

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

...Gaston steered her into the hut. "Come. There is a pallet inside. I will not tup you on the bare ground. A lady of your quality deserves better than that, and so does the only love of my life."

The passion and tenderness in his tone sizzled through her, igniting fierce, itchy tingles in places she had all but ignored before. Her breasts ached, thrusting against the soft fabric of her shirt, with her nipples hard and eager. Pressing close to Gaston's strong body, she lifted one leg and wrapped it around his, stretching to press her crotch against his heat.

Gaston unfastened her cloak. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the hut, she saw him spread her garment over a pile of straw and tanned hides in one corner. Then he swept her into his arms, holding her high for a moment. After a few breaths, he settled her on the pallet, pausing only an instant before he threw himself down beside her.

Colette felt so hot she almost worried the straw would combust from the heat radiating from her body. Even before Gaston had fully stretched out beside her, she wriggled closer, clutched at him, and pressed her body to his with such fierceness it was as if she tried to merge the two of them into a single form. In an instant, his arms were again around her, hugging her in a starving embrace, and then skimming his hands up and down her backside, shaping every curve and hollow. There was awe and wonder, near worship in his touch, but also an explosive surge of hunger and passion.

"I need, I want. Please." She gasped out the words, only half-coherent, not sure how to ask for what she desired, but flooded with a great desperation to open to him and express the love and hunger filling her...

ALSO BY DEIRDRE O'DARE

Cowgirl Up Daring Delights Daring Departures Daring Dreams Doggone Love Dude Ranch Nights Fire On Ice Jesse's Girl Journal Of A Timid Temptress Karola's Hunt The Maltese Terror Muscle Car Man Nellie's Rogue Stallion Pickup Man Portrait Of A Cowboy Randi's Hellacious Adventure Rescued By Love **Revolution!** Saved By Sam The Taming of Jaelle'n To Protect and...Seduce? Treading Dangerous Ground Treading Dangerous Ground You Were Always On My Mind

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC http://www.AmberQuill.com

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

> Amber Quill Press, LLC http://www.AmberQuill.com

> > All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.

> Copyright © 2009 by Deirdre O'Dare ISBN 978-1-60272-448-8 Cover Art © 2009 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To favorite steeds of long ago, Yavapai Chief and Leo Mix, my non-shifter stallions who were friends and partners, and to horse-loving girls around the world. Dare to dream and in dreams at least you can experience your wildest desires.

Thanks as always to the Amber Quill team, incredible partners in the production of the tales of my heart!

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

CHAPTER 1

The Camargue, France Late Spring, 1797

Colette D'Estaing hurried down the flagged path to the stable. She took deep breaths of the morning's cool damp air, hoping it would clear the heat of anger from her soul.

Curse him! I am not yet Charles's wife and he cannot force me to submit to his disgusting demands. If there is any justice in this warped world, I shall not have to marry the fiend! Somehow, perhaps I can convince Papa what a depraved libertine his dear Charles de Fayette really is!

By the time she reached the shady peace of the stable, her

raging blood had calmed. A good ride would finish taking the edge off her emotions and make life tolerable again. Slipping into the tack room, she took off her heavy skirts and hung them on a convenient hook. Beneath them, she wore breeches and high leather boots, a most improper costume for a gently born young woman, but one in which she felt free and comfortable.

As soon as she emerged, one of the lads appeared, eager to serve her. *"Ma'mselle*, which of your horses do you want to ride today? I will have it here for you before you can blink your eyes."

She smiled at the youth, one of the younger sons of Francois de Jean, the estate's master of horse. "Let me ride Cloud today," she said. "He's not been out for a gallop in a ten-day, and I'm sure he's ready to run."

The lad hesitated a moment, knowing the spirited horse was a handful for even an experienced and masterful rider.

"Cloud it will be," she repeated. "You know I can handle him."

The lad nodded and hurried off. Very soon, he returned, leading the dappled gray gelding, one of the fine Camargue horses that filled the D'Estaing stable.

"Where is Gaston today?" She tried to make the question casual, but her heart accelerated at the mere sound of the name. Gaston was the horse master's eldest son, so devastatingly handsome and darkly dangerous in manner that all the servant girls could speak of little else.

The youth shrugged. "I do not know, m'lady. I suspect he

is off somewhere with his horses. Even Father cannot keep a rein on him!"

If what she'd heard was true, Gaston was not one for dalliance and seemed to prefer the company of his horses to that of the giggling maids who constantly devised excuses to venture to the stable area. These days he was unfailingly polite but distant to Colette. She thought he still admired her horsemanship and fearlessness. At least she hoped he did.

When they were younger, they had been best of friends and shared many adventures. He had often accompanied her when she rode her pony and later kissed away the tears of her occasional spills when she graduated to larger and more spirited mounts. But then she became a lady instead of a child, and he had distanced himself from her.

She suspected their fathers had played a major role in that occurrence, perhaps even forbidding him to spend time alone with her lest it taint her reputation. She must make a good marriage and, of course, no well-born suitor would have a bride whose purity might be called to question, especially if it were sullied by contact with a common man.

When the young groom led Cloud to the mounting block, she swung herself into the saddle. After the lad released the lead, the horse pranced in a wide circle, tossing his magnificent head. Another of the stable boys opened the gate and she loosed the reins, letting the gray burst into a gallop as he left the yard.

The horse seemed almost to read her mind, sensing she wanted to go to the cliffs, down the steep path to the beach

and then race along the edge of the water on the tide-packed sand. All of the Camargue horses loved the water, taking to it as if it were their natural environment. Cloud was no exception. He picked a sure-footed way down the steep trail from the cliffs to the beach, snorting with excitement. Resisting the urge to drive her mount to dangerous haste on the tricky trail, Colette braced herself in the saddle with light pressure on the reins, though she was as eager to reach the shore as the gray.

Her anger and concern faded like mist in the morning sun as she reveled in the freedom. It was a glorious morning and, for the time being, she was away from her chaperone's censorious gaze, her fiancé's increasingly insistent demands, and the necessity to behave in a subdued and ladylike manner. She could release the wild hoyden in her heart that wished to run free for a few blissful hours.

Finally, Cloud's dark hooves fell on damp sand instead of the rocks of the path down the cliff. Turning to skirt the upper edge of the incoming waves, Colette gave the horse his head and kicked him into a gallop. He tore down the beach, showering sand and an occasional spray of seawater into the air. His long mane lashed her face as she bent low over his neck. The powerful surge of the horse's muscles beneath her sent a thrill of joy through her.

Oh, I wish I could be a horse myself. What a delight it would be give over all the silly trappings of civilization and live as one with nature, to come and go as I pleased and run when I felt the urge! What could be more delightful than that?

They galloped the full length of the crescent beach below the venerable D'Estaing castle, a distance of over a league. At the end, the cliffs came down to meet the sea, cutting off the sandy shoreline. Colette reined Cloud to a stop. He was barely breathing hard, still eager and willing to run some more.

For a few moments, she paused there, listening to the cries of the gulls and curlews that nested in the cliffs and the rush of the waves as they rolled in and broke on the shore, a few splashing around Cloud's legs. The clean tang of the sea air tingled in her nostrils. Finally, she turned and headed back the way they had come, this time holding her mount down to a canter. With the edge off his energy, he gave in graciously to her control, although she could still feel the eagerness surging through his powerful body.

