

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

# BLACK HORSE RIVER

Robin Studwick

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## BLACK HORSE RIVER

By Robin Studwick

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

Black and white. A nicely muscled young man crouches waist-deep and possibly naked in shallow water, hair dripping as he ducks his head away from the viewer.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*One of my first vivid memories is of his callused hand holding a wooden toy. He was big even at 16, but I was not afraid. He speaks only to the horses, but I've heard him whisper, "As you wish, my lord".*

*He's always alone; the others shun him. I hide and watch him strip and bathe in the river. I'm fascinated by the movement of his hard, ropey muscles, his long cock, his dark to my light.*

*I'm of age to be married, yet I've never felt the sensual touch of another. He's a servant, not my friend; an illiterate peasant, not my equal. He can never be my lover, but I can't stop this desire from coiling inside me.*

P.S. I envision a fantasy, perhaps a sensual, nonliteral play on The Princess Bride; please no dystopia or rape/torture. Erotic tension, on-page sex, and a strong, romantic HEA are a must.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Dani

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** first kiss, first time, outdoor activity, handjobs, enthusiastic consent, magic, fairytales, faerie, kelpies, interspecies

**Word Count:** 7,247

# BLACK HORSE RIVER

**By Robin Studwick**

My riding boots clattered on stone as I rounded the side-tower stairs of my family's keep, hair flying free of its tie in bright wisps. If I were quick, I would reach the stables well before the hunt began, and get Bronwyn out of the running. She wasn't up to the race today, not with my visiting uncle's leggy red chestnut Rory leading the chase—my father's breeding program had a stubborn streak that bred as true as their black hides and short ears, and she would never settle for second place. My cousins were too young to know better and would let her have her head; I feared she'd run to exhaustion.

And if I got there so early, too, I'd have a moment alone with—

My breath caught at his fine silhouette in the dawn light, on his knees checking Bronwyn's feet. He knew her as well as I, if not better... for despite his beauty, he was but a stablehand, rough-clad and sun-dark, with dirt under his nails.

I was the younger son of good family, and I ought not to ache for his touch, but ever since my voice began to shift into the sweet, steady tenor my sisters so prized, I had wanted him to take off my breeches and touch me there. When my brother, the heir, told stories of the pretty chambermaids he tempted into the curtains of his bed, I could only imagine wanting that with my stable boy.

The other hands called him Bran for his raven hair and dusky, sun-warmed skin, but for all that he answered to it, it never seemed to fit him right to me. He was no creature of air, despite the way his shaggy mane flowed behind him at the gallop. There was a deepness about him that tasted not of bright things, but of secrets. The first time I saw his weed-crowned head break the river's surface, I thought him something out of faerie.

He was big even as a lad. I remember looking up at him when I was twelve and marvelling that the others still called him boy, because he looked like a man to me—broad-shouldered from hard work that put even my most strictly tutored fencing bouts to shame. He had the strength of three men, like a Lancelot, but I hoped every night in the shadows of my bed that his heart was not so pure. More and more, I wanted that which I should not desire... and as stubborn as my family's horses, I tried to find reasons to have it.

His eyes found me now, black fire under thick brows, and I shivered with the intimacy of the moment, my servant on his knees before me. The only sounds between us were the soft stamp and *whuff* of stabled horses. I fancied I could hear his breathing quicken like mine as he rose with fluid grace to bow his head. He still towered a handspan over me as I came close enough to measure myself against him.

“Bran,” I said softly, my voice the only caress I dared give him. Yet. I grew a little bolder each day, with each fresh sight of him. “Fetch me my tack?”

His dusk-rose lips curved up in a tiny smile back at me, eyes still on mine behind the thick fall of his hair. He only nodded, no words for me in return, and moved to comply. I chattered like a magpie, but his words were actions.

“Bran,” I breathed, once she was saddled. “Come with me?” For if I kept Bronwyn out of the hunt, I must perforce leave it too. My heart caught in my throat at the startled look he gave me, and the way it turned to... something else. Speculative? I thought for a terrible moment that he might say no.

His voice was deep when he finally spoke, words like dark jewels—no tenor, this. Twenty years and three months of age now myself, I was bound to remain one. “As you wish, my lord.” I nodded back, trying not to show how my knees turned to water at the sound. He’d never said aught else to me, but something in my loins was determined that I would coax new sounds out of him today. It wasn’t wise or well-thought to plan a tryst during a hunt that could turn any direction, but my body made demands of me that had my mouth daring things I hadn’t planned to say.

