



LORI BENTON

*"A fascinating story,
rich in emotion."*

DIANA GABALDON

NYT bestselling author
of the *Outlander*
series

*Mountain
Laurel*

Praise for Lori Benton

“*Mountain Laurel* is the sort of book where you really hope there will be a sequel because you want to spend more time with the characters. It’s a fascinating story, rich in emotion and a sense of the time and cultures in which it takes place.”

DIANA GABALDON, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Outlander* series

“Lori Benton’s epic family saga *Mountain Laurel* thoroughly immersed me in plantation life in the 1790s and in the moral dilemmas created by the evil of slavery. Her lush, descriptive writing made every scene vivid and real. This engrossing tale of love and sorrow and redemption kept me turning pages—and happily, there will be a sequel!”

LYNN AUSTIN, Christy Award–winning author of *If I Were You*

“Love forbidden, sacrificed, redeemed. *Mountain Laurel* casts long shadows of kinship through generations of a society that breeds slaves and secrets. Only divine wisdom can unravel this web of human passions and intrigue so tightly woven. Only divine mercy can pave a road to loosen the chains of bondage—those worn by the enslaved and those binding the hearts of slavers. Exquisitely penned, with all the beauty of a highland song, Lori Benton throws wide the door of a culture born in Scotland and wedded to the American South in years before that region dreamt of abolition. Stunning portrait of a past made real.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award–winning author of *The Medallion*

“Lori Benton is an extraordinary storyteller. She invites her readers into the 1790s of the Carolinas, where every character and plot twist speaks of bondage and freedom, kin and courage, choice and consequence. No skipping ahead allowed, though you’ll want to know what happens! But you won’t want to miss each fresh image weaving tender and

surprising moments that deepen the characters as they face the cost of their secrets and all they've come to love and lose. Every page delivers a unique, satisfying, and enriching read, where faith and family exposes and nurtures the journey of the human heart. I loved *Mountain Laurel*! (And I'm so glad to know there will be a sequel.)”

JANE KIRKPATRICK, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Something Worth Doing*

“Masterfully written, *Mountain Laurel* is not simply a novel to read but to live. With a stunning array of complex characters whose raw, oft-redemptive choices and their consequences are as soul-changing today as 1793 North Carolina, you'll never look at plantation life the same. A vibrant tapestry of good and evil, bondage and freedom, and the truest meaning of kinship. I eagerly await the sequel.”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award-winning author of *The Lacemaker*

“Poignant. Impeccably researched. Tender and romantic but with a powerful message of clinging to faith over fear, *Mountain Laurel* is Lori Benton at her finest. An expertly woven eighteenth-century story line with topics of freedom, family, and characters grappling over intense choices—with potentially life-altering consequences—makes this a novel that is just as relevant in our world today. Benton's latest solidifies her as a master of faith-based fiction, as well as a constant addition to my own favorites shelf. This is a stellar series debut!”

KRISTY CAMBRON, bestselling author of *The Butterfly and the Violin* and *The Lost Castle*

“Vivid and complex, Lori Benton's newest offering is penned within the backdrop of yet another stunning setting that touches the senses. In the truest threads of Lori's fiction, *Mountain Laurel* is an intricately woven tale of love and heartache, wrapped up in a sweeping family saga.”

JOANNE BISCHOF, Christy Award-winning author of *Sons of Blackbird Mountain*

“With a masterful pen, Lori Benton creates a poignant story that will have readers flipping pages late into the night. Filled with historical authenticity, heart-touching romance, and inconceivable circumstances, this book is a celebration of freedom—both the physical and the eternal. I finished *Mountain Laurel* with both a sigh of satisfaction and a longing of expectation for what comes next for these characters. I highly recommend this novel!”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award–winning author of *Freedom’s Ring* and *The Tea Chest*

“Lori Benton’s *Mountain Laurel* is a compelling masterpiece, a stunning dance of romance, sacrifice, yearning, betrayal, and redemption. Benton weaves an exquisite tale that delves into the world of slavery while unearthing the treasure of what it truly means to be free. Seona and Ian’s story continues to captivate me long after the pages have closed.”

TARA JOHNSON, author of *All Through the Night* and *Where Dandelions Bloom*

Mountain Laurel



*Mountain
Laurel*

A KINDRED NOVEL

LORI BENTON



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This book is for Wendy Lawton

For never giving up



Mama was the first of Mountain Laurel's slaves to know about the letter. Before Master Hugh posted it away north, he called Mama from her spinning and read that letter to her. You could've knocked me over with duck's down when it happened, but that's how we came to know early on that Master Hugh was asking his half brother, up Boston-way, to send his youngest son back to North Carolina.