Halfway back, she let him run full out once more until they approached the foot of the trail. Morning was speeding by and she'd be expected in time for the midday repast. Reluctantly, she turned Cloud back up the path. It was time to go back to the real life she detested.

* * *

From a vantage point high on the cliffs above the beach, Gaston de Jean watched Colette and Cloud gallop down the sand. They made a picture of glorious beauty, perfectly attuned to each other and synchronized in every tiny motion. She was an incredible horsewoman. He had to take a bit of credit for that, but most of it was simply her nature. If ever there was a woman meant for one such as him, a member of a venerable clan carrying the rare ancient gift of shifting into equine form, Colette D'Estaing was one.

The cruel unfairness of life that forced her into the arms of another roiled in his gut. She was his; she always would be. Even as children, they had recognized their bond without fully understanding it. He had taught her, cared for her, nourished her love for the wonderful horses of the region and her natural ability to ride and interact with them.

In those innocent days, he'd had no notion of the profound differences in their status that would bring about the separation he now hated so deeply. The knowledge she would soon wed to a man of her class and be lost to him forever gnawed at his very soul. It left anguish almost too great to bear. He found solace only among his horses, shifting to run with them at times and at others riding through the salty marshes and the wild hills on one or another of the mares or stallions that ran free there. None of them failed to accept his leadership and control for they recognized his nature and the gift that gave him dominion over all equine kind.

Although the position of horse master for the D'Estaing estate would be his by right upon his father's death or retirement, he often thought he would surrender that post to one of his younger brothers. Then, free to go into the shifted form, he might never return to humanity. Perhaps as one of the wild stallions he could live out his life and eventually forget the girl he had loved from the first day he saw her. Otherwise, he was not sure he could bear to go on living.

But for now, duty called. He had tasks back at the stables.

It would not be fair to shirk them and leave more work to his father and brothers. Soon enough the younger boys would be able to take on the farrier's job and the many other chores required in the care and management of the great stable, famous throughout France for the fine horses the estate produced.

Gaston turned his mount's head toward the stable, hoping he could time his arrival to occur after Colette had surrendered her mount to one of the younger boys and gone back to the manor. He ached at the hurt in her eyes when he spoke to her as a distant acquaintance, not the close friend he had once been. He had to fight the huge temptation to drag her into one of the empty stalls, lay her down in the fragrant hay and make her his. It was agony to see her, smell the sweet floral scent of her perfume, hear her merry laugh and the tender words with which she bade her mount of the day adieu. Once she had spoken thus to him. That she no longer did was no fault of hers but simply the circumstances, yet still it broke his heart.

* * *

When Colette rode into the stable yard, the first thing she heard was a masculine voice raised in anger. She recognized the tone at once. Her intended, Charles de Fayette, was on a tear, berating the horse master and the stable boys for allowing her to ride off unattended. She slid from her saddle and tossed the looped rein over a convenient hook near the stable door. Cloud would stay there until someone came for him.

The good feelings engendered by her ride evaporated at

once. She stalked into the shadowy recesses of the barn, thinking only to rescue the hapless staff from her fiancé's pointless tirade.

Charles de Fayette stood in the middle of the barn, his foppish attire clashing with the pastoral setting. He held a lace-edged handkerchief to his nose as if the scent of horses, leather and fodder offended him, but that did not mute his voice.

"What do you mean my fiancée went off alone on a horse? Why, any ruffian could accost her. She could be thrown from her mount and lie helpless somewhere. She could—"

"But none of those things have happened. I am here and perfectly well as you can see if you will be silent a moment and look." She stopped just beyond an arm's length from him, in case he should choose to take his wrath out on her with a swift blow. If he did, it would not be the first time. Temptation to provoke him nibbled at her thoughts. She was sure the horse master would come to her defense before Charles could injure her seriously, and she would then have a witness to support her when she told her father of the abuse.

Charles whirled to face her, an expression of utter shock sweeping over his face as he saw her attire. "Breeches? How indecent. I can see I must take you in hand at once and teach you how a proper lady behaves. No wife of mine can be seen in public in such scandalous clothing. I am surprised your father permits this."

"He does not know. I slipped out early needing some time alone to settle my nerves. Your visit has been very stressful." "Stressful? I will show you stressful." He grabbed her arm and started for the nearest vacant stall. "It is past time you submitted to me. I will no longer tolerate your missish excuses. I can see plainly that you are not the timid, virginal creature you've pretended to be. For all I know, you were off seeing a secret lover behind my back. Well, there will be no more of that, my girl. You will not leave the barn until I have what I want from you."

Everyone seemed to have vanished while his attention was fixed on her. No one appeared to stop him now as he dragged her across the wide aisle toward an open stall. She dug her heels in and strained against his grasp to small avail. Foppish he might be, but he was a large man and certainly stronger than she was.

He swung her in a half-circle and pushed her down into the thick straw carpeting the floor of the stall. She had hardly landed when he began to unlace his breeches, freeing his purple cock from their confines. He dropped to his knees astraddle her legs and clawed at the fastenings of her trousers, tearing the laces from the worn fabric with a violent rip.

The garment was old, a pair of Gaston's pants, long outgrown, which he had slipped to her before their friendship decayed into the present state of chill remoteness. The fabric gave way leaving her nearly nude below the waist, covered only by the tails of her chemise, which she had tucked into the trousers to take up a bit of the excess space left by her much smaller waist.

When Charles leaned forward to grind his mouth upon hers

in a rough, bruising kiss, his cock nudged at her belly. She flinched from the touch of his alien flesh, trying to scream around the barrier of his heavy, wet lips. Finally, in desperation as he forced her mouth open and thrust his tongue in, she bit down on it as hard as she could. With a howl of rage and pain, he drew back, but slapped her savagely across the face as he did. Blood streamed from his mouth, along with foul curses.

At that instant, a huge shadow darkened the doorway. It was a horse, a powerful stallion of silvery gray. Colette stared up in amazement as the beast's massive jaws clamped on Charles's shoulder and lifted him off her as easily as a child might lift a doll.

Charles' roar of rage turned to one of terror as he realized what had captured him. The horse's eyes gleamed fire-red in the shadowy barn as he backed a couple of steps, taking the man with him, still grasped in his strong bite. The horse tossed his head, shaking Charles as a dog might shake a rabbit or a rat.

After a moment, the stallion dropped the man's limp body to the floor. He snorted fiercely. Then, rearing high, he came down with both forelegs stiff, hammering the man's body. Again and again he reared and stomped, until Charles was little more than a lump of bloody flesh, nearly embedded into the planks of the floor.

Colette dragged herself to her feet, trying to hold the tattered remnants of her clothing to cover her body. She watched in shock as the enraged stallion trampled the broken body of her would-be lover and future husband. She could feel no sorrow or sympathy after the man's harsh treatment, but the brutal violence still disturbed her. She shoved her fist against her mouth to stifle her whimpers of horror.

At last, the horse settled to all four feet and backed a halflength away from the remains of the man. The stallion snorted again, rolling flame-hot eyes. His massive body shuddered as if he fought to control the rage that still surged through him.