“Take the Old Man,” I half-whispered, unwilling to break the liminal space between us with too loud a human voice. “He’ll only be unhappy following Red Rory. He can come c-court my Bronwyn.” Oh, for a steady voice! Surely, he must know how difficult it was to say that word to him, and what that must mean. Was my secret spilled? Did I want it to be?

It widened his smile, for whatever reason, and he chuckled in a rich, knowing way I’d never heard from him before. “Yes, my lord.” His eyes had lashes thicker and longer than a maid’s. They lowered now as he looked at me for the space of a breath, then two breaths more. His gaze drifted from my eyes at last, and I wondered if he really were looking at my mouth the way I sometimes studied his, wondering what it would feel like on mine. I could feel my lips flush ruddy along with my cheeks before he smiled a little more and moved away, leaving Bronwyn’s reins to me as he released me. She shoved me



hard in the chest with her rude velvet nose, breaking the spell, and I buried my face in her dark neck, leaning on her for support.

My cock throbbed, hidden from his sight by the curve of my rear and thankfully solid flesh. Riding breeches hid its impertinent stiffening not at all, and my attempts to distract myself all came back to him. I tried for a neutral memory—I had some pride, not to want him to see me flustered like a blushing maid instead of the steady lord I should be—but my earliest memory of him was of his hands, strong and callused, holding a wooden toy out to me. His hands had always been so kind to me—older, wiser, gentle with me despite their strength. Did they know what I wanted now?

If they did, would he give it to me?

Where did that even begin? I knew what my brother did with the maids he tumbled, more or less. The idea of grappling nude with my stable boy in the grass would not leave me, but I wanted kisses more, and I did not want him to yield under coy protest the way my brother liked. There was no allure in the thought of him telling me no—quite the opposite, it turned my blood cold and banished desire. I wanted his *yes*. I wanted—touch, praise, attention, I didn't know. My blood sang at the thought of anything I could imagine he might teach me, and then take the sweet fruits of my study as his due.

I was sure he could teach me. Even though the other servants shunned him and he seemed to prefer the horses' company to humankind, my gut told me he knew far more of the ways of the flesh than I. It was in the way he moved, that knowledge—the dark flash of his eyes, the sensual curve of his wide mouth, the flick of his tongue to catch a droplet of juice in apple season. I wanted to drink pleasure from his lips and let his hands burn it into my skin, but I did not know how to ask.

I had seen him naked, and I thought on it while he saddled Dark Water, our aging herd stallion and the slow but respected Old Man of the stable. Once mounted, we set out. Bronwyn knew my favorite trails, and I confess I let her guide us while my mind wandered.

Bran was not made like a castle wall, squared-off and blocky. His shoulders were broad, yes, and his arms powerful, but the secret of his strength hid within a frame like any lakeside peasant swimmer—long and sleek, not the tree stump of my father. Myself, I took after my mother—more willow than oak. Father would have been happier with Bran's build on me, but it was not to be. Grace and speed I had aplenty, drilled into me to save my hide from tree stumps with

claymores, and that was both my gift and my lack. I could not withstand a direct blow without crumbling, whereas one such as Bran doubtless could take and turn it on a greatsword.

It was not his shoulders which so preoccupied me, however. It was his cock.

Wicked thing that I was, I had seen it from hiding, watching him bathe. It hung long between his thighs when he rose from the river to regain the land, nigh as thick as my wrist, but not quite so pale as my own. Like the rest of him, it had a dusky quality, though he was darker above than below, and it flushed as ruddy as his lips toward the tip. My own pale skin showed brighter than his when I was aroused, but something about the deep and subtle blush of his manhood hypnotized me. I was near-desperate to see it hard, to know if it darkened to the shade of his nipples or reddened to brilliance like my own member in its full majesty.

More than anything, I wanted to see his hands move on it, tugging the loose skin back from the crown of his manhood as it swelled and pushed forth from hiding... and I wanted to see what that did to the perfect serenity of his face. God, I wanted to see him need something I could give him!