Master Hugh's nephew came here once before, but he never paid me no mind that I can recall. He was twelve years old then, the age a boy, whatever color his skin, gets to fancying himself a man. Me, I was half his years and, what was surely worse, a girl. I was nothing to the master's kin. But he was something to me.

Even now I can close my eyes and see him as he was then. Tall for his age. Skinny as a fence rail. Eyes the blue of a jaybird's wing and hair like Mama's spinning flax. It was on account of that flax-pale hair I made my first picture, hunkered under the kitchen lilacs so he wouldn't spy me scratching his likeness on a piece of broken slate.

Rubbing out that drawing lest I get caught with it came hard, but it was only the first. I've made many pictures since then but only one other of him—on a scrap of old paper we was made to strip off the parlor walls, that summer Master Hugh up and married again. It shows his nephew looking off to the side, with that moonbeam hair curling over his brow like the halo of an angel. No one has laid eyes on it but me. Not even Mama.

Every slave keeps to their heart a secret. This one is mine.



Prologue

MOUNTAIN LAUREL

September 1793

Seona had been minding chickens the day Master Hugh's nephew rode away north with his daddy. She was minding chickens the day he rode up again. The tobacco had been suckered and was days from needing cutting. Near-about every morning Miss Lucinda told her to save the washing for later and go with Esther out into those long green rows to pick the worms off the leaves. Some folk let turkeys at their tobacco to eat those worms. Master Hugh didn't keep turkeys, so they made do with chickens—and Seona and Esther and any other hands to spare to catch the worms the chickens missed.

“Eee-ew! Will you look at this nasty thing?”

The crinkly leaf she'd been peering under sprang back as Seona straightened to spot Esther. Some of the plants topped her head; still it took a deal of stooping to be sure the chickens hadn't left any worms down low. They'd hear about it come cutting time if worms ruined the leaves. Master Hugh didn't hold with beating his slaves anymore, but the overseer, Jackson Dawes, was known to strap a back on the sly.

Never Seona's, but it was a thing to bear in mind.

She spied the younger girl hunkered among the plants, gaping at a fat green worm. “Quit thinking on it, Esther. Just pick it off and stomp it.”

“I can’t. It’s the king-granddaddy of the lot.” Esther’s face popped up between the plants. She pushed her skinny self through, mischief in her dark-brown eyes. “What you reckon Miss Rosalyn would do was I to slip that one into her bed?”

Miss Rosalyn Bell, Master Hugh’s oldest stepdaughter, thought right high of her clean sheets and fine white skin. Not that Seona’s skin was much darker. Or wouldn’t be if she spent as much time as Miss Rosalyn did indoors, embroidering linens and arranging her shiny blonde hair.

“Directly after Miss Rosalyn sends that worm on to glory, guess who gonna have to wash those sheets?”

“You?”

“Uh-huh. So put the notion out of your head—and mind those worms.”

Esther giggled, then flipped the hem of her petticoat up to fan her face, baring knobby knees. “How much longer we got to do this?”

“Til it’s done, what do you think?”

Esther rolled her eyes. The girl wasn’t used to field work. Miss Lucinda had just that spring judged her old enough, at nine, to lend a hand beyond house and yard. That didn’t mean she’d have to put in a full day’s work with the men.

Early on Miss Lucinda tried to force that on Seona and her mama, but Master Hugh nipped that notion in the bud. Seona could be spared for days at a time, but her mama already spun flax and wool and wove cloth from it. She made shirts and shifts, petticoats and breeches. Even some for white folk. On top of that her mama tended the ailing and delivered babies for miles about. And she helped Naomi with the cooking. Taken altogether it was enough for one woman to be getting on with, most days.

“House-spoiled is what you are,” Seona told Esther, but not meanly. Esther’s mama and daddy were dower slaves, come from their old place in Virginia with Miss Lucinda and her daughters. Since Esther had been born to them, she’d been something of a pet to the mistress. Until lately.

It comes hard, that season a child begins to know she’s still a slave, no matter how favored.

Sweat trickled down Seona's neck. The stink of ripe tobacco hung thick in the sticky heat. They'd been at the job since breakfast, save to grab a bite of dinner when the sun was high. A couple of the hands were working toward them from the field's far end, but there was a fair piece to go before anyone reached the middle.

Esther scuffed a grimy toe in the dirt, wrinkling her nose as the hen perched on the mound beside Seona pecked a fat worm in half and gulped down the pieces. The hen was a scrawny, speckled creature, unlike most of their plump, shiny-black chickens. It had come as payment for a baby her mama caught two weeks back, on a farm upcreek.

