jumping from their seats, they flew into each other's arms.

Though frightened, Belle refused to give him the satisfaction of letting him see her cower. “You are a coward if you delight in terrifying helpless women.”

He snarled again, and her sisters ran toward the exit.

“Stop,” he growled, and they froze to the spot. “No one may leave unless I give my permission.”

Trembling, but emboldened by anger, Belle stated, “We have done

you no harm. Why do you imprison us?”

“You have trespassed.”

“Our father is ill,” Belle replied. “We wished to hurry home to care for him. Traveling over your lands would have saved us time if you hadn’t obliged us to accept your accommodations.”

“That is no reason to disturb my peace or break my laws,” he replied. “Besides, have I not treated you well? Your sisters have said they could adjust to this lifestyle. I have observed the custom of Highland hospitality.”

Isabelle caught sight of a stirring, like the swirl of a black satin, in the far corner of the great room. “We are not free to leave. That makes us prisoners, no matter how fine the abode we inhabit. What do you want from us? If it is a fine for trespassing, name it. We shall pay it and be on our way.”

“Are you sure you can pay what I ask?”

“How can we know until you name your price?” Belle demanded.

“I shall tell you in the morning.”

“Then you mean to sequester us here all night?” Belle walked closer to where she thought the sound of his voice originated.

“Come no closer, mistress,” he warned.

She halted abruptly.

“Besides, you cannot travel in this blizzard. Your coach will bog down in the snow, and you will all freeze to death. Retire to your rooms and return here promptly at eight in the morning.”

He was right. The storm had worsened. Well, she'd pay the fine, and they would leave tomorrow.

* * * *

Although he had drunk a great deal of whisky, Haldon was unable to sleep. He paced the library floor, trying to discharge his sexual energy. The woman, Belle, inflamed his senses and aroused his passion to the point of madness. Just being in the same room with her had stoked his ardor to new heights.

He knew she feared him, yet she did not allow that terror to impede her from asserting her rights. She had more courage than her two simpering sisters had. He admired her spirit, and instinctively, he knew that she would show the same fire while making love.

What does that matter, Haldon? You will never share her bed.

Pain engulfed his heart, tearing at it. He didn't know if it was worse to live without expectation, or to exist with hope only to have it dashed.

He walked to the table and picked up the magic mirror. "Show me the woman called Isabelle."

The surface of the glass flashed with the sparkle of diamonds then showed Belle pacing the length of her bedchamber.

So she could not sleep either. Doubtless, fear and worry kept her alert. Haldon felt a pang of remorse. He should not have frightened the

women so. Perhaps Belle guessed correctly. Maybe he was a coward to take out his anger and frustrations on those who had no defense against him.

Belle stepped closer to the fire, holding her elegant hands above the flames. She stood for several minutes then removed her robe, draping it over the chair by the hearth. The outline of her exquisite curves became visible through the gossamer batiste of her shift.

Desire gripped him even more intensely. How he wished he could arouse her so that she quaked with need and her sheath became copiously wet and slippery. Fists clenched, eyes squeeze shut, Haldon groaned and gnashed his fangs, wishing he could plunge his male member into her moist warmth and spend his semen within her time and again. He felt he could make love to her all night and into the next day. His loins ached, for he felt like he had a river of come dammed up within him.

“Show me what she is thinking,” he commanded.

His image, before the curse, sharpened into focus.

“So the girl found my picture to her liking. Put everyone to sleep and allow me to see Belle’s dream.”

Like a swarm of bees, a swirl of glittering fairy dust traveled through the castle, circling everyone but Haldon before falling on Belle. Then it faded away, and he saw her yawn. She walked to bed, slipped in, and snuggled down.

* * * *

Belle didn't know why she suddenly felt so calm when a moment before she'd been terribly anxious. Perhaps exhaustion had finally caught up with her. She closed her eyes and saw a lovely rose garden with a sparkling marble fountain spraying water high into the air. The droplets splashed merrily into the basin beneath.

Belle sat on the stone bench in front of the fountain, delighting in the June sunlight and the fragrance of the lovely roses in full bloom. Robins twittered merrily, and the song of the lark tumbled from the sky in a golden trill of joy.

All at once, the handsome man from the portrait appeared before her as if by magic.

The murmuring breeze became a charming melody. He took her hand, and they began to dance, whirling around the fountain. His clean scent reminded Belle of a pine forest.

Then they stopped dancing, and he drew her closer, but the music continued. He inclined his head, his lips remaining but a hairsbreadth from hers. Belle closed her eyes, every fiber of her body a tumult of anticipation.

He touched down on her mouth. He tasted of claret, and she felt her knees go weak. She had never experienced anything quite like this before. Belle trembled, and she pressed closer to him, reveling in the warmth of his strong body.

The tip of his tongue probed the seam of her lips, and Belle allowed

him ingress. She moaned as her nipples drew up tightly beneath the cloth of her shift, and moisture bathed her inner thighs.

When he slipped his hand beneath her bodice, caressing her breasts, something seemed to burst within her. Belle wanted more of him--she wanted *all* of him.

Still caressing her bosoms, he broke the kiss, and whispered, "My beautiful Belle, I want you so."

"I want you, too, but this is was madness, I do not even know your name."

"Does that matter, my bonnie lass, when what we feel is so unmistakably right?"

"No," she answered desperately because she didn't really care. Nothing mattered except assuaging the hunger that he provoked in her.

"Let me love you, Belle," he whispered, urging her to recline on the grass.

"Yes, love me."

Lying beside her, he dropped kisses down her neck and shoulders while he unlaced her bodice. He helped her shed it then untied the bow that secured her shift and exposed her breasts. He caused a peacock feather to appear from out of the air and dragged it across her sensitive nipples, causing them to become even more erect.

Belle inhaled sharply, and the fragrance of rose water wafted to her because he had opened a flask and drizzled the cologne on her breasts. As

he began to gently massage it, she realized that scented liquid was mixed with glycerin, so his hands would glide over her sensitive trembling flesh.

Belle moaned as his fingers played over her nipples, gently squeezing them. Then he took one erect bud into his mouth. Each pull caused deep pleasurable spasms to contract in her belly. She writhed. "Oh, suck harder," she pled.

He obliged, and reflexively she parted her knees. He nestled between them and repeated the process on the other breast.

"I need more of you!" Belle cried.

* * * *

Reading her thoughts, Haldon responded to Belle's newly awakened passion. If he had wanted her before, he needed her even more now. In fact, his heart thundered, and his loins nearly burst as he watched her respond to her dream lover's touch. He wished to be the man of her heart and longed to caress her body in a way that made her quake with desire.

Jealous that this would never be, he roared, "Wake her!"

He watched as she abruptly bolted upright in the big bed, her blue eyes wide, her hands over her pounding heart.

Let her feel what it is like to crave love without the benefit of satisfaction.

Suddenly, a blinding light brightened the chamber.

“Shame, Haldon,” the fairy chided.

He squinted and put his hands up against her magnificent brilliance.

“Be gone, Lucia.”

“I shall stay until I decide to leave,” the platinum-haired, blue-robed beauty announced.

“Hasn’t your spell punished me enough?” he snarled.

“Oh, Haldon, you have learned nothing.” The fairy’s large transparent wings fluttered, glittering like crystal in strong sunlight. “You are still a bully, a tyrant, and an arrogant blackguard. You intruded on the private dream of an innocent woman.”

“Not so innocent. You saw her lustful reverie.”

“She is still untouched by a man, but I was talking about you, Haldon. You have delayed her journey home. Meanwhile, her father lies ill and worries about his girls.”

“They will return home tomorrow, Lucia. Why do you continue to torture me? Isn’t dooming me forever enough?”

“The spell need not be eternal, and you know it.”

He laughed bitterly. “What woman will love me in my present form? No, Lucia, I am damned. No one can see beyond my disfigurement.”

