

He rode with abandon, legs wrapped around the girth of the black gelding he'd taken from the stable, guiding him through the trees and over the hills with the barest tensing of his leg muscles. With a strange mixture of pain and exhilaration he rode over the same land he'd ridden so many times as a boy when he'd sought to flee the tight confines a strict father placed on him. Back then, he would urge his horse faster and faster away from Amherst Hall, and always his flight would lead him to Land's End.

Now, as then, he dismounted and walked along the edge of the land mass, blue eyes focused on the ocean. It never failed to excite him, to stir his senses and set his heart pounding. As a boy it was where he had wanted to be. As a man it was where he had wound up.

He watched it now, one foot in the present, one in the past, part of him pulling away from Amherst, part of him pushing back toward the undeniable fact of his birth. So much of him still lay in the green English hills; so much of him was in the sea that crashed against the rocks below. He turned away, suddenly impatient with himself. He should flee this place and never return. He was a fool for having come back. He cursed himself for the weakness his uncle had recognized in him, the arrogance that had prompted him to come. Placing a foot in the stirrup, he swung easily into the saddle. A quick jab of his boot heels at his horse's flanks and he left Land's End behind.

His mind was made up. He would stop at Amherst Hall only long enough to say goodbye to Martha. When Trevor and Lord Alfred returned, he'd be long gone without leaving a clue that he'd been there at all. It was best to cut the past out of his life.

He took the long way back, skirting the main road and circling wide through the green forests. Everywhere he saw signs of change, of time moving inexorably forward. Yet, there was familiarity, too, things remembered with fondness. The path he used to take as a short cut through the woods. The massive oak he used to climb to observe the surrounding countryside. The ancient ruins of an earlier civilization that had fascinated him as a boy.

Reining his horse to a halt at the edge of a glen, he sat back in the saddle. In the middle of the clearing stood an elegant white Arabian mare, waiting patiently while its rider, a woman, examined its right foreleg. Christian urged his mount forward, prepared to offer assistance to the lady who crouched down, the skirts of her dark green riding habit spread over the ground.

"You'd better check the other hooves," he said. "This country is deceiving. It looks as soft as a blanket of goose-down, but underneath are enough rocks and pebbles to turn the best animal lame."

The figure jerked upright, spinning around at the sound of his voice. One look at the lady's face brought Christian out of his saddle. In two strides he was at her side and grasping her by the arm.

"You!"

Familiar emerald eyes flashed at him. "Let go of me," she said, pulling free.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I am just as surprised to see you," she said, her chin tilting up at him. "I was out for a morning ride when my horse picked up a stone. If you will excuse me now, I must be going."

"Hold it," he said, spinning her back around before she could mount. "You can leave after you answer my questions."

"Questions? I don't have to answer any questions. Am I on trial?"

"Nobody's on trial," he said, letting her go. "But I'd still like to know what you're doing here. First you appear at the Royal Palace at Versailles on the arm of a traitorous Frenchman, and then you nearly run me down in the street fleeing a very sticky situation. And after I rescue you

from that, you thank me by running off with my money. Now you turn up here, claiming to be someone you're not."

Juliette gasped. "I don't claim to be anyone other than who I am."

"Don't you think I know you're the wench my...the Duke is going to marry? I can put two and two together. That's a Kenmare horse you're riding. What sort of game are you playing now?"

"You're insane," Juliette responded. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you take me for a fool? The Duke plans to marry a Mademoiselle Delacroix. You are Mademoiselle le Roy. How do you explain that?"

Green eyes narrowed with fury. "Madame le Roy is my Godmother," she said tersely. "She was the best friend of my mother who died when I was very young. When the Chevalier le Roy died, she traveled to Spain to take me out of the convent my father had placed me in. She took me into her home and treated me like her own daughter. So it is with gratitude and deep affection that I use the name le Roy, but my real name is Delacroix. Juliette Delacroix."

Christian swallowed hard at the revelation. "You are the daughter of Michel Delacroix?"

"Yes, although I cannot see that it is any concern of yours, you...you...pirate. And you have not told me what *you* are doing here. I know not what your association is with the Kenmare family, but I assure you, *mon Capitaine*, when I become Duchess of Amherst, you'll not set foot on this land again."

"I am an acquaintance of the Duke's," he said. "I came for the wedding. I'm surprised you're going through with it. From what I heard, you were reluctant to marry him. Yet you seem eager enough now to claim the title. What changed your mind?"

Bristling at his mocking tone, Juliette replied, "Whoever told you that was mistaken. Now, if you will excuse me, it's getting late and I must return. I have a fitting this afternoon with Monsieur Hamilton Wycliffe who is traveling all the way from London with my wedding dress." She waited impatiently for him to cup his hands to receive her boot and hoist her into the side saddle. With her skirts draped like a mantle over the white mare's back, she gave a final look of haughty disdain down at Christian and galloped off.

Christian watched her disappear into the woods. With her went all thought of leaving Amherst Hall. Just minutes ago he could have turned his back on it and left it buried in the past. But now...

Now there was no turning back.