Seona bent to grasp a leaf of the plant under which the hen was feeding. Lightning quick it darted at her, neck stretched low. Seona kicked out and sent that chicken squawking down the row, leaving a cloud of spotted feathers and herself sitting on the ground, fingers pressed over a sting at the base of her thumb.

Esther, gone up the row a ways, rushed back to her side. "You hurt?"

"Just a nip." Seona sucked at the heel of her thumb, bitter with tobacco juice and blood.

"Wicked ol' biddy-hen." Esther slapped a mosquito on her arm, then scratched between the tight plaits of her hair, up under her shade hat.

Seona's braid hung heavy down her back. She wound it up and tucked it under her kerchief, hoping it would stay. Her hair wasn't straight like her mama's crow-black Indian hair, or wiry like Esther's. It was somewhere between—long, springy curls that defied the taming of brush, braid, and head-rag.

She got up off the ground, thinking how Mister Dawes would be making his rounds to see they weren't sitting idle. She bent to the worm-picking. That's when the shouting started up and she straightened again. Shielding her eyes, she spotted Ally, their cook Naomi's son, galumphing through the oaks, calling to her and Esther, waving them in.

Esther put a hand to a skinny hip and hollered, "We ain't near done yet, Ally!"

From a distance Seona saw the grin splitting a gleam in Ally's face.

Though a great ox of a man, about her mama's age, inside, Ally was still the age he'd been when a mule kicked him in the head and he didn't wake up for a night and a day. When Seona was small, Ally would wade the creek with her on a Sunday, when they had time to themselves. Other times he'd make a present for her out of something he found—a pretty feather, a shiny rock, or an arrowhead turned up with the plow. Now, when he wasn't working the fields or helping Jubal with the stock, he favored Esther, who'd reached his inside age.

"Maisy want you cleaned up to serve, Esther," Ally hollered back. "Seona needed in the kitchen with our mamas!"

Esther turned to Seona, eyebrows scrunched. "What for? Dinner's done passed."

When they didn't budge, Ally broke into a run again, heading toward them like a charging bull. They stood and waited, too hot to move more than needful. Ally lumbered to a halt, bent over between the tobacco plants, dinner-plate hands splayed on broad knees, gulping breath. "Big supper . . . planned. We gots . . . comp'ny."

"Bound to be someone important," Seona said, "if we're being called in to help."

"Hope it ain't them uppity folk from over Chesterfield," Esther said.

With all her heart Seona said a silent *amen*. Chesterfield was the biggest plantation for miles. Miss Lucinda and her daughters went visiting there more than to any other place. *Like moths to a flame*, she'd heard Naomi grumble. It was something rarer for the flame to come to the moths. But it happened, now and then.

Not today apparently. Ally was wagging his head. "Ain't them. You never guess who it be."

"Who then?" Esther demanded.

"That boy what was here before—Mister Ian. He done said *yes* to Master Hugh's letter and come back, all growed up! Got hisself a roan horse, red as strawberries with cream on the side." Words tumbled out of Ally like rocks rolling downhill. "He come wearin' this coat-o'-many-colors like Joseph from the Bible, with his own manservant on a fine black horse, and another horse loaded down with I-don't-know-what-all. Look like they here to stay."

Esther was bouncing like a worried flea, grinning to match Ally. “Come on, Seona. Let’s get shed of these worms!”

The girl grabbed her wrist and pulled. Seona let herself be tugged along the row, mute as a scarecrow, reeling from this rush of news about horses and colored coats and . . . Master Hugh’s nephew.

The boy with the angel-halo hair was back.



PART I

September 1793

What can I offer to set right that which lies between us, save myself, to spend as you deem fit? However dubious an Investment I have thus far shown myself to be, perhaps I may do some Good for Uncle's People—unless North Carolina prove Oil, and I the Water that will not mix.

Nevertheless, my Duty to you, Sir, as Your Most Obedient Servant &c—

Ian Cameron



I

MOUNTAIN LAUREL

A wee bit earlier that day

At the creek that marked the boundary of his uncle's plantation, Ian Cameron paused his horse. The creek's water ran clear, chattering over a pebbled bed, no more than ankle-deep, yet for all his balking to cross it, it might have been the Red Sea.

Ian pressed a hand to the breast of his coat. For eight hundred hot and muggy miles he'd ridden with his uncle's letter tucked there, yet still he hadn't decided whether answering its summons had been an act of desperation. His father's. Or his own.

A black gelding edged up alongside Ian's roan to drink. Its rider swept a hand at the oak wood shading the creek's far bank. "*Kalmia Latifolia*. This is it, then?"