“The deformity is more in your heart than in your body. While you behave basely, there is nothing good for anyone to see.”

“Go, Lucia. I want no more sermons from you.”

“Reflect upon my words, Haldon. Your fate is in your own hands.”

Her voice faded, and the room went dim.

Haldon felt empty inside. Perhaps he should try to get some sleep. He threw himself on the bed, and slumber came upon him like a thick mist.

The woman, Belle, was back in the garden, and he had miraculously resumed the handsome form of his youth. This time, she removed her clothes and stepped in the fountain's basin. As she stood, the spray of water beaded on her long golden hair, and the patch of bright curls at the juncture of her legs.

He removed his clothes and waded to her. She smiled, and the droplets of water sparkled on her flesh and hung like diamonds from her rosy nipples. He bent and licked the moisture from her delicate pink crests.

"Delicious," she whispered on short breath. Emboldened, he began suckling first one luscious tip then the other.

"Love me, Haldon," she cried desperately.

He swept her up and carried her to the velvet grass beneath the sheltering branches of a wide copper beech, setting her down on the turf.

He reclined beside her. "Belle," he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

She caressed his face, exploring his body, her hands slipping over his back and shoulders.

His own need began to claw in his belly, but he continued his adoration of her body, sliding his fingers down her ribs, over her flat stomach, and between her inner thighs. His fingers burrowed through the curls on her *mons*. As he dipped into her, she sucked in a breath. He

probed more deeply, marveling at her abundant moisture. Then he found her sensitive flesh, and he began caressing it in small circles.

She writhed and elevated her hips to meet his touch. Her lips swelled and reddened, her breathing quickened, and her fair skin blushed, making even her earlobes deepen to a bright pink.

“Haldon, I need you now!” she cried.

His loins near to exploding, he poised then loomed over her.

Suddenly, she screamed and horror replaced the pleasure that had glazed her bright eyes. Stunned, Haldon saw that his hands had become like claws, and he realized that his body had transformed back into his beastly form.

Belle jerked away. Jumping up, she fled from him. He leapt up and pursued her, but as he caught her, she faded like an apparition. Grief speared his heart, and Haldon woke, his face wet with tears.

The cold winter light shafted through the casement, nearly blinding him, for he had forgotten to draw the bed curtains.

Today, Belle and her sisters would leave, and he’d be alone again. How would he continue to live like this? Hell could be not worse.

But she didn’t have to leave.

Haldon, her father is ill.

Couldn’t the other women minister to the man?

She will never stay.

Perhaps she would remain if he offered her the thing she wanted most

in the world.

* * * *

Chapter Two

“His lordship bids me to tell you that he will charge no fine. He also wishes you to take the clothes he gave you, Mistress Dunbar,” Maud informed her.

“I am grateful, but I shall leave with only what I had when I arrived,” Belle stated.

“His lordship will be offended,” Maud remarked.

“That is *his* problem. I want no reminders of this eerie place.”

“Your sisters have packed their new gowns, my lady. Not only that, but they are taking the fur-lined cloaks and ermine muffs Lord Glen Dubh sent them this morning.”

“That is their decision, and I have mine.”

“Yes, mistress.” Maud curtsied. “Well, your coach is ready. I hope you have a safe trip and that you find your father well.”

“Thank you, Maud.” Belle donned her plain brown woolen cloak and left the room.

As she descended the grand staircase, she saw Morag and Ailsa waiting in the entrance hall. Porters were carrying two huge trunks to the coach, the gifts Lord Glen Dubh had given her sisters no doubt, Belle thought, but she said nothing.

As she and her siblings headed toward the door, a tall figure shrouded

in a long black monk-like robe came forth, his face hidden by a deep cowl, his arms folded, and his hands concealed within the wide sleeves of the garment. Despite the yards of dark cloth, the great hump on his back remained obvious.

“My ladies,” he said.

Her sisters started.

“Lord Glen Dubh?” Belle inquired.

“That is correct,” he replied. “I wish a word with you before you go on your way, Mistress Dunbar.”

“Of course, my lord,” she replied. “My sisters and I wish to thank you for your hospitality.”

“But *you*, Mistress Isabelle Dunbar, did not take any of my gifts.”

“I have no need of such finery, my lord.”

“That is ungracious of you,” he answered, his tone bitter.

“Please, my lord,” Belle replied. “We are most anxious to be on our way.”

“We’ll take the clothes,” Morag offered.

“Yes,” Ailsa agreed.

“Silence, chits!” Lord Glen Dubh bellowed, his voice booming off the stone walls. “Ailsa, Morag, get into the coach and wait. I want to speak with Belle.”

Her sisters scurried away.

“This way, mistress.” His tone much gentler, he gestured toward the

door.

She entered a library, the most extensive collection of books she had ever seen. Volumes crammed the shelves from floor to ceiling. A large hearth radiated warmth, and a comfortable sofa provided a place to curl up and read. A lovely large casement let in a prodigious amount of light.

“Mistress Belle, I request that you to remain here.”

She stared at him. “But you know that I must go to my father. He is ill. I wish to be with him.”

“What if I offered to cure him if you promised to stay here?”

“How can you do that?”

“I have powers beyond those of mere mortals.”

“How can I be certain you are not lying? You could be a charlatan.”

“How did I know your dress size and those of your sisters? How could I also know that you dreamt about a dark-haired man? He evoked sensations you have never experienced before, didn’t he? Just the thought of him inflames your senses.

Belle felt her face flush.

“When he took you in his arms, you ached with need and your private parts flowed with moisture.”

“Please, my lord.” She put up her hand and turned her blushing visage from him.

He walked to the table. “Come here, Belle.”

Her chin trembling, she obeyed.

He handed her a hand mirror. "Show Belle her father," he ordered.

She stared at the sparkling glass and cried, "He's in bed. His doctor says he will die!" Panic gripped her and tears welled in her eyes.

"Now, do you believe me, Belle?"

Nodding, she bit her lower lip. "Oh, yes! Please cure him, my lord!" she entreated desperately. "I'll do anything you say. I shall stay here if you promise to make him well."

"Before you agree, there is something that you must know, Belle." He threw back his cowl.

Belle gasped and shrank back. She wanted to run, but she remained paralyzed in fascinated horror. This creature was monstrous, inhuman. How could she stay with him? Yet, her father looked so ill. She couldn't jeopardize his health for her selfish whims.

"How long must I live here?"

"Until death releases one of us."

"Oh!" Dizzy with fear, she gripped the edge of the table.

"The price of your father's life doesn't come cheaply, Belle."

"And what will you require of me while I stay?"

"Your companionship."

She gave him a dubious look. "What exactly is your definition of companionship?"

"I shall never touch you unless you ask it of me."

"Is that all?"

“Yes. Were you prepared to give more to save your father?”

She heaved a heavy sigh. “I honestly do not know.”

Haldon’s heart contracted. “I envy him, for he is loved.”

“Yes, my lord. I love him more than anyone. May I write to him if I remain?”

“Yes.”

“Then I agree to stay, my lord, if you will cure him.”

“Look in the mirror again, Belle.”

As she complied, he said, “Make Master Dunbar well.”

Suddenly, a cloud of golden fairy dust settled on her father. As it disappeared, he flung off the bed covers and stood, looking strong and healthy.

Relieved and resigned to her fate, Belle said, “I should like to say goodbye to Morag and Ailsa, my lord.”

“Of course, but say nothing about the magic.”

“As you wish, my lord.”

A few minutes later, Belle watched her sisters’ coach depart, and a terrible sadness gripped her. She must live a life of imprisonment. Only death, either hers or Lord Glen Dubh’s, would release her.

* * * *

Several days later, Haldon watched from the window as Belle strolled

in the garden, dispersing crumbs to the hungry birds. Her old brown hooded cloak trailed in the snow.

