



Key to Love

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KEY TO LOVE

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To Christine,
who chose the name *Lucretia*

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Chapter One

Like a sneaking reptile, Ludwig's hand slid to the jeweled hilt of his sword, then across to his dagger. He was yet undecided. It had to look like an accident.

The tinkling sound of a small waterfall came to his ears. "It will head toward water, Your Highness," Ludwig whispered. *A drowning will be perfect! It will feel less like murder than it will to stab the prince.*

Tethering the two horses, Ludwig followed Prince Lothar, who moved without a sound, gently forcing his way through the undergrowth beneath the forest's ancient trees. Before their eyes, a beautiful pool unclothed itself, dotted here and there with large grayish-white rocks that seemed to rest in the crystal waters like sleeping whales.

"Wait," the prince whispered.

Ludwig's eyes, unblinking, consented only to wait for murder.

More than two minutes passed, and out of the forest, on the other side of the pool, stepped the young buck with its first show of grand velvet.

The prince silently raised his loaded longbow.

Ludwig, unclenching his fists, decided to wait a little longer. *The deer has been provided especially for the occasion,* he thought. *The prince will drown while trying to retrieve the carcass.*

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The thin sound of a twig crunching woke Lucy and her large blue eyes flew open. Her senses on full alert, she lay still, her vision filled by the buck, so very close, lifting its dripping nose from the water, uncertain, then jerking back, poisoning itself, preparing for flight. An arrow whistled across the expanse of the crystal pond and found its deadly mark: the deer's heart.

Gasping with fear and sitting up in alarm, Lucy saw the wide-eyed deer leap toward her, splashing halfway into the water, falling, dead.

A deep exclamation reverberated across the deep waters of her secret pool, and Lucy snatched up her muslin dress and sprang nimbly to her feet. Shaking and rearranging her hair so she could see, she wondered who would dare intrude into her sanctuary, ruining her tranquility, and clouding the crystal water with blood.

A second voice joined the first, "Yes, it is an illusion! You're right! It is a naiad. Pinch me, then I'll pinch you—if you'll allow me—then we'll both know if we're dreaming."

Pulling her filmy dress on and rearranging the bulky mass of her hair, Lucy tried to see the owners of the voices, but lengthening shadows created dark uninviting dimensions between the trees. Glints of golden brassards and jeweled buckles caught her eyes, and she released her bound breath of fright, realizing the voices came from the other side of the pool.

The distinctive sound of cracking twigs and horses' snorts came to her unwilling ears, and she knew the interlopers had mounts.

Lucy turned to leap from the rock's edge to the bank, but the deep voice called to her, pleading, yet commanding:

"Stop...beautiful naiad! Don't leave. Stay!"

Later, Lucy would not recall why she turned, only that the voice was so commanding, reverberating with domination not to be disobeyed. Her father had spoken with similar authority, and no one ever defied him! She was numbed by invading memories of her father and she frowned deeply, turned mindlessly, unable to continue her first urge to escape.

Staring out across the scintillating watery expanse, Lucy

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saw a man. Bearing a bow as tall as he, he stepped from the camouflage of the greenery to the small space at bank's edge. There was room only for one at that place, but she could see another manly outline in the shadows behind. The hunter in view seemed arrogant and over-confident. His clothes were not at all like those worn by other hunters Lucy had seen. Her heartbeat increased as she figured him to be from another kingdom.

Lucy's gaze quickly scanned the overhanging branches around the pond, staring up at the source, hoping that others were not creeping about, seeking the crossing to her side. She drew a breath that seared her throat with panic at the thought of the arrow, released so accurately. If she were shot through, who would ever know? Who would find her here? Would she be left, helpless, in the pond, her life-blood seeping pitilessly from her? Horror and distrust eclipsed her fair face, but before she could turn to flee again, the commanding voice returned.

"Why are you so afraid? We will not harm you. Indeed, no! But such a beautiful maiden should not be lingering in the middle of the forest, alone..."

"I came to find peace...but you spoiled it for me!" Lucy accused, knowing she could never return here.