"Aye, Mountain Laurel." Ian shifted in the saddle, eyeing the man, half a year his elder. "Ye've the better head for Latin, Thomas, I'll grant ye. But surely it's unseemly in a slave to flaunt it."

Thomas Ross twisted his mouth in amusement as he gazed down the carriage drive that crossed the creek and curved through the wood, beyond which a house was visible in white slashes. *The big house*, his uncle's slaves had called it, with its two rooms belowstairs and three above. In the eleven years since Ian's last visit to the place, his uncle had remarried, acquiring two stepdaughters in the process. What had

seemed a big house indeed for a single man must have proved in-commodious with the addition of three females, judging by the new wing jutting from the rear.

“First your uncle inherits it all,” Thomas said, his thoughts obviously fixed on the plantation’s past as well. “Next you. What’s wrong with the place that it goes begging for its heirs?”

Ian shrugged. An older man called Duncan Cameron—no near kin—had settled the place originally. He’d met Ian’s uncle, fresh from Scotland, exiled and homeless, down on the Cape Fear River. The elder Cameron had made Ian’s uncle his overseer, then left Mountain Laurel to him when he passed—forty years or more ago.

“Uncle Hugh at least *had* a son,” Ian said. “He died a long time back. I never met him.”

Thomas shot a pointed look at Ian’s garb. “I expect your kin’s bound to take you for a red savage come calling, rather than *heir presumptive*.”

It was a fair point. Over leather knee breeches—the thigh rent and stitched less artfully than the wound beneath had been—Ian wore a coat cut and collared in European style but pieced of buckskin and lavishly adorned with red, white, and black quillwork and an expanse of ragged fringe. In trade for it, the old Chippewa woman who made the half-breed coat had wheedled from him a twist of tobacco, several prime beaver pelts, and one very fine fox. He felt a mite foolish for wearing it now but had wanted to present himself as truthfully as possible, so there’d be no mistaking what sort of man his uncle was getting. Not the lad he would recall.

Ought he to have done the thing by stages?

And there was Thomas, tricked out in fawn-brown coat, fine linen breeches, and a pair of outlandishly striped stockings—dressed the dandy when he was meant to be a slave.

Which of them would prove the greater consternation to Ian’s kin?

“One way to know,” he muttered. Girding his will, he touched a heel to the roan’s side, where his rifle rode snug in its sling.

Thomas followed on the mount he called Black Huzzah, leading their pack mare, Cricket.

They dismounted in the oak-dappled shade of a stable-yard that

appeared much the same as it had eleven years ago, with the stable itself, a long, clapboarded structure, standing quiet in the summer heat. The only creature to mark their arrival, a sorrel in a nearby paddock, whinnied and trotted to the split-rail fence.

Ian turned to the open stable doors to call a greeting and bit it back as a man, trimly bearded and slightly stooped in the shoulder, emerged from the shadows. Even with the stoop, he was of a height with Ian, an inch over six feet, with hair like sugared cinnamon tailed back from a scowling brow. His voice held the clipped snick of a rifle's hammer being cocked, despite the familiar Highland cadence, as he addressed Ian. "I'll ken your name—and your business here."

Ian removed his hat. "It's Ian, sir. Robert's son. Ye sent for me and I've come."

The man's blue eyes snapped from Ian's quilled coat to his face, brows lifting in belated recognition.

"Devil take me if it isna," said Hugh Cameron, his father's elder half brother. He crossed the stable-yard to Ian, who replaced his hat in time to meet his uncle's outstretched hand with his own. The clasp was sure; before Ian saw it coming, his uncle had pulled him into a kinsman's embrace, clapping a hand to his road-dusty back. He pushed Ian away but held him at arm's length, taking in the sight of him with what appeared genuine approval.

"Forgive my brusqueness, laddie," he said. "I kent ye were coming—your da's letter reached us weeks ago—but I didna ken the day. And I must say ye've grown a mite since last I saw ye." His uncle released him, chuckling at that. "Besides, just now I'm a wee bit distracted by goings-on."

Still caught off guard by the warmth of the welcome, Ian gathered his wits to ask, "Did we interrupt ye in some work, Uncle?"

"No, lad, more's the pity. I've a mare ready to drop a foal. Jubal thought she was finally making ready and got her into the double box at the end." He bent his head toward the stable behind him. "But it's proved another false alarm."

Ian minded his uncle's passion for horses. "So ye've taken to breeding?"