Although Belle had agreed to stay, he did not have much hope that she would be the woman to break the spell. He had seen her recoil when she looked upon him. How could she ever grow to love him?

Yet, she loved greatly. He had never witnessed such depth of devotion as she had shown for her father. Had he asked Belle for her body, Haldon had no doubt she would have submitted to him to save her parent.

He'd been a fool. He should have demanded it. Why hadn't he? Even in his hideous form, he could have shone her delights of the flesh that would have tethered her to him forever.

After all, there were ways to get around his appearance. He could have made it a game and blindfolded her. Then he could have taught her all the ways he knew to evoke pleasure from her. Furthermore, he had read her dreams. He knew what sparked her desire. Her reveries, though, hadn't come close to what he could make her feel. He would teach her all about erotic touch.

Haldon left the window. He sat before the fire and closed his eyes, fantasizing about making her shiver as his hands slipped over her ribs, down her belly and lower. Her complexion would blush with pleasure, and she would shudder deliciously as he dipped his fingers between her thighs and caressed her folds.

The notion caused blood to pool in his loins and engorged his phallus.

His breathing deepened when he thought about exciting her so much that she would beg him to take her, just as she had pled with her dream lover, and Haldon would grant her request, possessing her again and again.

The reverie had stimulated him almost to the point of orgasm when a dazzling flash of light heralded Lucia's appearance.

"Oh, Haldon, you are obsessed with lust."

"I still have a man's needs," he growled, angry that she had prevented his release.

"There is more to being a man than carnal urges." As she floated to him, Lucia waved her silver-white wand, and grains of sparkling light swirled from it. "Maybe you should think beyond your wants and give consideration to others."

"I am tired of your lectures, Lucia. Give me some rest."

"I am not your enemy, Haldon."

He snorted. "No. Did you not change me into a vile creature?"

"Your own misdeeds did that. Your lust, avarice, and arrogance keep you a prisoner." She faded away, leaving him more bereft and hopeless than ever.

Damnation! Where was Belle? He needed some company. Why wasn't she here for him? She promised to be his companion, yet she had avoided him for days.

He flung on his monk-like cloak and went into the dormant rose garden. Its water drained, the snow-frosted fountain stood silent.

He prowled up behind her. “Belle!”

She whirled around, her great blue eyes wide with fear. “Must you startle me so? Why cannot you summon me as a normal person would?”

“Because, as you can see, I am neither normal nor a person. Besides, you are supposed to be my companion, but you keep your distance. You are not living up to your part of the bargain.”

“I will if you give me a chance. I need some time to adapt. You are so wrapped up in your own misery that you cannot see beyond it. I know your life is unhappy, but I have given up my family.”

“You didn’t have to,” he snarled back.

“Oh? You gave me quite a choice, didn’t you? I could have my liberty at the expense of my father’s life. How could I ever live with myself, knowing I had purchased my freedom at such a horrendous cost?”

He arched a brow. “So ... the virtuous Belle Dunbar has spoken. If you believe that you are without fault, my dear, you are sadly mistaken. You are a self-righteous prig who is besotted with delusions of her own rectitude. You think you are so much better than everyone else is. You even hold your own sisters in contempt. I may not be perfect, but at least I know it. You need to learn humility, my dear, or that pride of yours will destroy you.” He turned and stomped away, but the confrontation had inflamed, rather than cooled, his raging need of her.

* * * *

Belle sat in her room, her eyes burning from all the tears she had shed. Lord Glen Dubh was not the first person to call her proud or self-righteous. Morag and Ailsa often had said as much. Her father also had admonished her to be more tolerant of others who did not share her ideals.

Nevertheless, she had not been trying to shirk her duty. It was just that her heart had been so heavy, was still so heavy, because she would never live with her father again.

Oh, why had this happened to her? A month ago, she had been a happy girl. Her father had enjoyed good health, and her life in the small seaside village had been a happy one. She enjoyed helping her father keep his accounts. By the standard of the day, her family enjoyed quite a wealthy lifestyle and lacked for nothing.

Then, one terrible morning, her father became ill, and he sent her and her sisters to Aberdeen on that important errand. The trip was successful, until Lord Glen Dubh interfered. Now, she would remain his captive and never see her family again.

Be fair, Belle. Deep in your heart, you know your father would have died if Lord Glen Dubh had not intervened.

Furthermore, she felt guilty because she had not kept her part of the bargain. She must begin to do so--today.

* * * *

Haldon stood by the casement in the library. His anger had degenerated into remorse. He needn't have frightened Belle. He could have sought her out in a more congenial manner. After all, she was grieving the loss of her family. He could empathize with that. After the curse, his whole life had been comprised of a series of losses.

But perhaps Belle had a point. He was so engrossed in his own misery he could not see anyone else's pain. He must go to her.

A diffident knock interrupted his thoughts. He turned, and Belle stood at the open door.

"May I come in, my lord?"

Just the mere sight of her inflamed his need, but he must constrain his desire. "Of course."

She walked toward him, contrition on her lovely face. "I am sorry, my lord." Her blue eyes became brilliant with tears. "I've been remiss so far, but I promise from now on to fulfill my part of our agreement." Sniffing, she pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped away her tears.

His regret deepened. He wanted to reach out and embrace her, to soothe away her sorrow, but she would shrink from his beastly touch. Oh, if he were in his natural form, instead of under this ghastly curse, he would take her in his arms and make her forget every sad thing that ever happened to her. The need burning in his loins continued to rage with no hope of a

gratification, for each day, he wanted her more.

“I-I’m sorry, too, Belle. I should have shown a little more compassion.”

Surprise lit her lovely eyes, and she began to pluck at the cuff of her simple beige frock. “Uh, perhaps we could establish a routine, so I will know when to come to you. I don’t wish to intrude on your private moments.”

He had no private moments, just lonely ones. His days were filled with isolation, with the need for the warmth of human contact, and the terrible knowledge that his longing would never be fulfilled.

“Yes, that sounds like a good idea,” he answered, thinking that if she stayed by his side every second of the day, he would never get enough of her company.

“We could write down the schedule,” she offered.

“Why don’t we do that later, Belle? Let’s start now with a walk to the pond.”

She nodded. “I’ll get my cloak and meet you on the terrace.”

True to her word, she rendezvoused with him a few minutes later. They followed the winding path through the garden and down a little knoll. The willows, stripped of their foliage, bent their drooping branches toward the frozen water.

“Even the swans have left for warmer climes,” Haldon observed.

“And the moan of the wind is a melancholy dirge.”

She looked up. "Perhaps it is up to us to dispel the gloom."

"How can we do that?"

"First, by being kind and understanding of each other, my lord. My father always says that if we change what is in our hearts, the rest will follow."

"That is a difficult thing to do when my heart is already full of sorrow."

"My father also says that a sad heart is like a dark room. Though it is full of blackness, there is always space for light to enter if we let it come in."

Haldon stroked his malformed chin, giving the idea some thought.

"That is quite profound, Belle."

She smiled and nodded. "Father is very wise."

"How do we start?"

She shrugged and gave him a shy look. "Uh, well, I'll go first. I never formally thanked you for restoring my father's health."

Her declaration stunned Haldon. "But you forfeited your freedom."

"No one can really imprison me if my heart and mind are free, so thank you again." She began to shiver.

"You are most welcome, Belle. But let us return to the castle before you catch a chill."

"I am a little cold," she confessed.

They began to walk back to the castle.

“Shall I have the servants serve you some chocolate before the fire?”
he inquired.

“Will you not have some, my lord?”

“I eat and drink like a beast, Belle. I do not want you to see me.”

“Is that why you do not join me at mealtime?”

“The sight would revolt you.”

“I think you should let me be the judge of what offends me.”

“I am ashamed, Belle.”