I had long since come to terms with the fact that I might not be well grounded in the art of what two men could do to make love, but only a creature with no imagination at all would keep his hands off the source of such pleasure. I wanted to stroke him like I touched myself and see how long it took him to crumble into the creature of desire I became when I was safe within my bed-curtains, thinking of his hands.

My lustful reverie was brought up short when Bronwyn suddenly stopped to drink from a pretty stream, and I realized we'd arrived at the spot where I usually watched Bran bathe. She was even standing by the bushes I used as cover. I shot him a mortified look against my reason, and found him looking at me as if he knew.

"I, I come here sometimes," I blurted most un-smoothly. "To... to reflect."

His serene beauty developed a touch of wickedness. "The water is excellent for reflection, my lord."

Those were more words than I had ever heard from him at one time. The delight of his interactive company nearly had my senses dazed, the music of his voice eclipsing my untutored fear of discovery. "Will you—will you help me spread a blanket?" I asked him—the son of a lord asking a stable boy to do a

menial task. I saw him as my equal, though, if truth be told—no. That was still no truth. I saw him as my superior, my elder, and the object of my desire. It was unseemly, and yet it was the truth and always had been. He was mine to command, yet if he only knew—all he needed to do to command me was lift his voice into the air between us, and my blood would sing to obey him.

“I will,” he murmured, glancing at the little satchel I’d brought. “Are you going to hide it from me that I must search, or hand it to me, my lord?”

My tongue refused to answer my bidding at all that time, my fingers fumbling at the clasp in an ecstasy of awkwardness. Would he? Would he lay hands on the next closest thing to my very person? O God, that I had the boldness to stand proud and dare him to it! I might have his hands on mine—

I fumbled the strap free of my shoulder and held the closed bag out, mute and half-terrified. He gave me a pretty pout—O God, why? Was he disappointed too?—and took it, strong square hands as delicate with the clasp as a well-schooled bird dog carrying a chick back unharmed. He had it open in a trice and folded the supple leather back like he were caressing it, or parting the nether lips of a maiden with gentle fingers. A red apple gleamed inside, polished skin catching the light, and a meat pasty from the kitchen. I took them in shaking hands, my own bag and the fruits of my own kitchen suddenly foreign to me.

“I did not think to bring enough for two,” I confessed, abashed as I held out half my broken pasty to him. “I woke in a hurry to get her out of the hunt, lest her heart drive her legs to ruin, and at first I had no—I didn’t think you might come if I invited you, too.”

“Would I not?” Bran murmured, mouth warm as his voice. “You are my lord, are you not? When have I e’er disobeyed?”

“I—” My tongue tied itself again, but for just a moment. I was learning to manage its frailty! “I would give you no order you did not wish to honor, Bran.”

His smile was everything I could have imagined or wished it to be, the reward that my soul desired. He looked at me like I’d said something beautiful, worthy of honor and admiration. My chest filled slowly with a pleasure like warmth that pressed against my sternum to escape, a thing with wings bound by my bones into mortal flesh. If he kept giving me that look, I thought it might escape captivity.

“You are all that a lord should be, then,” Bran purred in a voice that had ne’er been mine before. “Good to your people, kind and just.”

“I-I would be,” I murmured back, spellbound. “If you would let me.”

“Let you? What is it that I must permit rather than enjoy freely as my lord takes his due of me?”

I was certain that if he looked down, he would see the very veins of my cock outlined in clear and shocking detail against the straining front of my breeches. I suffered mad thoughts I had never entertained ere this of pulling him down with me and sucking his lips to pull their plumpness into my soul, like the juices of a ripe fruit.

“Oh, Bran,” I breathed. “If you only—” And then I caught myself, shocked by my forward words. What was I doing? Was I going to tell him what I wanted, brazen as a stud in the field?

“If I only, my lord Fionn?” Bran’s dusky pink lips shaped the sounds softly as he stepped closer. “Is there something you would have of me?”

“There is,” I whispered, my man’s voice caught in my throat like a bone. “Your joy.”

“My joy?” His voice betrayed surprise, but no condemnation. Far from it—he sounded as pleased as I had ever heard him.

“In all things.” I still had no louder voice. “You are beautiful, and I wish that I had thought to bring you a feast, for you deserve that and more. Alas, we are down to flint and steel, with nothing to cook.”

His mouth gifted me with a slow, wide smile. “And what do you deserve, my lord?”