“Aye,” his uncle said. “A few years now—a couple of colts to show for it. Though I hadn’t meant to do so with this mare. I had her from a man in Cross Creek—Fayetteville, it’s called now,” his uncle explained. “She’s docile as a lamb and can pull anything ye hitch her to, but I’d meant her for a saddle horse—for the lasses, aye? We didna ken she was breeding out o’ season ’til past midwinter. The mare’s blood is of no repute, but the sire’s a grandson of Janus.”

Ian nodded, assuming *Janus* a name to impress among thoroughbred aficionados. He’d won his horse, Ruaidh—an Indian pony of uncertain origin—gambling with a Frenchman in Canada two years back, and wouldn’t trade the compact, unflappable roan for a dozen of his high-strung leggy cousins.

Still, it seemed a fitting name, Janus: Roman god of gateways. Of beginnings. He hoped his da would have thought it a propitious sign.

By all that’s holy, lad, dinna throw away another chance to settle. Robert Cameron’s parting words weeks ago, delivered with beseeching sobriety, had dogged him south these hundreds of miles to hover in the heat-weighted air of his uncle’s stable-yard. *’Tis the last I have to offer ye.*

It was the pack mare letting out an impatient whinny that recalled them to Thomas, who’d stood by unacknowledged, holding the bridles of both their mounts.

“I see ye’d help along the way,” Uncle Hugh said. “Did ye engage yon mannie for the journey then?”

“Ah, no,” Ian said, casting Thomas a quick glance. “He’s mine actually, not hired. Will that be a . . . a problem?”

His uncle’s brows flicked high before he answered, “Not at all. But let’s get these horses settled, aye?” Turning, his uncle called toward the stable, “Jubal—and, Ally, if ye’re there—ye’ve three new horses here to tend!”

In quick order two of his uncle’s slaves exited the stable. The first, a wiry dark-skinned man of middling height, was a stranger to Ian—Jubal, his uncle named him, making introductions. The second man to emerge was several inches taller than either Ian or his uncle and muscled like a blacksmith, though Ian knew he was not.

“Ally,” he said, grinning in recognition.

The man halted, peering down at him, eyes soft as a doe's gone wide as he took in Ian's quilled coat. "Yes, sir. You know me, sir?"

"Ye know me too, Ally. Or ye did. I'm Ian Cameron."

Ally's lips pulled wide, showing large white teeth. "I hear you was coming back. But law! I mind you a spindly thing. You done growed up, Mister Ian."

Ian remembered then that, despite his hulking stature, this man of his uncle's had never grown up. Not in mind. There'd been an accident when he was a boy involving . . . what had it been? An ox?

"Tis a momentous day," his uncle was telling Ally, who was eyeing Ian's roan and Thomas's black gelding with an eagerness to make their acquaintance. "Go on and help Jubal, and Mister Ian's lad there, get these horses unsaddled. Show them to the boxes we have free. Then go tell your mama in the kitchen we'll need a special supper tonight. She'll ken what to do."

"Yes, sir!" As Ally followed Jubal toward the horses, sunlight breaking through the oaks caught the side of his head, revealing the slight concavity behind his left ear, not quite concealed by a cap of woolly hair.

Mule-kicked, Ian minded.

He took a half step after them, thinking to snatch his rifle from its sling before the others got their hands on his gear, until it struck him to wonder whether toting a rifle into his uncle's house—as if he were entering a British-held fort—would cause offense.

He hesitated, feeling off-footed in this place both remembered and strange.

"Ciamar a tha thu, a mhac mo bhràthair?"

Ian started at his uncle's question, taken aback by its perception as well as the language of its phrasing. *How are you, Nephew?*

"Tha mi . . . gu math—tapadh leat." No lie. He was well enough, all things considered. *"Tha mi beò co dhiù,"* he added. *I'm alive, anyway.*

"So ye are," his uncle agreed. "And ye've the *Gaidhlig* still. And is it the faint bells of Aberdeen I'm hearing in your speech? That'll be from your mam."

"And her brother—Callum Lindsay. Ye'll mind I was in Upper

Canada with Callum 'til the spring?" Ian eyed his uncle, dappled in the sunlight. How much had the man been apprised of the happenings in the intervening years since their last meeting? He'd have no joy in the telling but best to have it out—in case his da hadn't beaten him to it. "I'm obliged to mention, sir, that it wasn't by my choice I left Boston. When I went west with Callum, I mean, five years back. I don't know whether Da—"

An upraised hand checked him.

"Lad," his uncle said, "who doesna have deeds he'd as soon put behind him? What say we leave the past where it belongs?"

The roan and the black were unsaddled now, the pack mare unloaded. As Jubal, Ally, and Thomas each led a horse away to stable, his uncle added, "That dun mare carried a respectable load. Might ye have brought the tools of your trade along?"