Hesitantly, Colette approached the trembling horse. She had to pass very close to him to retrieve her skirts from the tack room at the far end of the long barn. Never, since childhood, had she feared a horse. She didn't actually fear this one, in spite of his ferocious behavior and the visible hints he was still on the edge of uncontrollable fury. Somehow she felt sure he would do her no harm, no matter how vicious he might appear. As she drew near, he lowered his head to her level. The velvet muzzle touched her cheek in the lightest possible caress. Then the beast whirled and thundered out of the barn, disappearing as quickly and inexplicably as he had come.

Shaking so hard she could barely walk, Colette eventually made her way to the tack room and struggled into her skirts. Then she gathered her strength and staggered along the path to the kitchen door of the manor house. She slipped in unnoticed, and crept up the back stairs to the corridor on which her suite was situated.

* * *

A short time later, she heard the commotion in the stables.

She had to assume Charles' body had been discovered. Somehow she must erase from her mind all memory of the horrific scene, as well as the rape the dead man had been about to force upon her.

Then, when she heard her fiancé's body had been discovered, she could profess shock and surprise. Anyway, no one would believe a wild stallion had come in from the marshes to defend her, even though the whole estate knew the horses all loved her and even the wildest would approach her and show no tendency to either fear or harm her. Matters would be simpler if no one was ever able to explain what had happened.

CHAPTER 2

Gaston came to himself, naked and shivering, on a hill high above the manor. For a few moments, he could not explain how he had come to be there or what had taken place. But slowly, the memories of the past hour returned. He looked at his hands, no longer the dark hooves that had pounded a man into oblivion, and saw hints of blood still clinging to his skin. He shuddered.

He recalled how he'd just released the horse he'd been riding when Colette's soundless cry of panic touched his mind. The only thought he had was to respond to her danger. He had stripped and shifted in an instant, running with his equine self's greater speed and strength, hoping with all his soul to reach her in time. With animal rage clouding his mind, he had intended only to save her from harm, but the passion of his wrath had gained control, all humanity lost as he made sure the hated man could never threaten or harm her again. That he had accomplished. But at what cost?

Although his shifter status was not widely known, there were some aware of it. One was certainly his father, who had the power himself, but eschewed it to remain in his human guise and work with the horses instead of becoming one. Gaston could never recall his father shifting, although the first time Gaston had done so as an adolescent, his father had been there to explain and help him through the process, guiding him until he had both sides of the change within his ability to control, except in the times of greatest stress.

Sometimes he thought Colette might guess, but she had never spoken of it. She had even ridden him a few times when he was in his horse form, but she'd behaved then as if he were just another of the wild stallions that roamed freely over the D'Estaing estate, siring the colts to be tamed and sold or kept in the stable.

Charles had certainly deserved punishment for his abuse of Colette, but there was no question Gaston had been carried away. The death of a highborn man under such peculiar circumstances was bound to create a great scandal. The situation would probably rebound badly on D'Estaing and perhaps on Colette as well. For that, Gaston felt sincere regret. Her father was a hard man, but fair; one who treated his staff and retainers with courtesy few of the upper class wasted on the lower classes.

Finally, Gaston remembered where he had left his clothing when he shifted. He slipped along a hedgerow, trying to stay out of sight so his nudity would not be noticed. If anyone spotted him, it would raise questions he was in no mood or position to try to answer. If he could return to the stable in a little while and behave in a convincingly shocked and surprised manner upon hearing what had occurred, he might divert suspicion. Perhaps that was too much to expect, but he had to try.

Looking out her window, Colette spotted Gaston hurrying toward the stable from the hilly pasture area where many of the horses ran. He moved with less than his usual smooth grace, while his posture and abrupt movements betrayed anxiety. If she did not know him well and watch him often, perhaps it would have been less obvious, but she always saw everything about him with preternatural clarity. He was disturbed, and she sensed it keenly.

*

*

*

Had he just heard what had occurred? How would he know if he had been off with the horses all morning?

After dressing quickly in a fresh morning gown without summoning her maid, she descended the main stairs and went on to the stable for the second time, although she pretended it was the first for the day. One of the stable lads met her at the door.

"No, 'demoiselle, you must not go in. It is a terrible thing,

a sight one of your sensibilities should not see."

"What has happened?"

"A man, the visitor from Nantes, has been killed. It looks as if he was trampled to death by a frightened horse. I cannot believe one of our well-trained steeds would do such a thing. Father is very worried because none of the horses shows any signs of having done this thing, no blood or shreds of clothing on their hooves or faces. Oh, it is terrible! There is blood splashed all around and the man has been crushed into the floor by the violence of the attack."

Colette pushed past the lad, determined to see the horse master and observe his response to the matter. François stood near the center of the barn, overseeing several men who were involved in gathering up the remains of Charles. It was a grisly and unpleasant task. The visitor had been trampled to a pulp, as Colette already knew. As she approached, she averted her gaze from the mess, but the stench of blood and filth assailed her nose and she could not ignore that.

François turned from the scene and took her arm. "Come, *mademoiselle*, there has been a terrible tragedy. We shall get to the root of it in time, but now I must go and speak to your father. His guest is dead—and your fiancé, was he not? I nearly forgot that. The poor man was brutally trampled by a horse. No one saw what happened nor did anyone even hear it."

The horse master all but wrung his hands, distress marking his lean, dark countenance and bringing out every bit of his age. Colette realized at that moment that François was no longer young. It would soon be time for Gaston to assume the role of the D'Estaing horse master.

"I cannot imagine how this could be," the horse master continued. He hurried toward the manor house, almost dragging Colette in his haste. "Usually the barn is a busy place with lads running to and fro. But, for a few moments, no one was about and that's when this horrible attack happened. Come, you do not need to look upon it. The man is dead, far past help. Oh dear, what a terrible, frightful thing."

Finally, when François went into her father's study to tell him of the situation, Colette was able to escape. She fled back to the barn, hoping she could find Gaston and speak with him. Some inner sense told her he was in some way connected with this, but her mind refused to explore the vague hints and clues that edged around her awareness. The conclusions trying to take shape were too fantastic and far too frightful to accept.

* * *

Gaston sensed Colette's presence before she drew near. He waited in the shadows, watching the men clean the barn and listening to their shocked chatter. The devil horse they discussed was so far beyond reality that only the rankest superstition would even allow it. They had the animal breathing fire like a dragon and flying over the ground without a hoof touching down.

If they knew the truth, would they be even more appalled? At that moment, he knew he was going to have to leave, soon and forever. He could revert permanently to horse form and hide away in the depths of the salt marshes or should he choose to remain a human, leave the area, even the country, and never come back.

Either way, Colette was lost to him forever despite the fact Charles now would never have her. There would be someone else, another highborn man, and another he would hate because he would have what Gaston could not. Yes, it would be better if he went far away. If he stayed nearby, he might be drawn to kill again.

Those of high birth were not notably kind and considerate of their wives. Any man who hurt or frightened Colette would risk Gaston's wrath if he learned of it. Existing nearby as a horse, he would eventually lose all traces of humanity and the sensibilities that had, before today, held his impulses in check.

Gaston so lost himself in pondering his future that he jumped when a light feminine hand settled on his bare forearm. The gentle touch flashed fire through his nerves. He had not felt that small hand for many months now. He'd missed it even more than he'd realized.