She stopped and turned to him. “Perhaps the day will come when you will trust me enough to dine with me, my lord.”

“Yes,” Haldon answered, thinking that would probably never happen, for he feared her scorn more than he dreaded anything in the world.

“Perhaps.”

“Well, I shall drink the chocolate quickly, then we can read to each other, my lord.”

She smiled, and Haldon thought that he didn’t need sunshine. The soft blue light in her eyes touched his heart, but also incited his desire. Her very innocence made her all the more seductive to him. He felt a stirring in his loins, as he always did when she was near.

He looked at her lovely full lips and wondered what they would taste like and how they would feel on his. He wanted to feel her dropping kisses down his body. The thought of her touching his erect phallus almost made him groan aloud. His erection was painful and caused him to sigh.

"Are you all right, my lord?"

"Yes, of course." He needed to get those lustful thoughts out of his mind.

Get back to the matter at hand, Haldon.

"You would like reading to each other, Belle?"

"Very much, my lord."

Because of his engorged member and its discomfort, he set a slow pace as walked up the steps to the terrace and entered the castle.

"Belle, do you think that you could ever consider me as something other than a beast?"

"I already do, my lord. I see you as my father's healer."

* * * *

The cold January days drifted into February. Snow still covered the moors and glens, but Belle found she was less lonely now that she and Lord Glen Dubh shared a more amicable relationship. She actually looked forward to her time with him, and he didn't look quite so hideous to her anymore. She even asked him not to hide under that great black robe.

She sat in her room, drinking some tea, when she heard a knock. "Enter," she called out.

Dressed as a gentleman in breeches, a waistcoat, and a jacket of gray wool, Lord Glen Dubh walked in. The white shirt and jabot on his chest

contrasted starkly against the darkness of his fur.

“Belle, do you know what day it is?”

“Yes, my lord. It’s Valentine’s Day, and I have something for you.”

His whisky-colored eyes glinted with surprise. There was something about those eyes that almost...excited her. No, they *did* excite her because they looked exactly like her dream lover's eyes.

“You have, Belle?”

“It isn’t much because I do not have any funds, but I managed.”

“May I see it?”

She grinned widely. “Of course, you silly. Close your eyes.”

“Must I?”

“Yes.”

She walked to her dressing table and withdrew the simple gift from the drawer. Then she walked to him. “All right, open your eyes.”

He looked down, and she held out an envelope fastened with a heart-shaped piece of red wax. He took it.

“Open, it,” she urged, anxious for him to see it.

He complied. “Oh, Belle! It’s the most beautiful card I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you, my lord. I’m so glad you like it.”

She’d fashioned a heart, but inside it she’d painted the pond with couples ice skating on it. A fawn stood in the snow near a pine tree, and a red bird sat on its bough.

“I didn’t know you could paint with watercolors,” he remarked.

“Look at the inscription,” she implored.

He quickly obeyed. “To my dear Lord Glen Dubh,” he read. “I hope joy will crowd the sorrow from your heart.”

He reached toward her then pulled back his claw-like hand. Anguish on his face, he turned.

“Please don’t go, my lord.” She held onto his sleeve.

Keeping his gaze averted, he slipped the card inside his waistcoat. “I am not going. It’s just that ... I am very moved, Belle.”

“Please look at me, my lord.”

He wiped his face and turned, but she could see that his eyes were red. His tears flayed her heart. “You wanted to take my hand, didn’t you?”

He nodded.

“Why did you hold back?”

“Because I am repulsive, and I promised I wouldn’t touch you unless you asked.”

She took hold of his furry hand and rubbed its back against her cheek. It felt more pleasant on her face than she could possibly have imagined. In fact, his touch felt very sensual. Suddenly, Belle wondered how it would feel on her body as that soft texture swept across her sensitive neck and brushed across her breasts.

The idea excited her terribly, and then she felt horrified that it should. Still, the heat of desire that her dream lover had awakened flared up, making

her hot and very wet.

Stop it, Belle. Think of him. He is hurting and needs some affection and warmth.

Belle looked up at him. “We are friends now. Sometimes, I get very lonely for a hug. I am asking you now.” She moved into his arms, resting her cheek on his chest.

“Oh, Belle.” He stroked her hair and the back of her neck.

She found his touch so surprisingly pleasant that she wanted it to continue, so she asked, “Do you think we could dance after supper?”

“Yes, but I feel I must go now.” Haldon drew away.

“All right,” she answered, feeling a little disappointed that he was leaving. Then guilt reared its head. She was using him to satisfy a need that her dream lover aroused. Haldon was her friend. She must not exploit him that way. Besides, her feelings were unseemly. He was a beast, even if she had begun to perceive him as something far different.

Still, as she found herself alone, Belle imagined how that furry texture would feel rubbing against her nipples. She sucked in her breath as pleasure gripped her in its thrall, and she had to sit for the spasms in her belly made her legs give way.

This was wrong. She should be quelling her lust, not feeding it. It was her dream lover whom she really wanted.

* * * *

Haldon's heart burst with joy as he entered his bedroom. He had been afraid to hope that she could ever let him touch her, but she even allowed him to embrace her. Moreover, she wanted more contact. Why else would she ask him to dance.

He withdrew her card, kissed it, and then held it to his heart. It must have taken her hours to create the picture. No gift he had ever received had pleased him more. He put it on his desk, propping it against one of the cubbyholes. He would conjure an elegant frame for it.

First, though, he wanted to give Belle something special for Valentine's Day. Actually, he wanted to give her several things. He hoped she would accept them. Until now, she had refused his gifts, but maybe she would take them now, for their relationship had progressed to a new level.

Still, though, she had offered only friendship. He dared not ask for more, although he wanted more--much, much more. When she embraced him, his hungry body immediately responded to her soft curves. Haldon had the sudden urge to back her to the wall, remove her clothes, and touch all her sensitive spots. He wanted to feast on her nipples, touching, teasing, sucking until she moaned with need. He longed to touch her nether lips, until she implored him to penetrate her. He imagined sinking to his hilt into her, driving into her slippery warmth until pleasure made her throb around his erect member, inciting him to spill his seed. But he had taken his leave before his lust overtook him.

Even though he had given his word, remaining a platonic friend was becoming harder and harder as the days flew by.

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* * * *

After supper, he waited anxiously for her at the entrance of the great hall. Again, he relinquished his black robe for a suit of royal blue velvet.

He had taken great pains to see that the great hall looked its best. All the tables had been removed, and just two armchairs flanked the fireplace. The whole area was aglow with the light of hundreds of candles flickering above in the sparkling chandeliers.

He anxiously looked toward the staircase and saw Belle at the top. His breath caught as she made a graceful descent, the silk of her gown billowing like a scarlet cloud. She walked to him and took his hand.

“My lord, thank you for the gorgeous dress. I didn’t think it could be any lovelier than the one I wore on the night I arrived here, but it is.”

He smiled, his gaze scanning over her gorgeous form. The gown’s décolleté gave him a good view of her generous breasts. The split skirt revealed the gossamer snowy lace of her petticoat, which was strewn with seed pearls and crystal beads. Still, he thought she would look more beautiful if she were completely naked.

“I am glad you are pleased, Belle.”

“Where did you get it, my lord?”

“I conjured it.”

“As you did with the other clothes and the suit you are wearing now?”

Glad that she noticed, he nodded.

“Then why do you not take care of everything with magic? Why do you still keep servants?”

“They were my only company before you came. Besides, the poor souls would starve without employment.”

“I see, my lord.”

“Now that we are friends, I wish you would call me Haldon.”

She smiled. “Of course, Haldon.”

He led her in. He nodded toward the minstrel’s gallery, and the musicians began playing a lovely melody.

Haldon loved having contact with her, even though the minuets allow him to touch her hand only. Perhaps that was best. More intimacy could easily cause him to lose control of himself.