"Aye," Ian said, unsure whether he was more relieved or disconcerted by the change of subject. "It's been a while since I've practiced my cabinetmaking, but I'd hoped, if ye have a shed standing empty, I might set up by way of a shop. Nothing extensive, only there's a bit of work I've promised to do."

The suggestion seemed to please his uncle. "I dinna see why not."

Suddenly overwhelmingly hot, Ian shrugged his way out of the half-breed coat and draped it over his arm. What he wore beneath only reinforced the impression of a man well on his way to *gone native*—fringed hunting shirt, tomahawk and knife thrust through a beaded belt girding his waist. And those worn leather breeches with their stitched rent, still faintly bloodstained.

"Ought I to change, Uncle? I've clothes more befitting . . ." He gestured toward the house, white and commanding beyond a spreading chestnut.

His uncle's gaze had lifted past it, over a scattering of outbuildings to the leafy apple orchard rising toward a hogback ridge. Beyond it rose the higher ridges of the isolated Carraways, rolling westward in thick-wooded waves like a rumpled counterpane.

"The Camerons were first, ye ken."

Ian frowned. "First?"

“To answer the Stuarts’ call. I went down from the glen wi’ my da and the lads. All but wee Robbie, your da.”

“Ye mean the ’45?” His uncle spoke of the rising of the Highland clans for Charles Stuart, son of the exiled King James, which had ended in slaughter on a frozen moor—a slaughter that claimed Ian’s grandfather and two uncles. Nigh fifty years ago. “What made ye think of that?”

Gazing at the ridge rising beyond his orchard, his uncle didn’t seem to hear. “By the spring we’d lost all. Lands, clan, honor. Hope. I was all of twenty at the time. Younger than ye.”

Hugh Cameron’s voice had gone as hazy as the rising hills. The man himself seemed hazy compared to Ian’s memory of him. On closer scrutiny, his complexion was no longer the burnished bronze of a redhead well acquainted with the sun. There was a hint of something sickly in its hue, like copper begun to green.

“*This* land is ours now,” he said with sudden fervor. “Cameron land—and none shall take it from us.” His uncle’s eyes held the blue of distance and a grief as raw as new-dug earth—until behind them a voice spoke.

“Mastah Ian? Where you want all your tools and things to go?”

Thomas had joined them.

Uncle Hugh blinked at the intrusion, then turned to Ian. The distance in his eye diminished. His beard-framed lips softened in something near a smile.

“Here I’m forgetting my manners, Nephew, keeping ye standing in the yard. Your things can bide where they are for now. Come away in—ye and your man.” Facing the house, Hugh Cameron firmed his jaw. “’Tis time ye made the acquaintance of your auntie.”



If a woman less inclined to welcome the address of *Auntie* existed, Ian was hard-pressed to imagine her. Straight of carriage, pale of skin, and dark of hair and eye, twenty years younger than his uncle, Lucinda Bell Cameron met them in the parlor prepared to offer tea—judging by the maid stationed at a serving tray. It had been good Scotch whisky his

elders partook of in that room years ago. Swift reassessment forced Ian to admit that tea better suited the environs now. The once-masculine sparseness of his uncle's parlor was transformed. Pillowed settles and needlepoint chairs vied for space with delicate tables cluttered with bric-a-brac of the fragile-looking sort.

He halted in the doorway, mindful of road dust and the dirt that caked his boots. His uncle's wife gaped at him for a frozen second; then her gaze swept past him to Thomas, who'd followed them into the house. Her nose, both narrow and long, pinched in disapproval.

"Mr. Cameron, it is not our custom for servants to enter through the front door. Your boy may go around to the kitchen door. In back." She cast a pointed look at Ian's uncle—eliciting support or offering reproof, Ian couldn't be certain.

His uncle smiled. "Aye, Nephew. Naomi will see him settled."

Ian cleared his throat. "Settled where, exactly?"

Lucinda's slanted brows rose. "The servants' quarters, of course."

"Aye," Ian said, hating the need to test the woman's forbearance so soon. "But if it's no inconvenience, I'd prefer Thomas stay near me. In the house."

"Slave quarter be fine," Thomas murmured, loud enough for all to hear.

Mindful of the indignant color staining his aunt's cheeks, Ian caught Thomas by the arm and marched him down the passageway, out of earshot of a whisper. "Ye don't get a say in this. Not in front of them. We'll discuss it later. Meantime keep your mouth shut."

Thomas set his jaw. "I don't need a nursemaid."

Ian tightened his grip. "Look. Ye wanted this. Ye hounded me from Boston 'til ye got your way. Act like ye're meant to." Releasing Thomas, he added in a carrying tone, "Fetch our bags up to the house, all but what the mare carried."