I had no response to that but a wicked little thrill that he would say such words to me. My jaw opened, but words failed to come out at first.

Bran’s eyes narrowed with what I could swear was wicked pleasure. “More provender for us both, perhaps? I shall catch us fishes to roast, if you please. Fire is yours to command, as the water is mine,” he purred, and stood to slide out of his—O God, his shirt, and his hands at the ties of his breeches. My face turned the color of the apple we’d just shared. I couldn’t look away, eyes glued to—not his face. I had seen it all before, but never so close... nor with his awareness of my gaze.

His body was sun-browned in many places, but not all. His cock, though darker indeed than mine, was of paler skin than his arms, for he wore pants to work even when he eschewed a shirt. All of him from the waist down was water-shielded when he bathed, or swam for sport. His hands and feet were strong and long, as capable as they were handsome. If he had been born to a station that was given to lessons on the harp, he would have had half an octave's reach on me. They mostly served to remind me of what I was trying not to stare at, however—which was that all his members were long.

Bran slid into the river all too quickly, or perhaps with merciful speed. I wanted to touch myself for a quick and desperate release, but I had a witness in the water and a fire to build. Out came my flint and steel. My cock stayed in my pants as I found tinder and coaxed a spark to life. It was a welcome distraction from the ache in my loins, at least, and there was no small pressure as well—Bran, who never needed me for aught, depended on my flame for a feast.

Success came with time, and not too soon. Dripping with river water, Bran returned clutching a broad, brown fish by the tail. He dispatched it with ease on a rock and held out a hand for my knife to clean it. We shared a companionable silence as its skin crackled and crisped over the fire, then dined blowing on our fingers and laughing as our greed for its sweet, white flesh outpaced our common sense regarding food fresh off the fire.

Even without salt or herb, it was delicious to me, and I thought he seemed equally well pleased. We licked our hot, sore fingers as we reduced his prey to tail and bones; and with my belly full and Bran naked beside me, my eyes wandered again to a different sort of tempting flesh.

I found myself spellbound by the sinews of his arms as my eyes slid bashfully sideways from the perfect jewels of his nipples—indeed, rubine in their quality, though the color was truer to rich riverbank brown than a gem any king might set in his crown. But what fool would that king be, to reject for opacity these shapely tips of my stable boy's chest! Garnets are oft dark, but are they not still considered gems worth having? Bran's little cabochons were worth more to me than rubies of the highest water. What they lacked in clarity, they more than made up in rarity. They were *his*.

"No king would value you more than I," I breathed, half aware at best that I was even speaking. "What king could, surrounded only by bright baubles that catch the light, when yours is the eternal beauty of the river depths, dark water and its mysteries... such secrets that men would wage war to gain, but can

never grasp because they fall through mere mortal fingers like water through a crack in stone?"

His black eyes sharpened, and there was somewhat in his voice that put a shiver in my gut when he spoke softly. "You see truer than you know, son of Adam."

"You call me thus as though it does not apply to you." My laugh and smile were uncertain. "Well I see now that you have all the parts of a man," I added, for he stood bare as a babe before me and finally I was brave enough to look when he could see me do it. His manhood twitched at my gaze, filling with blood to stand erect, and my God! This I had never seen, and it was daunting! More horse than stablehand was he, a two-handed sword of a cock curving up toward his belly, red as the king's rubies after all!

"I do," Bran breathed, and it was not in my power to disbelieve him. His face, his voice, the tension in his muscled shoulders all said he spoke in earnest. "A son of man are you, but ne'er have you seen me in your church, and ne'er you will. A son of the river am I, fair youth, my people older than yours."

I stared for a space, my mind muddled. "The river? No man, but—"

"Wild black horses there were, before your father's father came," Bran murmured, stepping toward me. He took my shoulders between his two broad hands. It did not hurt, but I felt such power in his grasp and gaze that I knew no escape could be had.

I wanted no escape. I wanted only to stay caught in his spell. I stood, and I listened.

"Wild black horses there were, that came from the river," he went on softly, with the rhythm of a bard. And spoke the third time, the magic time—"Wild black horses with silver bridles."

I heard someone gasp aloud, but Bran did not look away from my face. After a moment of heart-stopping terror that we were caught, I realized it had come from my own throat. "Kelpies?" I whispered. "But they keep to our stables. We ride them to hunt and to market. We sell them for chargers, with their sturdy bones and fine-feathered feet. They cannot be fey things, Bran, they are my family's legacy—not creatures waiting to catch and drown the unwary."