"Gaston, why are you lurking in the shadows? Did you just learn of the terrible thing that happened here earlier?"

He looked down at Colette's sweet, somber face. He could see the worry in her eyes, the shock still troubling her. If only he could have spared her the horrific scene she had witnessed. Could he but do over the past hour's work, he knew he would.

Why had he let the stallion-rage overcome him to the extent he had committed a brutal and heinous murder? True, Charles was a sorry excuse for a man, certainly not a true gentleman, but to crush him to pulp in front of Colette was unforgiveable.

"I am sorry," he blurted. "You should not have had to witness that. I did something terrible, which I will regret for the rest of my life. I could not let you be raped, but I went much too far."

As her expression registered understanding of what he had just said, he knew he had made yet another huge mistake, speaking from his spirit and not his mind. Love had again overruled his judgment. But this time he did not have the horse sense to use as an excuse. He knew she had been able to deny the fact he and the raging horse were one and the same, although he felt sure she must have sensed it in some deep inner part of her consciousness. Now she could no longer pretend or ignore. His confession hung heavy in the air between them, almost a visible cloud.

"You? The horse, that fierce, savage stallion? Oh, saints help us. It is true then. I had never been sure, in spite of the whispers and the wild tales. I knew there was a special kinship between you and the horses, one I share in part, but not to the same degree. Yet I never quite believed. I thought it a fairy tale, one with perhaps a thread of truth, but not real, not a fact."

She had turned so white he feared she would faint, and he wrapped an arm around her slight shoulders to steady her. She leaned into his clasp, her body accepting what her mind had not yet absorbed. Whoever and whatever he was, a part of her still trusted him with all her heart and soul.

"Oh, my God, Gaston, the authorities will be coming after you. Charles de Fayette was an influential man, hateful and vile, but one with close ties to the powerful men in Paris! He moves among the most influential men of the nation, nearly of the world! I am not sure what they will believe, but they will charge you with this death. I know they will!"

Drawing on some inner strength, she straightened and slipped from his embrace. "You must go at once and hide. Tonight, after dark, I will come to the hut on the big hill in the pasture. I'll bring money to buy your passage, provisions for you to use as you make your way to the port at Marseilles. You must sail to America on the first available ship! That is the only place you can escape those who will come hunting you."

She tiptoed, throwing her arms around his neck to press her eager lips to his. "You did it for me, to save me the humiliation and pain of his attack. I can only forgive you, my dearest love, and share the blame. I know not how all this will play out, but I do know you must flee. Go now, quickly, out the back door where no one will see you. I will come tonight."

When he did not turn fast enough, she gave him a surprisingly strong shove. "Go! Now! Father comes and your father with him. I hear them just outside. You must go."

Still muddled with shock, he obeyed her without resistance. His mind was too clouded and troubled to think with clarity. Perhaps she was right. He could slip away into the hilly pastures and shelter in the stockmen's hut for the rest of the day. Maybe he could devise a different plan, but for

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

now, the one Colette proposed seemed the only chance he had. In effect, his life was over, at least the life he had known for his first twenty-seven years.

* * *

Darkness had fallen before Colette was able to dress in another pair of breeches she begged from one of the younger de Jean sons and gather the things she had spent the afternoon acquiring one by one. Wrapped in a heavy, dark cloak and carrying a bulging satchel and a shielded lantern, she crept from the house to cross the tidy lawn. Then she moved on to the wilder pasture regions beyond. Not until she was safely distant from the manor did she allow a small beam of light to emerge from the shuttered lamp to guide her steps.

The French stockmen or guardians' hut sat above a sheltered valley, deep in the rugged terrain. When it was time to round up the horses or the wild cattle, the stockmen stayed in the hut and others like it scattered through the wild pasturelands. Now there would be no one there—except Gaston. At least if luck were with them.

Colette scampered along as fast as she could, burdened by the heavy satchel filled with food and the gold coins she had filched from her father's secret cache. Despite the need for haste, she was careful not to fall and drop the lantern, which then might spark a dangerous fire. The spring had been unusually dry and the grass was not as rich and moist as usual. She knew the senior de Jean was worried about the forage and she'd heard talk of a potential need to acquire supplemental feed unless the weather changed soon. That worry was small, though, compared to her concern for Gaston.

She could still hardly bear to think her beloved childhood friend and the man she now worshipped from afar could have done something so brutal and violent—and that he had done it to save her from rape and abuse. Guilt sat heavy on her shoulders, as if somehow she had brought the vicious crime about by mishandling her fiancé and the whole situation.

Perhaps she should have submitted to Charles without a struggle. Sooner or later she was bound to lose her virginity in circumstances that were likely to be less than pleasant. It was a fact of most women's lives—peasant, commoner or highborn made little difference. A woman was told she was good for just two things—slaking a man's lust and perhaps bearing his children. The sooner she bowed to that yoke, perhaps the better things would go for her.

Lost in thought, she almost passed the hut. It loomed close suddenly, a dark mass against the lighter blue-gray of the night sky now filled with stars. She paused in the doorway. "Gaston, are you here?"

There was no reply. A bolt of fear shot through her. Had someone else come and taken him captive or frightened him into reckless flight without any provisions or funds for his journey to safety? She almost screamed aloud when a warm hand settled on her shoulder. The heat and strength of the touch seeped quickly through the fabric of her cloak and the thin shirt she wore beneath it.

She gasped, then whirled when she realized it was Gaston

who had materialized at her side. Without thought, she leaped toward him, much as she had done as a young child, grasping his shoulders and raising herself to lock her legs around his body. Clearly taken by surprise, Gaston reacted by clasping his arms around her to support her body as he backed a step to lean against the solid stone wall of the hut.

Steadied by his strong arms, Colette loosed her grip on Gaston's shoulders and clasped his head, turning his face into hers and pressing her lips to his.

"You are going away forever," she whispered. "I know not how I can bear it, but I must. Still, tonight you must be my friend again and my love. It is the only chance we will have."

For a moment, she feared he was going to refuse, but his hesitation lasted only a moment. With a ragged sigh, he crushed her close and returned her kisses with growing heat and ardor. She slid lower down his body and felt his cock harden, seeking her through the fabric of their breeches. Virgin she might be, but living among the animals as she had, her knowledge of the ways of males and females was limited only by lack of personal experience. Before the night ended, she vowed that would be remedied.

Gaston lowered her until her feet found the ground, but he kept her in his embrace. "I cannot," he whispered. "It will ruin your chances for a good marriage."

"I shall blame Charles for deflowering me, and no one will know otherwise. Since we were betrothed, it will be almost as if I were a widow. He is not going to be around to dispute it, and the servants have all seen him mauling me, heard his demands. Only Papa was never witness to it and thus did not seem to believe my complaints." She shivered, recalling the resolution of the problem and why she was here now.

He steered her into the hut. "Come. There is a pallet inside. I will not tup you on the bare ground. A lady of your quality deserves better than that, and so does the only love of my life."

The passion and tenderness in his tone sizzled through her, igniting fierce, itchy tingles in places she had all but ignored before. Her breasts ached, thrusting against the soft fabric of her shirt, with her nipples hard and eager. Pressing close to Gaston's strong body, she lifted one leg and wrapped it around his, stretching to press her crotch against his heat.