In the front hall his uncle's wife took matters in hand. "Maisy, see Mr. Cameron's boy finds the *back* door."

"Yes'm." The maid sidled out into the hall, headed their way. "Come with me," she said to Thomas, with an echo of her mistress's censure.

Uncle Hugh frowned after the pair retreating down the central

passage that ran the house's length, past a wide set of stairs leading to the rooms above, to a narrow back door at the far end. "Ye've not had him long, ye said. A body servant, is he?"

"No, sir," Ian said as he rejoined them. "I don't need a man to dress and shave me."

Too late he heard the criticism implicit in the words, but his uncle's expression showed only faint amusement. "Nor do I, though Mrs. Cameron has done her best to cure me o' the sin."

He cast his wife a wry smile. She failed to return it. "If he is not a body servant, why keep him in the house?"

There was no admitting the truth of the matter. Latching on to the implication his uncle had voiced, Ian managed a tight smile. "Considering he's been in my service but a short while, I think, ma'am, it would be best I keep him close."



His uncle showed him to a bedchamber above the back stairs, and to the storeroom across the passage, where Thomas, with some rearranging of trunks, might spread a bedroll on the floor. "Unless ye'd rather he had a pallet in your room?"

"This will do, Uncle." At least for now it would. Ian turned from the cramped space and asked, "What of your stepdaughters? Are they not at home?"

"Rosalyn and Judith are verra much at home but ye willna see them before supper. No doubt the lasses wish to arrange themselves proper to greet ye—first impressions being a vital thing." His uncle's mouth twitched when Ian raised a brow in acknowledgment of his own failings on that front. "I take ye gladly as ye come, Nephew—quills and all. My wife, now . . . she was once accustomed to a grander living than she presently enjoys, but I dinna expect ye to bow to her airs and fancies should they go against your grain. This is your home now. I mean ye to be at ease in it."

Warmed by the words, Ian lingered in the doorway after his uncle vanished down the narrow back stairs, until he caught the beginnings of a conversation not meant for his ears.

“For heaven’s sake, Hugh, is he what you expected? That coat . . . that belt . . . a *tomahawk*?”

Chilled by that cold dash, Ian shut the door and hung the offending garments on a peg behind it, where they were unlikely to incite further indignation.

The room he’d been given belonged to the newer wing. Though smaller than those at the front of the house, it remained untouched by the zealous hand that had had its way belowstairs. The walls were plastered. A braided rug fronted a small fireplace. There was a high-post bed with hangings, a clothespress of rustic make, and a cylinder desk of more elegant design with a drawer that locked; he found the key.

A spindle-backed chair and a washstand completed the furnishings.

It had been weeks since he’d been shut within doors, having camped rather than hire lodging during his journey south from Boston. The room was stifling.

Up went the window beside the desk.

Bathed in a rush of warm but moving air, he stripped off the hunting shirt and flung the garment over a chair, then recalled he’d sent Thomas to fetch the bags and had nothing to change into. While he waited, the sweat drying on his skin, he took in what prospect the window afforded.

Close by stood the kitchen, clapboarded and whitewashed, chimney smoking. Beyond it a wagon track curved between smaller outbuildings. It continued past the apple orchard, skirting a stand of oaks, under which a cluster of tiny cabins sprouted like toadstools. Slave cabins—servants’ quarters, as his aunt had called them. To the north of the house, cornfields, interspersed with stretches of broad-leafed tobacco, rolled up to the ridge in the west. Out in those distant rows tiny figures shimmered in the heat. His uncle’s field hands at work.

A tap at the door announced the housemaid, Maisy, who entered bearing pitcher and basin. She set them on the washstand, then with a put-upon air, bent to retrieve his saddlebags from the passageway—deposited there by Thomas, presumably. Another mark against him in the maid’s opinion, he could tell.

Ian hurried to the door before she could make a second trip and

found his long rifle lying in the passage. He brought it into the room to find Maisy casting about as if for anything else left half-done. She frowned at the open window but made no comment.

"I'll have my girl, Esther, air the tick for you, Mister Ian, soon as supper's past," she said. "Speak of supper, Miss Lucinda likes folk to be prompt."

Mindful of his half-dressed state, Ian stowed his rifle behind the door, then gave the woman what he hoped was an engaging grin. "I've the impression Miss Lucinda generally has things arranged to her liking."

His teasing hadn't the intended effect. Wariness sharpened the maid's features before they went a careful blank. "Yes, sir. She do. When the bell ring, come on down to table."

She backed from the room, shutting the door between them.