"Only one, and he has forgotten who he was," Bran said with sorrow I felt in my chest like an ache.

“How?” Such was my trust in him that I asked in expectation of an answer, not denial, and he knew the way I meant it.

“Your grandfather met a black horse along the riverbank one blue evening, Fionn the fair. He saw its silver bridle and knew what it must be, and he took his knife and stole that bridle from its head with one swift cut of cold iron. That horse was my grandfather, and you have him still in your stables.”

My mouth gaped. “The Old Man. Dark Water. But—he’s here. You rode him here! Can we not free him?”

“Not without the silver bridle your father keeps under lock and key.”

“How do you know this?”

He smiled then, and it was proud. “My mother told me, passed down from her mother who loved him before his capture... and bore him a daughter, who then had me.”

Riverfolk, the half-wild wood-witches and scattered villages of fishermen that lived here before we’d built the castle, afterward incorporated into folk we called our own. And thus, my family had wronged them when I’d always thought we helped them—but no, it seemed we came in and left a family fatherless. “How can you forgive me?” I whispered.

Bran blinked. “Forgive you? Sweet Fionn, I am not fey enough to take vengeance on you for your blood. Your eyes and heart hold no sin against me or mine. Your father holds us trapped, not you.” His smile was both sad and gentle, but I could scarce bear it. He was as kind as he was handsome, but I knew differently.

“No,” I said firmly. “To fail to right a wrong in your power to correct is as bad as committing it yourself, for by not acting against it, you condone it. I will get you this bridle, Bran.”

His eyes shone, luminous as river depths under the sun. I fancied them deepest blue now, not true black. “What a ruler you would make,” he purred, and kissed me.

“Bran,” I gasped when I had my breath back, and the look in his eyes was worth more than my family’s castle to me.

“Bran is what the stablehands call me, Fionn. I want you to use the name my mother gave me. Duibhne.”

It suited him better than Bran the raven, this name of different shadows: Duibhne, the dark one. The difference to me was like seeing him in maille, finely linked and fitted to him, when before I had known him only in coarse boiled leather. “Duibhne,” I said gravely. It tasted like wine on my tongue. I had to say it again, savoring the rich sensation and long vowels: a cool ooo, and eee, and ahh. “Duibhne. Will you kiss me again?”

“Do you wish me to?” he asked, as though it could be in any doubt, and I nodded so hard my hair came half-unbound.

“Yes!”

He kissed me firmly then, and it only confirmed what I had known the moment his lips touched mine; he did know what to do with a lover, and he had surely been good to someone before me. I minded not at all—one of us had to know what to do! “I want, very much, for you to teach me,” I whispered against his lips. “If you will.”

“Oh, I will.” His voice had roughened, but so very pleasantly. He did not ask me what I wanted him to teach me—my hands were already on his manhood, my shyness pushed aside for a precious moment by burning desire. His cock was hot to the touch, the skin suede-soft. It made him gasp—I, with no tutoring, made this perfect creature feel pleasure! Or—

“Is that—all right? Did I hurt you?” What if I’d done it wrong? I began to panic.

Duibhne gave me a stunned sort of look, cock still stiff between my now feather-light hands. “I—yes, Fionn, it’s all right. It’s good. It’s a cock and you’re touching it. Everything.” He started to sound like he wanted to laugh a little. “Well, nearly everything but trying to pull it off, or sticking anything but a tongue in the slit, is entirely acceptable to my taste.” His eyes were black and bright, his mouth merry, and suddenly I felt my heart lighten. How could I fear my inexperience would dampen his interest when there was such admiration in his gaze and frankness in his voice?

“Your tongue reassures me,” I said, abashed but smiling back at my newfound lover. “I just—have not done this before. I feared to do it badly and harm you, rather than bring you joy.”

“Joy is all that I feel when you stroke me thus,” he assured me, a bit more solemnly than before, as if I needed convincing. “Well—joy and a desire to kiss you again. As requested...”



I leaned in helpfully, and his lips met mine in a molten moment. Fire raced through my veins from the touch, bright lines of passion searing me from within, but it was far from pain. I wanted more, not less! His teeth grazed my bottom lip, and I swooned against his firm body like the virgin I was. “More,” I asked him, and more he gave, ’til I was dizzy with the intimate touch of tongue and mouth. I had never known it could be so heady to just kiss.