Gaston unfastened her cloak. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the hut, she saw him spread her garment over a pile of straw and tanned hides in one corner. Then he swept her into his arms, holding her high for a moment. After a few breaths, he settled her on the pallet, pausing only an instant before he threw himself down beside her.

Colette felt so hot she almost worried the straw would combust from the heat radiating from her body. Even before Gaston had fully stretched out beside her, she wriggled closer, clutched at him, and pressed her body to his with such fierceness it was as if she tried to merge the two of them into a single form. In an instant, his arms were again around her, hugging her in a starving embrace, and then skimming his hands up and down her backside, shaping every curve and hollow. There was awe and wonder, near worship in his touch, but also an explosive surge of hunger and passion.

"I need, I want. Please." She gasped out the words, only half-coherent, not sure how to ask for what she desired, but flooded with a great desperation to open to him and express the love and hunger filling her.

In spite of Colette's pleas, Gaston would not be rushed. He eased his hold on her enough to draw back and begin working on the lacings of her breeches, then roll the soft shirt up her torso and finally over her head. The process was slow because he paused to kiss and caress each new bit of skin he bared. Before he was done, she whimpered and writhed, clutching at him with urgent hands.

When he lowered his head, took one nipple between his lips and drew on it with hungry tugs, she thought she would fly into a thousand pieces. Digging her fingers into his thick hair, she bore down with all her strength to press his face into her flesh. Twisting beneath him, she parted her legs and pushed upward against the heat of his stiff cock. At last, he gave in and peeled away first his breeches and then hers. Then finally, he settled between her thighs. Still he hesitated.

"This first time, it is going to hurt, *ma cherie*. There is nothing I can do to prevent this pain. You're virgin, so I'm breaking new ground here. I'm not small and you are so petite I fear I'll be too large for you."

She had only a partial sense of what he was saying, but she'd never seen a mare unable to take any of the stallions. How could she not be able to accommodate, in much the same way, the man she loved more than life? "I will stand the pain, my love. I burn and ache for you. Come, make me yours so we'll both have this to remember when the wide sea rolls between us. Perhaps I will even have a babe to keep part of you near me."

"No! Do not say that. I would not have you suffer the shame and difficulty of bearing a child without a father to help and shelter the two of you. I should not take you now, but I cannot resist."

So saying he shifted, nudging into her twat with slow, careful thrusts. Combined joy and fear surged through her as she felt his powerful shaft stretching and penetrating her. Her body and her life would be irrevocably changed by this act, which even now could not be undone. There was a sudden keen pain, a sharp tearing sensation, but that passed in a moment. Her inner muscles involuntarily tightened against the invasion, but her body soon relaxed to accommodate him.

She lifted her legs and clasped them around his lean horseman's hips, arching to meet his rhythmic movements. As the pain faded, delicious tingling sensations fluttered through her. When Gaston reached between them and toyed with the little nub at the front of her feminine slit, those feelings intensified until her whole body twitched, bucked and convulsed. Waves of ecstasy washed over her, so powerful she could only cling to Gaston's strong, warm body and ride them out.

With a guttural groan, he slammed into her depths with even greater force and then slumped down atop her for a few breaths. Then he rolled to one side, drew her cloak up to shelter her nude body and held her close while they caught their breaths and rested from the wild ride.

"I brought a satchel," she said, "but I think I dropped it at the door when you appeared beside me so suddenly. I brought food and as much gold as I could carry. I think there's enough to sustain you on your way to the port in Marseilles and then buy a passage to the distant shores of America."

He shook his head. "You've risked too much, *ma petite*. Will your father not guess who took his treasure and where it went?"

"He may guess, but he cannot prove anything. I'm sure his manservant knows of the cache and perhaps others on the staff whom he trusts...maybe even some of his closest friends."

She shrugged, dismissing his concern. "Besides, I expect he'll soon be too busy to think of that. Word of Charles' death has already gone forth with swift messengers, and when it reaches Paris, if not sooner, the wrath of the powerful will descend upon the house of D'Estaing. No one can prove what happened. Perhaps you'll be blamed since you'll be gone, but I suspect Father will fall from any favor. I cannot regret this, though, none of it. I'd rather be dead than have had to wed Charles de Fayette!"

Gaston gathered her in a crushing embrace. "Oh, my precious little one, what a tangle I have wrought in my concern for you. Surely, anyone suspected of being a shifter will now be persecuted as a witch and condemned to death. Witchcraft and demonism are the only explanation the folk will be able to accept for this. I swear my gift does not have satanic roots, but the old religion that honors it has been crushed into oblivion and all but forgotten."

Colette drew back, still loosely held in his clasp. "You must arise soon and go, beloved. I know not what the hour is, but it was late when I managed to slip away from the manor and come to find you. You must be far away before the sun rises."

"I must love you one more time before I go."

His lips closed over hers, silencing any protest she might have made. She kissed him back, opening to the teasing thrusts of his tongue, which echoed the movements she now knew would sweep her away to the ecstasy of their union. Within a moment, she began to gasp, twisting in his arms and seeking to press her body closer to his. She reached down to clasp his cock in her hand, thrilling to feel its heat and power. No magnificent stallion in the roaming herds was more splendidly endowed.

At that moment, they both heard muffled sounds outside the hut, but there was no stopping now. He plunged into her again, thrusting deep in an accelerating rhythm that soon had them both gasping and clutching each other's sweat-slick bodies as they rode the mad dash of passion to its crest.

CHAPTER 3

With the greatest reluctance, Gaston at last drew away and felt around in the darkness for their scattered clothing. He handed the smaller garments to Colette and donned his own. He finished dressing first and slipped out to see what or who had arrived. That they had waited to allow the lovers to finish their union led him to believe they were friends rather than enemies. If he was wrong, it could be a fatal error.

A gray mare loomed pale in the darkness. :: I know you must leave us now, sire. I brought two who wish to go with you, your son and daughter. They can travel as horse or human as needed, for both have reached the age for shifting.::

The young colt and filly were still dark, not yet shed into

their silvery adult coats, but they were sturdy yearlings now, able to run tirelessly for hours. They both edged nearer, eagerness in their quivering muscles and twitching ears.

:: I am not sure this is wise, Old Mother. I will be fleeing and hiding, not sure whether I will go as man or horse. They'll be in grave danger.::

:: I know, but they will be in greater danger here. Anyone suspected of shifting will be at risk now. The only way to stay safe is to stay in equine form and trust in the care of Epona to keep us from harm. These two are young and hot-blooded, not fully in control of their gift yet. They need their father to guide and teach them, something I cannot do for I have not the gift. I am horse only.::

Gaston placed his hand gently on the faithful mare's neck. She had been one of his favorites in the herd he'd led when in his horse form, a wise older mare who led the rest in his absence, as she would have to do now. The two younger horses were her grandchildren, offspring of her daughters, one of whom had died in the previous year in a sad accident during the roundup.