They danced for hours until he noticed her stifling a yawn. He stopped and rested his hands on her shoulders. “You are tired, Belle.”

A sad look came into her eyes. “But I hate for the evening to end.”

“You should retire, Belle. We can do this again.”

She smiled. “I suppose you are right.”

“I’ll see you to your room.”

When she put her arm around his waist, and leaned her head on his

shoulder, Haldon became galvanized. How was he going to prevent himself from taking her on the spot?

They left the great hall, mounted the steps, and traveled the long torch-lit corridor to her apartment, stopping in front of the arched oaken door.

“Thank you for a lovely evening, Haldon.”

“I should thank you for the grandest Valentine’s Day I’ve ever spent.”

“It’s the best one I ever had, too,” she answered.

“Even though your father is not here?”

“Well, I got a letter from him today, and you often let me see him in the mirror.”

“Before you go, there is something that I want to give you, Belle.”

“You have something else to give me? You’ve done enough, dear Haldon.”

If he gave her everything in the world, Haldon could not compensate her for the joy and meaning she gave to his life.

“Turn around, Belle.” He took the heart-shaped pendant, fashioned of rubies, from his pocket and fastened it around her delicate neck. The heart rested in her deep cleavage. He was glad that his long waistcoat and jacket covered the enormously hard erection bulging beneath his breeches.

Looking down, Belle picked it up. Then her gaze met his. “Oh, Haldon! It’s so lovely.”

“I want you to keep it and remember this night.”

“I shall always cherish it...along with the memory of this evening.”

An uncomfortable lull in the conversation ensued. Haldon didn't want her to go, but couldn't think of a thing to detain her. Belle seemed uneasy, too.

“Thank you for the ruby heart and everything else, Haldon. You have wonderful taste.”

“For a beast?”

She blushed. “I told you that I do not think of you in that way.”

“But it's what I am.”

“Perhaps you should try to see yourself as I do.”

“And how is that, Belle?”

“As one who has more kindness in his heart than he is willing to admit.”

“Do you mean that, Belle? You're not just trying to make me feel better?”

“I mean it with all my heart, Haldon.”

“Then perhaps you will grant me one request before you retire.”

“What can I give you?”

His heart thumped in anticipation. Should he dare to be so bold?

“Why do you hesitate, Haldon? Tell me what you want.”

“May I kiss your forehead, Belle?”

* * * *

Chapter Three

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so forward, Belle.”

The look of anguish in his eyes flayed her heart. “You weren’t, my lord.”

“But you do not relish the touch of my lips.”

“I did not say that.”

“But you feel it, Belle. After all, I am a hideous beast.”

“Haldon, I have had no problems expressing my emotions. I haven’t shrunk from your touch.” In fact, she found it sensually pleasant and initiated the contact, even though she felt guilty about it. “Why should I want to avoid a friendly kiss?”

“You are sure?”

“Yes.” She moved into his embrace. It felt immensely pleasant. The sensation seemed the same as when she dreamed about being in the handsome man's arms. She closed her eyes and imagined her dream lover was kissing her.

“Belle,” he murmured, his lips touching down on her brow.

The sweetness of his kiss surprised her. She should break away and go into her room, but she lingered in his arms.

Lust tore at Haldon's belly. He needed her so badly he would have forfeited ten years of his life to make love to her. He wrestled with himself.

Should he press his suit further? Should he ask for a kiss on the mouth? She did not find him that repulsive, or she wouldn't have encouraged him to hold or kiss her.

Yet, he may be mistaking friendship for something more. He wished he could read her thoughts right now, but he could only read her dreams, for when she slept, all her mental defenses were down. Furthermore, if she rejected him, he felt he would die. That fear cooled his fervor.

Finally, he disengaged. "Good night, sweet Belle."

"Good night, Haldon."

She entered the room, and Maud was waiting to help her undress. After the maid put away the garments and warmed the bed, she snuffed out the candles and left, taking a taper to light her way.

Belle snuggled down in the big bed, feeling as if she were drifting on a cloud.

The handsome man appeared again. Belle found herself inside the Valentine scene she had painted on the card. Couples skated around her on the pond. The man slid toward her, and together they glided across the frozen surface as a flurry of flakes began to whirl down.

They traveled away from the crowd and stopped at a bench where they slipped off their skates and into their boots. Then he led her down a forest trail lined with snow-dusted pines. A small cottage appeared at the end of the path, its thatch encrusted with snow, its windows bright with a warm golden light, a curl of smoke rising from its chimney.

They went inside and took cups of hot cider from a sideboard to the dancing fire in the great hearth. After they finished their drinks, they set them on the mantel, and he took her in his arms.

His kiss set off a raging fire within her.

"I love you, Belle. Please say you will marry me."

"I will," she said on heavy breath.

They made a slow sensuous game of undressing each other, although her body was clamoring for consummation. They kissed deeply, their tongues challenging, retreating, delving, and sweeping together. Their hands explored, and Belle shivered in delight as he stood behind her, pressing full length against her with his huge penis between them. Then he urged her up on a footstool and slid his stiff member between her legs. He put his hands on her hips, showing her how to glide his length. When she learned the maneuver, he cupped her breasts, nibbling the back of her neck and shoulders.

She writhed against him and closed her thighs more tightly around his aroused member. He turned her to face him, and it was her turn. Reveling in the sensations his body evoked, she charted her course over his chest, teasing his nipples, running her fingers through the hair on his chest, and following the dark growth to where it narrowed over his hard muscular stomach to just above the curls crowning his manhood.

She stopped and looked into his eyes, tacitly asking permission.

"Touch me, Belle. I want to feel your hands on me."

She obliged, caressing the warm pulsing flesh, stroking it, and anticipating its penetration.

He urged her down to the sofa. "Part your knees, Belle."

She complied as he gently explored the rim of her nether lips. Belle moaned as he inserted a finger.

"You are full of sweet hot nectar," he murmured.

Suddenly, Haldon stood before them, his frightful face scowling with rage. "Faithless wench! Is this how you repay my kindness, Belle?"

"Vile beast! How dare you insult her!" the handsome man snarled.

The two males suddenly held swords, but Belle jumped between them. "No," she screamed.

Heart pounding, she woke and burst into tears.

* * * *

After viewing Belle's dream, Haldon put down the mirror. So she had not let the handsome man kill him.

Could this mean that she has deeper feelings for me in my beastly form than she realizes?

Hope surged in his heart. Perhaps Belle *was* the woman to break the spell. Then fear engulfed him. He would die of a broken heart if she disappointed him.

* * * *

Haldon found her in the library as she sat on the sofa, reading a book. She looked up when he entered, but she did not smile.

“Is something amiss, Belle?” he asked, walking to her. “You look perplexed.”

“I....” She blushed.

“Sharing troubles is part of friendship. Do you trust me enough to tell me?”

“I will try, Haldon,” she replied, closing the book.

He sat beside her on the sofa. Taking her hand, he kissed it. When she didn’t flinch at the surprise gesture, he felt encouraged.

“Tell me, sweet one. What is weighing on your mind?”

“You can read my dreams, Haldon, for you have told me their content. Why does the man in the portrait haunt them? Why won’t the servants tell me who he is? Why do they shake with fear when I ask?”

“I think you know that you desire that man, Belle,” he answered, trying to keep the jealousy from coloring the tone of his voice.

Her face blushed, and she stared into her lap. “Who is he then?”

“There is only one way I can reveal that information.”

“How? Tell me!” She leaned forward, exposing her cleavage.

Haldon struggled against the surge of implacable need that gripped him in its thrall. His body clamored for hers. When she reached out and

took his hand, he could bear it no longer. “Marry me, Belle,” he cried, pulling her into his arms.