"But we will share it with you," Ludwig called warmly, his treacherous scheme forgotten. He suddenly longed to be alone with this girl.

The tone and insinuation of the man's declaration caused Lucy fright again. This time, she sprang across the narrow channel to dry land, making sure her escape route was clear. Staring at the reddening water, she then turned for a last look at the handsome man standing on the bank.

His brown curly hair was trimmed and neat. The moustache he sported was of a lighter color than his hair and sat atop a generously smiling mouth. Lucy felt her heart pounding in an unfamiliar manner. The young man's aristocratic countenance overflowed with fascination towards her.

Lucy knew she would never forget such a face. His eyes linked with hers, even from such a distance, and seemed to bind them together forever.

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She shook herself in disbelief, and continued to turn away.

“Wait, please! Before you leave, fair naiad, please...tell us your name?” The young man’s voice no longer commanded, but implored.

Lucy’s father had been the only one who ever called her a ‘naiad’ and Lucy was sure, on later reflection, this was reason she paused to converse.

Summoning her courage, Lucy was encouraged by the distance between them. She demanded, “Tell me yours first.”

The young man bowed and apologized, “Forgive me, fair naiad. To see you rise from the concealment of the rock, and to behold your extraordinary beauty made me forget I even owned a name! I am Lothar Charles...and this is my companion, Ludwig.” He straightened up. Grasping a strong branch above him, his warm hazel eyes sparkled as he asked, “And yours?”

“Lucy,” she said simply. Her hand flew to cover her pink lips and she gasped, inwardly reproaching herself for using that name.

“Lucy? Let’s see, a pet name for Lucinda?” Lothar asked. At the slight shake of her head, he continued, “Lucille?”

“No!” she answered firmly, again wondering why she was lingering.

“Lucy can’t be your proper name?” he asked, then offered: “Luciana? Lucella? Lucetta?”

To which she answered, “No. No. No!” Believing the two men were alone, Lucy relaxed and laughed. The sound tinkled like wind chimes across the water.

Both men drew deep breaths at the transformation. Laughter lifted every feature of Lucy’s countenance, like a rare luminous butterfly, free from its cocoon, rising to greet the sun-filled blue sky. She was indeed very beautiful, and obviously unaware of her own loveliness.

Lothar, completely enchanted by now, leaned out, holding to the branch with one hand. “Lucy, I declare you are the most beautiful maiden in the entire kingdom! I must become more acquainted with you, Lucy. I’m falling in love with you...”

The smile fell from Lucy’s fair young face as though the butterfly was shot through its very heart while in full flight and plummeting to the earth.

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With a grimace, she scoffed lightly, but loud enough for the men to hear. "Love! Love? But what is love?"

This time, Lothar laughed. His deep voice echoed across the water, but his laughter was not unkind. Remembering his mother—for the first time without deep heartache—he answered, "Love is God's gift to mankind. Love is the most needed emotion. Ah, to give love, to receive love! Really, to be without love given and received, is to be asleep, unconscious.

"You have awakened me, Lucy!" He saw her head shaking and continued, "Love is gentle and kind. Love is giving...love is being together." He saw her fair curls glinting with golden lights as she again shook her head. Like a cloud overshadowing the sun, a deep scowl darkened her visage. Yet even scowling, she was exceptionally exquisite.

Lothar called, "Love is this place, Lucy. The trees, the birds, the flowers, the water, and you!" He watched her draw the long ringlets back from her face, lifting them in both hands, pushing them back and seeking to secure them behind her small ears.

"Marry me, fair Lucy!" Lothar proposed in his deepest desire. Ignoring the astonished gasp emitted by Ludwig, he called again, "Please marry me, Lucy! I love you, only you!"

Reaching for her embroidered hair band hanging on a branch, Lucy trembled. The unexpected proposal, repeated, from a stranger placed her off-balance and the band slid from her hand into the water and floated out of reach. Lucy's face drew into a grimace which, on anyone else, would have been ugly.

"Marry you?" She laughed a strained laugh and called, "How impertinent you are, sir. But I—I will *never* marry!"

"Not even the prince of Lotharingia?" Lothar called.