:: Aye, mother, it is as you say. I fear, but I do not want to leave my children. They may come, although I cannot promise to keep them safe. Go in peace and care for the rest of the herd for I know I cannot return in the span of their lives. I would leave others with the shifter gift if there was time, but there is not.::

He bowed his head for a moment and leaned against the mare's warm side. Grief tore through him. So much of his

heritage was here in the marshes and hills, lands where his ancestors had roamed and ruled for eons. He was leaving behind all he held dear, both the lovely young woman who now emerged from the hut and his human and equine families as well—how could he refuse to let these two young shifters come with him?

His attention was drawn by Colette's urgent hand on his arm. "Listen, someone is coming." They all fell silent as the breeze carried faint voices to them. Then a flicker of a lantern appeared at the edge of a wooded area a couple of leagues away. "You must go!"

There was no time to think. In a shimmer no brighter than a firefly's light, the man faded and the silver stallion stood in his place.

"The satchel," Colette's urgent whisper stopped him on the verge of whirling away with the two young horses at his heels.

::How can I carry it?::

She did not reply, but simply grasped a handful of his mane and swung up onto his back. "Run now with all your might for I'm going with you."

The voices were louder now and the lantern bobbed closer, accompanied by other moving sparks of light. There was no time to argue. He leaped forward into a hard gallop, tearing away into the most remote parts of the hills and marshes, but moving ever in the direction of the coast, the sea and the distant port city. Three horses flew over the ground as lightly as clouds, two dark and one pale, a small darker shadow clinging to the silvery one's back. * * *

Colette had gathered the clothing Gaston shed when he shifted, but she had no idea how to dress the two young horses if they shifted. There was so much she had yet to learn about her lover and his kind. Her mind still struggled to grasp even the basic concept that beings existed who could appear at will as either horse or human. She pondered this incredible reality as they rushed on through the rest of the night, dawn finding them many leagues to the north and east of the D'Estaing estate, traveling along not far inland from the rough cliffs that marked sections of the coastline.

Finally, she sensed that even the powerful horse beneath her was growing tired after the headlong flight. The two young horses carried no burden, but they too began to lag, stumbling now and then.

::We must stop soon and rest in a sheltered spot for the daylight hours.::

For an instant, Colette was startled. Had he spoken or had she simply heard the words in her mind? "Yes, my love. I know. I am not so heavy, but the gold and food add to my weight. Surely you must be very tired."

He brushed off her concern, but she could tell he searched for a safe haven for the four of them. Finally, they came upon a sheltered cove where a streamlet fed a grassy vale before it plunged off the cliffs to seek the sea below. The horses picked a way down into this shelter by a steep and rocky path probably made by wild creatures descending to the water.

Gaston declined to shift for the time being. :: I can eat

COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

grass like the two young ones and save the food for you and for our use later if we need it. Then we'll all rest. I'll shift later to hold you close, but for now you must eat and rest.::

The three horses drank from the stream and began to crop the rich green grass. Colette took out a bit of bread and cheese to nibble and then curled up on her cloak against a large rock in the dappled shade of a towering tree. For a few minutes she watched the three horses graze, caught up in a surprising sense of ease and peace. She might have left behind everything familiar, but the beckoning adventure offered a chance to experience things she had never dreamed would be available to her. Perhaps there could be a happy ending for her and Gaston after all. She would never know unless she tried...

When Colette awoke, she found herself nestled close to Gaston's warm human form. He lay behind her, sheltering her in the circle of his embrace. She felt her desire for him surface. The two young horses stood a few paces away, heads hanging low and a hip dropped as they rested. From the angle of the sun, it was mid-afternoon.

Not quite time for us to start off again. On the heels of that thought, she recognized the pressure she felt against her bottom was Gaston's hardening cock pushing between her buttocks. His low laugh rumbled against her neck as he nibbled at the tender skin underneath the tangled golden hair he swept aside.

"I was wondering if you were going to wake up before the sun went down."

"You should have wakened me. Is there something we

need to do?"

He laughed again. "Can you not guess? Did our frolic last night and the long ride afterwards leave you too sore to enjoy another tup?"

She shook her head. "Never, my love. I'm ready and willing."

At that, he flipped her onto her stomach and began to tug her breeches off with rising urgency. When he had them off her hips, he lifted her to her knees. She barely had time to brace herself before he pressed close behind her, his engorged cock seeking shelter in the slippery warmth of her cunt.

Then he paused, perhaps worried she might not be prepared to receive him so quickly. Colette was in no mood for hesitation. She had awakened already aroused, her body well aware of his hunger and heating to match it. She wriggled, pushing her plump cheeks back against him, widening her knees to give him easier access. "Yes, my love, mount me and mate with me. I am not a mare but I know how the horses do it. If I possessed a tail it would be canted aside to grant you entry!"

He laughed, a low rumble like a stallion's eager nicker. Steadying her with both hands at her waist, he plunged into her, fucking with joyful abandon. This angle let him reach further into her and touch sensitive spots their first lovemaking had missed. Colette dug her fingers into the turf as she squeezed her eyes shut and surrendered completely to Gaston's dominant possession. Even in this he remained tender and caring, reaching to caress her breasts and then sliding one hand down her body to fondle the tiny bud forward of her twat. He teased the nub and continued to thrust into her depths until her climax came in a rolling cataclysm that made her scream and left her trembling in every muscle. Her orgasm triggered his. Afterwards, they slumped to the ground together for a few moments while they caught their breath.

The growing coolness of the air as the sun sank into the west provided a reminder they could not ignore. It was time to be up and away, to spend another night fleeing through the countryside to reach the distant Marseilles port before any messengers who might carry word of their flight and convince the ship captains not to sell them passage. Colette scrambled into her clothes and gathered the rest of their things.

Gaston shifted back to his horse form and stood while Colette leaped up on his back. The two young horses were fed and rested, ready again to run through the night. Before the sun vanished, they climbed out of the sheltered vale and started off at a brisk canter.

In this manner, it took them three more days and nights to reach the fringes of the port city. They sheltered for half that day in an abandoned stable on a run-down estate just outside the city. While the colts slept, Gaston and Colette discussed the best way to go about obtaining their passage to the distant shores of America.

"What do you propose to do with the young ones?" The question had preyed on Colette's mind much of the journey. Could the two young horses shift as their father did? It was still hard for her to believe that Gaston, in his equine form, had sired these two and given them the precious gift of shifting. Still, their spirit and endurance were so much like his that she had to admire and even love them.

"I'm not sure," Gaston admitted. "They can shift with my help, but it may be safer for them to travel as horses. How much is the value in gold you took from your father's stores? Can we buy passage for the four of us if we travel as a family?"

"I didn't count it. I simply filled this pouch until I feared it would be too heavy for me to carry."

Colette spilled the coins out onto her spread cloak so they could count them. The total was greater than she had guessed.

Gaston sat back on his heels. "So much. I never saw a tenth this much in one pile. Surely we can contract for a cabin with this and have some left over to start our life in the new world."

Colette studied the pile of coins, sudden fear congealing in her belly. "I'm afraid if anyone learns we have this much they'll plot to steal it or turn us over to the authorities as thieves. I have no idea how much it will cost to buy passage, but I'm sure we have more than enough. I wish I knew someone to ask about this, though, to find the going rates and advise which captains are reputable and which might take our money and then seek to sell us into slavery or simply throw us overboard once we're at sea."