Jerking away, she stood, and the book fell to the floor. The stunned expression on her face ripped his heart to shreds.

“Belle.” He tried to touch her, but she jumped back, and bitter fury filled his heart. “So, for all your fine talk, you still regard me as the beast that I am.”

“Surely, I have proved to you that I do not think of you in that way. I consider you a friend, Haldon. I am very fond of you, but I am not in love with you.”

“No,” he sneered. “You love the beautiful image in the portrait. You are just as shallow as everyone else.”

“And would you desire me if I were ugly, Haldon? You want me to see beyond your exterior, but you cannot see beyond mine. If I were old and shriveled, would you have asked me to stay with you? I may be shallow, as you say, but so are you.”

“Leave me. Go to your room!” he roared.

“Gladly!” Belle retorted, fleeing the scene.

His soul in agony, Haldon ripped his clothes and tore at his hair in rage. He smashed furniture and threw books, rendering the room into a complete shambles until he collapsed from exhaustion.

* * * *

Greatly troubled, Belle paced in the garden. She hadn't seen Haldon in days, and she was worried. He refused her petitions for an audience. She had hurt him deeply, but she just could not give herself to him. She loved another, even though he was just the lover of her dreams.

Still, she felt a terrible sense of grief that she'd lost Haldon. She cherished his friendship. She enjoyed his company, more so now than she had formerly realized.

She looked up to the sky. Another winter storm was brewing. Would spring ever come? She wanted to hear the call of the curlew. She longed to see the bluebells, the hawthorn, and the rowans in bloom.

Most of all, she wanted her father, to feel his embrace about her, to listen to his gentle reassuring wisdom. The thought of never hugging him again caused her to burst into tears.

Perhaps seeing his image in the magic mirror again would soothe her aching heart, but the hairs on the back of her neck prickled when she thought about encountering Haldon and asking his permission to look at it.

She also felt horrible about hurting him. She should try to make amends. First, though, perhaps she could take a peek in the magic mirror.

She turned and entered the house, heading toward the library. She opened the door a crack and squinted. Darkness and quiet filled the room. Belle entered and rushed toward the table, picking up the looking glass. "Show me my father."

The mirror flashed, and the image of her father and sisters appeared. He was in bed, looking ill. They all seemed stricken. The lovely two-story sandstone house where they lived was in disarray.

“Oh, we are ruined,” her father moaned. “We’ve lost everything.”

“We’ll be poor,” Morag wailed.

“We won’t have pretty clothes and fine jewelry anymore,” Ailsa sobbed out.

“Belle,” her father cried. “I want my Belle.”

The pain in Belle’s heart squeezed the breath from her lungs. She put down the mirror on the table and collapsed on the sofa in tears. What had happened to caused this disaster? She had delivered those insurance documents and the fee to her father’s barrister herself.

“What is wrong, Belle?”

She jumped up, quickly wiping her tears and facing away from Haldon.

He walked to her, turning her to him. “You were crying. Why do you hide your sorrow from me?”

“Because my tears are useless.”

“Why do you say that? I will grant you anything you want. You know that.”

“You cannot give me what I desire most.”

“How do you know?”

“Look in the mirror. See how my father misses me. Something

frightful has happened, but I am not there when he needs me most.”

She and Haldon went to the looking glass and picked it up. “Show us what happened to cause this trouble.”

The mirror displayed the image of the dishonest attorney absconding with the funds Mr. Dunbar gave him to insure the ship and cargo.

“I am truly sorry, Belle.”

“Is there nothing you can do for them, Haldon?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it. I shall do anything you ask,” she begged.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she answered without hesitation.

“Belle, it would not be a marriage of convenience. I’d demand my rights. Could you submit to that, even though you love another?”

“Yes. Just help them!” she answered desperately, tears distorting her vision.

He held up the mirror. “Restore Master Dunbar’s health and wealth.”

Immediately, Belle saw a shower of gold fairy dust glittering down on her family. Then messengers ran to her father, delivering bags of gold. All at once, her family was well and happy again.

Sighing in relief, she took Haldon’s hand and kissed it. “Thank you,” she said, her heart chaotic with emotions. “And now, if you will excuse me, I need to be alone.”

“Of course, Belle.”

* * * *

Elated, Haldon almost pranced about the room. Soon, he would regain his handsome form, and Belle would be his bride.

He pictured how surprised she would be when he transformed before her eyes.

Then he would slowly undress her, watching her breath come in heavy pants. Envisioning the scene, blood pooled in his loins, engorging his phallus.

He would prolong her pleasure, making her tremble and writhe with longing. He licked his lips, imagining hers would taste like ripe summer berries.

Closing his eyes, Haldon inhaled deeply, for her scent lingered in the air. He imagined her naked in his arms. He would nuzzle her white neck and dropped a trail of kisses over her breasts, down her torso, her belly, and lower. He would savor her womanly flesh and sweep his tongue over it, listening to her groan with desire.

Jolts of pleasure shot through him when he fantasized about her taking hold of his manhood and stroking it.

“Haldon, I fear you are doomed,” Lucia declared, the room brightening with the light of ten suns.

“No,” he yelled. “There is nothing you can do against me now, Lucia.

She has agreed to marry me.”

“The curse cannot be broken by your marriage to her. You will only be free if she has learned to *love* you in your present form.” She fluttered her crystal wings, and rainbows danced about the chamber.

He laughed. “She has, Lucia. Belle understands that it will be a true marriage. I will assert my rights.”

“You speak of lust. Love is more than the sexual relationship to which Belle has agreed. It comes from the heart and demands sacrifice. You must give it to receive it. You have not given of yourself, Haldon.”

“I have presented her with everything she wants.”

“Not quite everything. Besides, the gifts have cost you nothing.”

“What more can I give?”

“The thing she wants most.” Lucia waved her wand, and a sprinkling of starlight swirled around him. “I have just given you insight. Use it, Haldon, or all will be lost.”

She faded, leaving him in the darkness, but he immediately understood that the only thing Belle wanted was to see her father and visit her childhood home.

“No,” he growled. “I can’t let her go. I just cannot.”

* * * *

“Haldon, this is a lovely conservatory. Why haven’t you shown me

this before?" Belle moved closer to the beautiful yellow roses. They wafted the finest perfume she ever smelled.

"This is my private in-door garden. Usually, I allow no one else to enter, but I brought you here for a special purpose."

"Which is?"

"Before we marry, I am going to let you go home, Belle." Though the thought of her departure left him bereft, he could not deny her the chance to go.

"But I thought--"

He held up his hand. "Let me finish, Belle. You must return within a week, or something terrible will happen."

"To my family?"

"No."

"To whom?"

"I cannot say."

"Why?"

"Never mind, Belle. Do you promise to come back?"

"Yes, Haldon."

"Even though you must marry a beast?"

"You seem less so to me every time you act with kindness."

He drew her into his arms. "My Belle, I shall miss you." In fact, he felt like darkness was swallowing his soul.

"Do not worry. I shall return to you."

“Oh, Belle, do you think that you could ever love me?”

“I do not know, Haldon.”

Her answer sent pain shafting through his heart. He flinched inwardly.

“Take this rose.” He plucked it from the bush, and its yellow petals immediately turned to gold. “It is magic and will immediately transport you to your home and back here when you wish to return. Remember, you have but one week.”

“I shall.”

“And, Belle, do not lose the rose.”

“I shall guard it carefully.”

"Before you go, I would ask one favor of you."

"Yes?"

"I want to kiss you on the mouth."

"I'm to be your wife. You need not ask."

"You are not my wife yet."

"Very well, Haldon. After all, I must become accustomed to it."

He took her into his embrace and kissed her very diffidently and superficially, for he would die of the rejection should she jerk away in disgust. But she did not pull back. In fact, her kiss was warm and affectionate...almost *passionate* and Haldon almost died from the need to possess her. Still, he released her before his lust got out of hand.