His hands found the ties of my breeches as he thrust hopefully into my hands. I had forgotten I held his cock! I stroked it timidly at first, then more boldly as he growled happily at the touch. I had just begun to settle into a rhythm like I used to pleasure myself, tugging the loose skin down from the swell of his thick crown, when he finally defeated the knot of my breeches and took me in hand too.

I came in three strokes, shuddering and mewling his name.

Duibhne’s eyes widened. “Did you...”

My seed dripped thickly from his chest and hand, confirming that unasked question. His mouth twitched up at the corners, his expression almost awed.

I blushed bright, hot red.

His mouth widened into a full, gorgeous smile. “I am very flattered,” he purred, and bucked a little into my suddenly idle hands. “Please do continue...”

Flushing now that I was amiss in considering his pleasure, I renewed and redoubled my efforts and found it deeply gratifying that he answered with a groan. My hands knew what I liked, at the least, and explored his tastes a little more boldly as they continued on. When I tugged at his smooth, warm stones, he growled, “Yes, Fionn,” and thrust into my fist. My hand became as a vessel for his satisfaction, and I won the reward of his climax.

His seed seemed thicker than mine, more musky. I delighted in the contrast and wondered what it might taste like, indecently curious. I brought a hand up to my mouth before I thought better of it and tasted. It was musky, yes, and somewhere between salty and sweet. His eyes widened again, and once more, he groaned. “Fionn, if I had not just reached my peak, I might ask you to put that pretty tongue to good use.”

I thought I might never cease to blush, but I had found my courage and I was not about to let go of it now that it was caught and harnessed to my will. “I would do it, too. Have you ever had that treat?”

“I have,” Duibhne said in a voice low and throaty, stealing another kiss from my salty lips. He leaned in close to murmur “A rare treat it is, and one I would show you. Not standing, though. It’s like to make your knees buckle, so sweet is it.”

My flagging cock jerked with fresh interest. “And will you take me now, on the riverbank?” I could scarce believe my own boldness, but now that we were come to it, surely that was what this led to. All the gossip would have it so.

He shook his head, smiling. It looked tender. “I cannot treat you so roughly. I would like to enjoy that act with you too, yes, but we have not the means to ease the way. Oil is needed, and time. I am honored that you ask, however. I pledge to you now that I will, if you wish.”

“Consider that a plan, then.” I beamed at him, intoxicated with my own courage and the warmth of his regard. “If we must wait anyway... let us return home. I believe I have business to settle before pleasure.”

\*\*\*\*

With Bronwyn safely back in the stable and the hunt not yet returned, I mounted the smooth rock stairs to my father’s quarters with stony determination. I knew where his locked chest was, for he kept coin in it too. He had shown me on my thirteenth birthday, in case calamity befell and a more musical than martial second son was the only man of our blood left to run the keep in his absence.

My hands shook as I fitted key to lock, for this was no family emergency I had ever expected to face. My nerves shivered and cried that I should not be here in my patriarch’s sanctum, robbing his treasures; my heart’s voice countered them with justice. What I sought was not our treasure to keep, and never had been. We had stolen like petty thieves, and if a man could be hanged for a sheep, what might the cost of this crime be? My grandfather had stolen the power of speech from a kelpie, the lord of this river before us, and kept him in a stable!

Thus fortified with resolve and the knowledge that I was on the side of right, I opened the lid.

No bridle sparkled or shone at me. I do not know what I was expecting—a magical shower of sparks, perhaps. What I got instead was burlap and leather sacks, neatly wrapping a small multitude of items.

Well enough. I knew where the coins were, and it was not that large a chest. I steeled myself for the invasion and shoved my hands into the pile, trying not

to be distressed at the immediate disarray. I could put it back to rights. I only wanted one thing out of all these bundles. Dried flowers fell out of one—lavender, my mother's favorite.

My fingers found a ropy shape and unwrapped it in a fever of guilt to find cold metal at last. I drew it out of its leathery confines to see what I sought: stolen faerie silver, intricately wrought in knotwork too small for human hands. I wondered how a kelpie got his bridle—were they smiths, or did other fae things work for them?