Although Gaston knew everything about horses, he had never been far from the D'Estaing estate and had to admit he was as naïve about all this as she was, if not more so. "We're on our own here, *ma petite*. You, at least, have the manners of aristocracy and should be able to convince someone to treat with you fairly or face the wrath of your family."

Colette snorted. "And what family dare I admit belonging to? What if some hint of de Fayette's death has already reached the city? I'm not sure the D'Estaing family is so well known anyway, at least enough to command respect from merchants and seamen here. I think I must assume another name." She glanced out at the wooded area beyond their shelter. "Dubois...I shall go by Dubois."

In the end, they decided Gaston would accompany Colette and pose as her hired groom taking care of the valuable young horses she had contracted to take to America. The story seemed a bit weak, but it was the best they could do. She would be a widow whose much older husband had succumbed to some ague the past winter, leaving her at the mercy of stepchildren not eager to share their sire's wealth with her, thus forcing her to seek shelter with family in the new world. She would buy passage to New Orleans where ostensibly she had distant kin with whom to reside.

Colette, with only her breeches to wear, disguised herself as a youth and went to a shop on the edge of the city to purchase clothing for herself and Gaston. She was not sure what she would say if she were asked why she was buying lady's garments as well as those for a man much larger than she was, but the shopkeeper seemed eager enough to take her money and did not question her. A few hours later, properly dressed, the little party reentered the city and made their way to the quayside. They were prepared to say they had left their carriage at a drayage stable having heard the streets near the wharfs were narrow and hard to navigate.

There are more holes in our tangle of lies than in a sieve. Colette sighed. I am not good at weaving tales, and poor Gaston has even less skill in this. We shall be lucky, indeed, not to be tripped up into a mess from which we cannot free ourselves.

A few discreet inquiries by Gaston at a tavern yielded the information there was an American captain named Silas Blake whose *Sea Witch* was due to set sail the next day. Blake might be willing to take them on for the right sum, which amounted to perhaps a quarter of the gold.

When they approached Captain Blake, Colette had Gaston do the talking, after carefully coaching him on what to say. Highborn ladies did not negotiate with tradesmen, and she knew that maintaining her protective guise of aristocracy was essential, at least until they were well at sea. Americans put less stock in such things than did the French or the English, she knew, but a haughty air did a great deal to intimidate all the common folk.

After a bit of haggling, during which Colette did her best to communicate silently to Gaston as he had done to her in his equine form, Captain Blake agreed to take them on board for what seemed an exorbitant sum, but was within their means. He would provide a small cabin for Colette, a hammock with the sailors for Gaston and a pen below decks for the two young horses. They would have to acquire and have loaded such fodder as the colts would require before the ship set sail. That proved the more difficult task, but Gaston managed to secure a wagonload of hay and some grain and got it carried aboard late that night.

As soon as those details were done, Colette took shelter in her cabin, while Gaston settled the two young horses in their accommodations where he could keep watch on them. To make things look better, she'd purchased a small trunk. Though it was near empty, no lady would travel without at least some wardrobe and personal accoutrements. A bag of oats added extra weight, along with the balance of their gold, now much reduced. She did manage one change of clothing for herself and Gaston and some garments for the colts should they have to shift.

As she watched the sky darken through the small porthole, anxiety gnawed at her vitals. Everything had gone almost too well. It felt as if something was about to go drastically wrong. COLETTE'S SAVAGE STALLION

CHAPTER 4

In what seemed an excess of gallantry, Captain Blake invited Colette to dine with him in his cabin that night. His space was twice or more the size of her confined quarters, which were normally reserved for the first mate, she learned. That lanky young man with a pockmarked face shared the evening meal with them. He glowered at Colette the whole time and said no more ten words, none of them civil. He seemed very resentful of being displaced and blamed it all on her.

I shall have to watch my back with him around. She gave pretty smiles to both men, though, and tried to appear both charming and virtuous at the same time. The last thing she needed was for either of them to attempt an amorous encounter and stir Gaston's wrath again. She had learned that under stress he did not have total control over his shifting. In addition, he lost a great deal of his human sensibilities when in equine form. When she was threatened, he seemed to go into a berserk rage and, as a stallion, was a dangerous creature indeed. A powerful, enraged beast rampaging around the ship—she shuddered at the picture the idea evoked.

As soon as she felt she could leave without giving offense, Colette excused herself and retired to her cramped cabin. She bolted the door behind her and wedged the one somewhat rickety wooden chair beneath the latch for added security. How she wished to be enfolded in the sheltering comfort of Gaston's embrace, but it would arouse suspicions for him to visit her cabin, and she could certainly not go roaming about the decks to find him. She resigned herself to a long and lonely night as she prayed they would sail early the next morning when the tide began to go out.

The cabin was unbearably stuffy and confining. Used to her airy chamber back home and an occasional night spent outdoors, Colette tossed on the bunk, unable to stay asleep for more than a few moments. The muted sounds of the sailors on watch, the creak of the ship as it rocked with the motion of the water, and the shouts of seamen coming and going from adjacent ships all added to her wakefulness. *Where is Gaston? How are the two colts doing confined below decks? Accustomed as they are to freedom, they must be even more miserable than I am.* A faint scratching at her door caught her attention. Who might it be? Then she half heard and half-sensed Gaston's greeting. :: Open up, sweetheart. I heard your restlessness, knew you were unable to sleep. The same is true for me so I am here. We need to be together.::

She tumbled off the bunk and hurried to move the chair and unbolt the door. He slipped in, quiet as a shadow, and caught her in his arms as soon as he eased the door shut behind him. She had undressed down to a thin shift. His ardent touch burned through the fragile fabric. She leaped into his arms and swung her legs up to clasp them around him, pressing close to the burgeoning shaft that rose to greet her.

He carried her half a step to the bunk and sat her down on the side, rolling the shift up her sweat-moistened body. He wore only a pair of ragged breeches, which he unfastened and stepped free of in a heartbeat. The light was dim, but his skin gleamed in the faint glow coming through the open porthole over the bunk. Beautiful and magnificently male, he stood before her—her mate, her stallion, her lover. She drank in the wonderful sight he made, erect cock thrusting out of the tangle of dark hair at his groin, his clean, muscled limbs aquiver with eager need, the sensitive lines of his face and his dark eyes vivid with emotion. His lips curved into a loving smile.

Trembling with desire and adoration, she reached for him, drawing him down beside her on the bunk. They had to lie close facing each other to fit on the narrow shelf, but that was no hardship. They dared not make any noise lest they be discovered, but Colette was learning the mind-speech Gaston could use almost as easily in his human form as he did when a horse, and they spoke to one another in this wordless way. This time he worshipped her body with an excess of tender loving care.

There was no bit of her skin that did not feel his ardent kisses from her face and neck to her feet. The moist caresses of his lips and tongue sent streaks of fire though her nerves and soon had her cunt weeping in joy. Finally, he knelt between her lifted knees and bent forward to kiss and lick her there. He sucked her clit and teased her until she had to stifle her urgent whimpers with a fist against her mouth.

One advantage of the mind speech was that one could use it even when the mouth was otherwise occupied. Some of Gaston's lavish praise and words of love had Colette blushing at their frankness, while she wept at the heartfelt sentiments he expressed. He told her that all of her was incredibly beautiful, especially the parts he now tasted and caressed, the most feminine parts of her that he worshipped as symbolic of the goddess.