“Go now, Belle.”

* * * *

When Belle disappeared before his eyes, Haldon thought he would die of grief. Nothing he had ever done had been as difficult as letting her depart.

Now, four days later, his agony had increased. His loneliness weighed heavier than the great hump on his back. He had been unable to eat or sleep since she left. A chill quaked through him when he entertained a doubt about her return.

Suddenly, Haldon realized he loved her so much that he was willing to release her from her promise to marry him. Just having her with him would be enough.

“Three more days,” he whispered. “Just three more days, and I shall see her again.”

* * * *

Belle looked out the window of her bedchamber, watching her family ride off in a coach to attend a ball at the home of a friend. She declined to go, for she was not in the mood to make merry. She missed Haldon more than she could say.

Perhaps when she returned to him, she could persuade him to let her

father visit her at Glen Dubh. That would be lovely, and she wouldn't have to leave Haldon.

Or would it? Her father would probably be horrified to know that she had married such a creature. Yet, Haldon seemed less beastly than some men she had met during her stay here. They lusted after sex and large dowries. They had no sensibility ... and no soul.

Haldon cared about her as a person. Hadn't he done everything for her and her family? He was intelligent, witty, and gentle. Belle wished she could love him. Why was she haunted by the specter of that handsome man? In truth, she hadn't dreamt about him for quite some time. She had dreamt about Haldon, though.

When she recalled his sweet tender kiss, she became just as aroused as when she thought of her dream lover's kiss. In fact, they felt so much the same she found it hard to distinguish between the two males. Her reaction surprised Belle. The contact had caused the same tingling in her breasts, the same tug in her belly, the same delicious shudder. For a moment, she also thought she was kissing her lover. Perhaps she had come to care for Haldon much more than even she had realized. Maybe outward appearances were not all that important when you really cared for someone.

Wanting to hold the last souvenir he had given her, she went to take up the magic rose from the dressing table.

Horried, she discovered it was gone. Trembling violently, she searched for it frantically. She had to get back to Glen Dubh by tomorrow

evening.

Belle spent a night of tears and frustration. At dawn, her family returned.

“Belle, what is amiss?” her father asked.

“I have lost my rose.”

“The beautiful golden one?” Morag queried.

“You know I have no other,” Belle replied, crushed by sorrow.

“Well, I haven’t seen it.” Morag lifted her chin.

“Nor have I,” Ailsa asserted. “It serves you right for being so selfish with it.”

“Yes.” Morag nodded. “You wouldn’t even let us touch it.”

“I must find it before I leave for Glen Dubh,” Belle insisted.

“Why do you want to go back to that old place?” Ailsa sneered.

“Because I promised to return.” Belle felt another fall of tears threatening.

“Morag, Ailsa, go to bed,” her father instructed. “I want to talk to Belle alone.”

“I hope you never find it,” Ailsa spat out.

Her two sisters flounced from the room.

“Belle, I have not seen you so upset in years.”

“Father, I promised Lord Glen Dubh, I’d return. You have always taught us to keep our word.”

“I understand, child.”

“No, father. You do not. It was due to him that you got back your fortune. I cannot explain it, but this family owes him everything.”

“I see.”

“I wish to return, father. Perhaps you can come to visit me.”

“I’ve heard strange stories, Belle. I am concerned.”

“Lord Glen Dubh has a disability, father, but he has a good soul, better than most in fact.”

“I believe you. Let us look about for the rose.”

* * * *

The next day came and went, and still she did not find it. If she did not recover the rose, she must take a coach to Glen Dubh. The trip would take three more days. She prayed she would not be too late to avert disaster.

* * * *

Haldon felt his strength ebbing from his body like a hemorrhage. “Why hasn’t she returned?” he whispered. Perhaps she had changed her mind. Belle probably got home with her family and couldn’t tear herself away.

He staggered to the magic looking glass. “I wish to see Belle.” For the first time, he saw only fog. The mirror’s power was also fading.

He crawled to the couch. Oh, how could she betray him? He had trusted her with his life. He closed his eyes as weakness overtook him, and despair shrouded his heart.

* * * *

Her tearful good-byes to her father said, a small bag packed, Belle headed toward the stable. She and a groom would ride to the coach depot. After he left her, the man would take her horse back to Dunbar House.

The snow still covered the ground and crunched beneath her footsteps. She hoped that another storm would not further delay her departure. As she made her way, Belle heard her sisters talking behind the tall hedge of yews. She intended to ignore their chatter until she heard her name mentioned. She walked closer to the shrubbery and peeked through its branches.

“I have no pity for Belle,” Morag remarked.

“I know you took the rose,” Ailsa replied. “But what did you do with it?”

“Well, I was going to steal it, but when I picked it up, it withered. I sneaked out of the house and threw it on the midden. It’s still there in the snow.” Morag laughed maliciously.

Ailsa giggled. “I must say I enjoyed seeing her so upset. I’m glad she is leaving. When she is around, men never notice us, and father gives

her all his attention.”

Belle did not bother to confront them. She hurried to the midden, but her heart sank, for the rose lay withered and frozen on the trash heap, its powers gone. Still, Haldon had given it to her. She would keep it as a memento. Belle stooped and took it up.

Miraculously, the flower turned gold again and shimmered in the pale winter light.

Without hesitation, she said, “Take me to Haldon.”

Immediately, the magic transported her back to Glen Dubh. She raced inside the castle. A depressing atmosphere hung over the place like a storm cloud, and the servants looked paler and more depressed than ever.

“Where is his lordship?” she asked as Maud came forth to greet her.

“He is gravely ill, Mistress Belle, but he refuses to let us get a physician.”

Her heart lurched, and tears flooded her eyes.

“When you did not return, he began to fail.”

“I must go to him.”

“He is in his bedchamber, mistress.”

Belle ran up the steps and knocked at his door. When no one answered, she boldly entered and hurried to his bedside. Fully clothed, he lay on the huge bed, and his appearance shocked her. Haldon had always radiated strength and vitality. Now, he looked wasted, and the black fur covering him seemed lusterless.

“Haldon,” she sobbed out, feeling inconsolable for having caused this disaster.

His eyelids flickered, and when they parted, his eyes seemed sunken and glazed with fever. “Belle,” he whispered.

“Oh, Haldon. I am sorry. My sister stole the rose, and I couldn’t come back.”

“So you did not betray me,” he rasped out.

Tears streaming down her face, Belle leaned over him and stroked his head. “I could never betray you, dearest.”

“Now, I can die happy.”

“No, Haldon!” She squeezed his hand. “You can’t desert me. Not now! We will be married, and I shan’t ever leave you again.”

“I am beyond hope, Belle.”

“Is there nothing that can save you?” She lay down beside him, holding him and sobbing.

“There is but one thing,” he answered, his words barely audible.

“Tell me, Haldon! Please!” she cried, hugging him closer.

“I cannot.”

* * * *

Chapter Four

“You must not die without knowing that I love you, darling,” Belle cried. “I’ve loved you for quite sometime. I just didn’t realize it. Oh, I’ve been such a fool.”

Suddenly, the room exploded with light. Haldon faded from her hold, and she found herself standing, and the handsome man stood in front of her as the room dimmed again.

“Haldon, my darling, why have you left me?”

“I am here, Belle,” the handsome man answered. “I am Haldon.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“You’re the man in the portrait. How can this be?”

“I could never tell you this before, but my beastly form was a punishment for my arrogance and indifference toward my fellow man. Lucia, the Fairy of Light, cast a spell on me, making my body mirror the ugliness of my soul. The curse could only be lifted when a woman found it in her heart to love me in my disfigured form.”

The room brightened once more, and a shower of silvery stardust rained on them. Platinum hair billowing about her, a crystal-winged fairy appeared, her ice blue robe shimmering like the sun on a summer loch.