"What the blazes are you doing?" roared my father's great voice, and I startled badly as I knelt. Some spark of spirit and determination had my fingers clutch the bridle tighter, instead of dropping it, and I stood to face him.

"Returning that which stains my family's honor with thievery," I heard myself say, firm and clear as a hero.

Lord Blackriver backhanded me to the ground before I could move. The fall was as distant as the rest of this had become; a thing I knew was happening that seemed oddly removed. "You foppish fool," he spat. "My father won that, and on it rests all our fortune, yours included! Would you bankrupt our house?"

I stared up at him, cheek numb, and ears ringing. "Yes," I heard myself whisper, and then I got up on my feet in a scramble and ran as he started red-faced toward me. He was bigger, but heavy, and my light feet were winged with terror. I took the stairs down three at a time, heading for the stable.

The horses were out of their stalls in a restless, tossing sea of black manes and tails when I burst onto the scene, no riders in sight but Duibhne on the Old Man. Silver bridle held over my head, I ran toward them and was thwarted by buffeting bodies. I heard footsteps pounding behind me; the door flung open a second time, and threw the bridle with all the strength in my arms. I saw my kelpie reach to catch it, and knew he would come up short.

Dark Water himself snatched it out of the air with a vicious snap, and time shivered. When I opened my eyes after a blink, he wore the bridle. He belled out a stallion-scream of triumph and turned to lead the herd at a run, straight through the fences. I heard the wood splinter, but no cries of pain. In the midst of the charging herd, I was in as much peril as from my father's angry hand.

I know not what would have become of me then without Bronwyn. She shoved her heedless fellows aside, protecting me with her body, and I seized the escape she offered and swung up to her back with two fistfuls of mane. Barely did I have my leg over her before she fled with the rest, among the last

three left in the stableyard. Arrows sang around us, to my shock, and I knew I could not go back.

We caught up with Duibhne at the river's edge as the rest plunged in and their herd stallion guarded the rear. The look in my lover's black eyes was relief as deep as the river. "You are safe," he breathed, and I gave a jerky nod.

"Safe, but homeless."

Duibhne held out his hand. "You'll have a home with me as long as you wish, Fionn."

"Where?" I cried, for I confess I was less concerned with romantic gestures at the time than with the sudden crashing realization that the life I knew was forever behind me.

"Come find out," Duibhne coaxed, his rich voice compelling. "I want you with me, and do we not have plans, my fire-lord?"

"Fire and water together?" My voice trembled.

"It has worked well thus far," he purred, and swung down to reach me, lacing my fingers with his as he gazed up, free arm spread in invitation. "I will not hold you here, but I offer you all that a prince of the water has. Stay and see if you like it. Freedom shall ever be our gift to one another: the freedom to choose."

My hand tightened on his. I swung down. "I will come," I told him softly. "Will you kiss me, river-lord?"

"Indeed you will, and indeed I shall," Duibhne laughed, and met my mouth with passion. I kept his hand as he tugged me toward the water, locked in our kiss. The black water rose past my waist, cold at first but not more than I could bear, and then his kisses warmed me back up and gave me breath. We were under the surface before I knew it, and his smile was bright as day despite the ghostly light. It was beautiful, fish glittering in scales of faerie-silver as they darted about. A crown of riverweed caught and clung to his wild black hair as he drew me into the depths.

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"Sometimes at night, when the moon's just right, you can still see them dancing on the water... the fair blond lord and his black stallion. And if you listen real hard, you can hear them laughing." Jenny's voice was low and mysterious.

Maggie stared at her in wonder, legs kicking idly as they hung off the pier. Her fishing rod dangled mostly forgotten from her hands; the fish just weren't biting today. "How d'you know?" she demanded, wanting to believe but instantly suspicious.

Jenny just grinned, teeth crooked in her freckled face. "'Cause I met 'em one night, and they told me the story."

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Robin Studwick has lived with her nose in a book since early childhood—mostly sci-fi and fantasy, after the usual animal-research phase so she could more accurately dream of her eventual transformation into a falcon, horse or dog for adult life since she wasn't good enough at math to be an astronaut. She is a big dork nerd person most often found cuddling pets or playing video games when not writing. After a considerable amount of travel, she now lives in Seattle, despite not liking coffee. Robin used to be too shy to write smut or look at naked people, but now it's just fun.*

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