By the time Ian judged himself presentable as soap and water could render him, enticing smells had thickened on the air belling the window curtains inward. His stomach writhed as he smoothed back his hair and bound it with the least offensive of his ribbons, letting the tail curl over a neckcloth that felt noose-tight in the heat but lent him a semblance of respectability—every scrap of which he'd need if he meant to win over his uncle's patently unimpressed wife.

"First impressions being a vital thing," he quoted at the quill-free, slicked-down image of himself in the glass above the washbasin.

He donned his only decent coat, a slate-blue specimen he'd brushed nearly clean.

Hearing the scuff of shifted trunks across the passageway, he yanked the door inward and strode into the hall, intending to have a word with Thomas—and instead caught a passing forehead square on the point of his chin. The impact clashed his teeth together, with his tongue clamped between.

"*Uhm!*" he said. So did his inadvertent casualty, a young woman. Her unpinned hair coiled in dark profusion over his coat sleeve as she staggered; he grabbed her to prevent a fall.

"Are ye all right, miss?"

Black lashes swept upward. Large, startled eyes caught the light spilling from his room—green eyes with flecks of amber at their centers. Eyes like the creek he'd just crossed, strewn with mossy pebbles, dazzled with reflected sunlight. He couldn't look away from them.

Gradually it dawned on him he *ought* to look away, that he was practically embracing the girl, to whom he'd yet to be introduced.

He unwound his arms from her and stepped back, leaving her standing in the light from the bedchamber. He knew within two guesses who she must be, though she didn't in the least resemble that cool, rigid lady belowstairs. Her complexion held a deep, sun-drenched luster. Her brow and cheekbones were wide, her nose long and high-bridged but not the least pinched. And that mouth . . . so full and boldly shaped he had the quite improper urge to kiss it.

Bitten though it was, he found his tongue again. "Forgive me. I didn't expect we'd meet 'til supper." Grasping at the vestiges of his early education, he managed a proper bow. "Ian Cameron, your servant—and, happily, your cousin by marriage as well."

The creek-water eyes stared at him unblinking.

"Ye'll be Miss Bell," he continued, thinking her shy as well as lovely. "But is it Rosalyn or . . . ?" What was the other one called? His mind had blanked.

Those vivid eyes rounded, but before his cousin could speak, another voice cut through the moment.

"Seona! Get down to the kitchen and quit pestering Master Hugh's kin." It was Maisy, the housemaid who'd brought the water, scowling up from the stairwell.

Rich color flooded the girl's cheeks, but Ian for the first time noticed something beyond her face. The bodice of her gown was stained, the cuffs at her elbows bedraggled. More so the hem of her petticoat.

"Begging your pardon, Mister Ian," she said, dipping a slight, apologetic curtsy, as if she felt at fault for their collision.

Ian was struck by the low, melodic quality of her voice—and the fact that she wore no shoes. Dirty bare feet flashed as she hurried down the stairs, leaving him tugging at a neckcloth now unbearably tight. What had the housemaid called her? It had sounded like *Shona*.

Not the name of either of his uncle's stepdaughters.

A throat cleared behind him. In the doorway to the storeroom, Thomas stood with arms crossed, convulsed in silent mirth.

"How long have ye been standing there?" Ian demanded.

"Long enough."

"Long enough to watch me play the fool. Why didn't ye stop me?"

"Too busy having myself a look." From below came the promised summons of a bell. Thomas drew near, frowning at Ian's throat. "You've a stain—not to worry," he added when Ian swore. Thomas tugged at the neckcloth, refolded it, then stood back to inspect him. "There. Least now you look the part."

"And ye'd best start acting it." Sweat beaded Ian's brow, not all of it due to the heat. Thomas had removed his coat but hadn't washed. Had anyone thought to provide the means? "There's water in the pitcher, yonder in my room. Help yourself. Ye'll find your way to the kitchen, see what they're serving up?"

"Any dog can follow his nose." Thomas raised his chin, sniffed, then met Ian's gaze as no slave would his master's.

"We need to talk, Thomas. About a lot of things."

"You fret like a hen with one chick. Best worry about yourself." Thomas leaned closer. "For in case you've failed to notice, what they're serving up presently is *you*."

Ian tested his bitten tongue against his teeth. "Aye, well. Pray there's enough to go around."

Brown eyes glinting with a familiar light, Thomas whispered, "*Aonaibh ri chéile*."

Taken by surprise, Ian laughed. He'd half forgotten the rallying cry the two of them had used as lads bent on mischief in Boston's winding, cobbled streets. The old Gaelic motto of Clan Cameron: *Let us unite*.