Only when she was sure she could not bear another instant of his loving torment did he move forward to bring his cock to her opening. Then he proceeded to fuck her as thoroughly as ever she had dreamed or desired. When they both came, she for the third time that night, they collapsed in sated exhaustion, gasping for breath and slippery with sweat. For a few moments, sleep drew a mantle of peace over them.

Sudden shouts and the tramp of booted feet on the main deck overhead jerked them out of the doze into which they had

fallen. Colette could hardly contain a whimper of fear and distress as she made out a few of the loud words.

"Oh, no, I fear it is the *gendarmes!* Word must have come of my fiancé's death and our flight. I cannot think Papa would name me a thief, but he may have been convinced you kidnapped me and stole the money. Oh, dear, what shall we do?"

They lay still, holding each other tightly while they waited, listened and tried not to give in to dread and fear. Colette clung to every ray of hope she could dredge up.

:: Captain Blake took our money. Surely he will not surrender us to the authorities. He's an American and owes no allegiance to the French police. When I dined with him earlier, he seemed to be a decent man, proud and arrogant, but fair.::

Gaston nodded. :: I agree. He seemed to deal fairly with me when we were bargaining over the terms of our passage and he was reasonable about accommodations for two horses, even though they are taking more than a fair share of cargo space. I don't think he'll betray us.::

After what seemed a very long time, but probably really was only a few minutes, the sounds faded. Colette had almost drifted into a doze again when strong strides approached her cabin door and then a sharp rap echoed in the tiny room.

"Madame Dubois?" Captain Blake's voice seemed as loud as a cannon's roar.

"I... Give me a moment. I am not properly dressed." Her voice emerged less than steady, but she hoped he'd attribute it

to her being startled awake.

::Gaston, you must hide! He cannot find you here!::

::Very well, I will hide, but if there's any danger or threat to you, I'll not hesitate to show myself, damn the consequences.::

He managed to squeeze beneath the small desk. She shoved the chair against it and threw her cloak across the chair. It was not the best hidey-hole, but all they could manage in the few seconds they had. Dragging on her shift, she snatched the blanket off the bunk and wrapped it around herself. She could hear Captain Blake shuffling in impatience before she cracked open the cabin door.

"What is wrong, sir? Have we been attacked?"

He held a lantern, which threw harsh shadows on his craggy face. "Nay, but it may be I have been invaded." He gave her a crooked smile. "The *gendarmes* came aboard, forcing their way onto my ship as they had several others. They said they sought a dangerous murderer and a woman he had taken captive. I told them no one of the sort had approached me."

He paused, assessing her with keen eyes of pale blue. Finally, he smiled again. "You don't look terrified, and your man, the groom for the horses, does not look like a vicious killer. But if there is truth in their tale, you'd best confess it to me now."

She shook her head so hard her hair flew around her face. "No, oh, no! I'm certainly not a captive and my hired man is a man of honor, I assure you. We merely wish to leave France and seek our fortune on the golden shores of America."

He nodded. "Well and good. We sail at daybreak or perhaps sooner. Go back to sleep and do not worry about any attacks. My ship is well armed and my crew is loyal to a fault. They would all fight to the death for this vessel and its cargo and passengers. Unless God visits a terrible storm upon us, we'll sail safely to our destination."

"I thank you, sir. I believe you to be an honorable man, a fact I deeply appreciate." Colette barely spoke above a whisper. "If we're delivered safe it New Orleans, I think a small bonus might be obtained for you and your crew—from my relatives, that is. And I shall light candles for you and your men at every mass."

He gave one quick nod. "That would be a nice gesture, madam."

With that, he turned and strode off down the narrow corridor toward the bow of the ship. Colette shut the door and sagged against it, too weak with relief to stand erect. Gaston crawled out from beneath the desk and took her again in his arms.

"It is best if I go now, I think," he said "but I'll not be far away and should anything distress you, I'll know it at once and come to your aid."

"Do not shift, please, at least if you can help it."

"I'll do my best to stay in human form, dear heart. I know my size and strength in my equine form would endanger everyone aboard and might throw the yearlings into a panic as well." He kissed her with passion and tenderness, then pushed her toward the bunk. "Go back to sleep if you can, *ma petite*. The night will soon be over and we'll be at sea."

He slipped silently out the door and closed it behind him. Colette fell onto the bunk, blinking back tears of relief, lingering fear and the overwhelming love she felt for her horse-man. Dangers still lurked around them, but they would face together whatever came. If fortune smiled and Epona blessed them, a life in the New World awaited, a life full of adventure and love.

DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes milder (roughly PG-13 rated) romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing childhood. Writing came since early naturally to Deirdre/Gwynn, who scribed her first simple verse at age eight. An avid reader, she devoured hundreds of books while growing up and later as an adult. Somewhere along the way she found romance and then romance with more explicit and detailed love scenes. "Ah ha," said she, "I think I have found my niche!" In the last decade after leaving her "day job" as a civilian employee of the U.S. Army, she finally settled into romantic fiction writing as a second career. Deirdre has a growing number of shorts and novellas, all published by Amber Heat.

With Irish and Welsh ancestry on both sides of her family, Deirdre has always been enthralled by the history and customs of the Celtic peoples as they have come down to us. The Mother Goddess idea particularly resonates with her as well as the notion that physical expressions of love between consenting couples are both a divine gift and a sacred duty to honor the Mother. Deirdre admits her favorite heroes are cops, cowboys and Celts.

* * *

Don't miss *Nellie's Rogue Stallion*, by Deirdre O' Dare, available at AmberHeat.com!

Nevada-raised Nellie Campbell despairs of ever finding love because her father, Jack, fiercely guards her chastity, keeping all virile men yards away from her. When she joins the hunt to capture a rogue stallion that has been stealing valuable mares from area ranchers, she learns Rogue Red is no ordinary horse. No way can she allow her father and the cowboys to kill or geld this magnificent creature. To help him escape, Nellie soon finds herself racing across the desert on the red stallion's back, knowing there can be no return.

Yet all her father's care to keep Nellie pure will now be for naught—because Rogue Red is also Steven Johns, descendant of a long line of shapeshifting were-horses. And as a man, he is even more gorgeous than he is as a horse!

Grief over the brutal slaying of his family has driven Steven to live in horse form for so long, his human side has almost been forgotten. Feisty yet charmingly naïve, Nellie reminds him there is more to life than leading his mares through the wilds while fighting off predators and angry ranchers.

But will Nellie's father ever abandon the chase with the ultimate goal of seeing Steven rendered harmless? It will take a tragedy and a heroic rescue to convince Jack Campbell that the right man for Nellie and the rogue stallion are both more than they seem...

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC THE GOLD STANDARD IN PUBLISHING

QUALITY BOOKS IN BOTH PRINT AND ELECTRONIC FORMATS

ACTION/ADVENTURE

SCIENCE FICTION

MAINSTREAM

HORROR

FANTASY

WESTERN

PARANORMAL

SUSPENSE/THRILLER DARK FANTASY ROMANCE EROTICA GLBT MYSTERY HISTORICAL

BUY DIRECT AND SAVE www.AmberQuill.com www.AmberHeat.com www.AmberAllure.com