“Lucia,” Haldon said.

“You have done well, Haldon. You have learned to give of yourself. Now, your handsome form reflects the goodness of your soul.”

He smiled. “It was a difficult lesson to learn, but one I finally comprehended, for I followed Belle’s example.”

“My work with you is finished, and you shall not need me or any magic power.”

“I want only the power of love, Lucia,” he answered.

“You have it. And now, I must take my leave for there are many miscreants who need to learn lessons in charity. The silly girls who tried to steal the golden rose are but two of them.”

“For my father’s sake, have mercy on my sisters, Lady Lucia,” Belle pleaded.

“I shall, but they will not have an easy time. Soon, though, your father will make his home with you, Belle. I see his grandchildren, your heirs, bouncing on his knee.”

The room seemed to explode with a dazzle of a thousand stars then darkened.

“Belle,” he said, pulling her into his embrace.

“Haldon, I love you so much, more for the goodness in your heart than the glory of your form.”

“And I love you, my precious Belle, for the same reason.”

He kissed her sweetly; sending shivers of delight rippling through her, but his lips quickly became more demanding. His tongue sought entry.

She gave him access, delighting in its velvety texture and wine-flavored taste as it swirled with her tongue.

Belle felt her nipples harden, and her breasts began to ache. Spasms of pleasure contracted in her lower abdomen, and moisture sprang between her thighs.

He kissed her forehead, eyes, cheeks, and neck. “Oh, Belle, I’ve wanted you for so long.”

“And I’ve wanted you, Haldon.”

Between kisses and embraces, they doffed their clothes, leaving them in a mound on the floor.

“Haldon, let’s love by the fire.”

“Anything you wish, darling.” He turned, then picked up the mattress and the feather ticking, and placed them before the radiant hearth.

She paused to admire his magnificent physique. His broad shoulders and deep chest tapered to a flat stomach, lean hips, and long powerful legs. In the firelight, his thick black mane gleamed like dark silk.

Her gaze lingered on his huge erect phallus. The sight of it made her long to feel it inside her, penetrating her completely, gushing its life-giving essence into her.

He held out his muscular arms, his gaze raking hungrily over her body. “Belle, come to me.”

She walked to him slowly, entering the warmth of his embrace. He kissed her deeply, pressing her naked body full-length against his. The mat

on his chest teased her hard nipples, making her daft with need.

His hands skimmed down her body and rested on her buttocks, kneading it. She returned the gesture in kind, and Belle could feel his huge member straining between them.

“Belle, this is why we were born,” he murmured, urging her down on the mattress and reclining by her side.

“Yes, love.” She kissed the slope of his cheek and the curve where his neck joined his shoulder.

He dropped kisses down her neck and over her collarbone, and then his lips fastened on her nipple.

“Haldon,” she whimpered. Pleasure pulsed through her, and with each tug of his mouth, the muscles deep in her abdomen clenched powerfully, making her even wetter.

She groaned as he paid homage to her other breast, and Belle began panting, striving, yearning for something that seemed just out of her reach.

Haldon doubled his efforts as he continued to suckle her breasts, for his fingers found their way to her moist swollen flesh. He gently traced the shape of her nether lips. He found her nub and delicately slid his fingertip around its head and down its shaft. Then he stroked gently, fueling the ravenous desire building within her.

Belle felt that her blood had turned to a river of burning brandy. Her back arched, her legs stiffened, and her toes curled under as she raised her hips to meet his plunging fingers. Finally, his lips charted a southerly

course. His tongue swept over her tingling nub, and her besieged senses reeled. On and on, he continued until the coil of need compressing within her sprang free.

Haldon held her close as she convulsed with a shattering release. When the pleasure ebbed, she said, "I'd like to reciprocate in kind, Haldon."

He lay back, and she took his penis into her hands, stroking it gently. Her fingers played over its delicate tip, and she felt its moisture.

Haldon closed his eyes and bent back his head, the cords in his muscular neck standing in relief, his clenched fists at his sides.

She sat up and licked his male flesh then took it into her mouth. His breath hissed in his throat, but she continued, caressing his sacs at the same time.

"Enough, Belle!"

He quickly loomed over her and rubbed the tip of his member against her incredibly wet opening. She shuddered with need. At last, we will be one, she thought.

He made a slow descent. The contact of his flesh against hers made her senses spin with pleasure yet incited a longing so strong she almost cried out.

Haldon paused, and she writhed beneath him.

"Why do you stop?"

"I feel your maidenhead. I do not want to hurt you."

"I do not have any pain."

“Let me try to stretch it.” He withdrew almost completely and slid forward again.

Belle was so frantic she raised her hips to meet his thrust and he sunk to his hilt. She lay there, reveling as his length expanded within her, filling her completely.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No. I feel deliciously full of you, my love.”

He then began his campaign, retreating and advancing. Belle had never felt anything quite like this before. This was a more complete sensation than when he had just caressed her with his hands and tongue. Her body suddenly responded to nothing but the demands of his long rhythmic driving strokes. Soon, his movements became heavier and more intense. Belle's sheath seemed to become more slippery as if it were full of warm honey, yet it seemed swollen and more sensitive.

Haldon felt her throbbing around him. She was wet, hot, and tight, squeezing him, inciting his body to clamor for release, and he increased his tempo, delving into her hard now. His loins felt close to the bursting point, but he must let her come first, so he tilted her hips upward, allowing his length to rub against her joy spot.

The friction of his penis against her nub made her blind with hot demanding need. She moaned and writhed, unable to fulfill the unrelenting hunger building inside her. She labored, straining toward his marauding phallus, unable to get enough of its sweet provocative titillation. Suddenly,

a firmament of stars exploded, and her whole body pulsed with deep sweet ecstasy.

Haldon felt her strong contractions around his member. He held her closer as she shuddered and gave himself over to mindless need. The urgency of his desire galloped unrestrained now, and blood pounded in his loins with the heavy beat of a drum. Finally, his seed exploded from him, flooding her womb, and a warm tingling release spread out from his loins to the ends of his fingers and toes.

Breathing hard, he collapsed on her. "I love you, Belle."

"And I love you, Haldon."

They remained joined for some time, his member deep within her. Finally, he moved to her side, cradling her in his arms, cushioning her head with his shoulder.

"I want to give you something, Belle."

"Haldon, you have already given me so much."

"You've restored my life, Belle. I can never give you too much." He leapt from her side and strode to the Bombay chest by the wall. He removed a velvet-covered box and brought it to her. "Open it, sweetheart."

Belle lifted the lid and drew in an audibly breath. A large ruby, which was shaped like a heart and surrounded by diamonds, winked in the firelight. "Will you accept this betrothal ring as a symbol of my love?"

"Oh, yes, Haldon," she answered, tears of joy blurring her vision.

* * * *

As they entered their bedchamber on their wedding night, the room filled with a silvery-white dazzle. The Fairy of Light appeared in all her gleaming glory.

“Lucia, I thought you would not return!” Haldon exclaimed.

“Haldon, how boorish of you.” But the crystal-winged creature laughed, filling the room with the sound of tinkling silver bells.

“I am sorry, but you did surprise us,” he answered.

“I wanted to give you and Belle a wedding gift. I’ve told you that you will have many children, but your first will be a son, Haldon. He will be born on Valentine’s Day next. Your lives will abound in love and joy forever.”

“Thank you, Lucia,” Haldon said.

“Yes, thank you,” Belle added.

“Well, I shall leave the two of you to get busy on that project.” She waved her wand and covered them with stardust.

“That is one assignment I will relish, Lucia.”

The fairy departed, leaving only the rosy glow of the fire for illumination.

Haldon drew Belle into his arms and smiled. “Shall we get started on procreating our heir?”

“With pleasure, my lord,” Belle replied enthusiastically.