Lucy's face, which mirrored self-rejection, returned to its frown of fear and her darting eyes again scanned the path of flight, to ensure that no intruders lingered there. She reminded herself of her safety, the distance separating them, and retorted, "Even less, if *you* were such a person. And besides, if you are the prince, then you would never want to marry me!"

Amazed beyond verbalizing, Ludwig swallowed. Finding his voice, he stammered, "Be—behold! She...she spurns Prince

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Lothar. She spurns the son of King Lothar the Third!”

Under his breath, he muttered, “If she does not want him, maybe I can make her want me. Such beauty, such youth, such innocence.”

The prince, bowing again, called, “My heart is yours, Lucy of Lotharingia. I must know more about you. Should I speak with your father?”

“I have no father!” she exclaimed with a resentful scowl. “And his name would cause you and *your* father to spit! If you are son of the king, then I must leave. You do not know me!” Without a backward glance, Lucy merged with the tree trunks, her white dress becoming anonymous in the deep shadows.

With great alacrity, the men rushed to gather the reins of their horses, leading them swiftly toward the pond’s source, seeking a place to cross.

After searching the spot where Lucy vanished to no avail, Lothar slashed off a long branch with his sword. Stepping across to the large rock, he reached out with the branch and retrieved the floating hair band. Wringing the water from the delicately colored cloth, he examined its embroidery thoughtfully. Mounting up, they directed their horses to follow the rarely used one-horse track from the hidden haven.

Later, having ridden around the perimeter of the forest, they came across a bent widow-woman carrying a large cane basket. Ludwig dismounted and confronted the old crone.

“Did you see a young maiden wearing a white dress? She had long golden hair.”

The gray-haired widow, who had an ugly hump between her shoulders, was so hunched she could scarcely look up at the man who questioned her. With a rasping voice, she said eagerly, “Yeah. I see’d ‘a.” Pointing her covered hand—a soiled sleeve, much too long, hid her fingers—the woman cackled and said, “She went thet-a-ways, she did. She wa’ runnin’ too...affrighted, I’m a-thinkin’ she were...runnin’ like the devil were at ‘er ‘eels!”

Prince Lothar reined his horse about, galloping off in the given direction.

Ludwig turned to the woman and said, “If you see her again, report secretly to me, Sir Ludwig. Give any soldier a

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verbal message that ‘the gray hawk has news for Sir Ludwig’ and I will come and see you personally. There’ll be a handsome reward for you if you help me find the maiden.” He tendered a silver coin to the woman, asking, “Do you understand?”

Nodding her covered head fervently, so that Ludwig could see the matted gray beneath, the woman snatched the silver ducat from his fingers so fast he did not see her hand. Swiftly mounting, Ludwig followed the prince’s path.

The widow’s directions led Lothar straight into his own escort, the very men he and Ludwig had escaped from less than an hour ago.

Laughing at the Chief Brigadier’s thunderous face, the prince said, “Oh, there you are, Marty. We wondered where you’d gone.” Ignoring the angry looks from the other men of the company as they drew up behind the leader, the prince raised the blue hair band above his head.

“Ludwig and I have just seen the most beautiful maiden in the kingdom,” he said as every man stared spellbound. “But, alas, she eluded us and disappeared like a nymph of the forest. Five gold ducats to the man who finds her for me. She wears a white dress and has the longest golden hair of any maiden ever seen.”

At a signal of affirmation from the Chief Brigadier, the company issued happy shouts and jubilant cries, all hoping to gain the five ducats and dispersing in various directions.

The prince interested in a young maiden! Until this moment he had been interested only in hunting, target shooting with the newly designed crossbows, his horses and racing them, or riding aimlessly throughout the kingdom. How pleased his aged father, King Lothar, would be if they could find the maiden who had caught the prince’s eye.

Lothar joined the search, but Ludwig, together with two captains, remained with the Chief Brigadier. Ludwig told them of the strange encounter with the young maid in the forest, her words, the offer of marriage blurted by the usually controlled prince, her denial and refusal, and the strange words about her father.

Marten, the Chief Brigadier, hoped his brigade would not find the coveted girl. It was of grave concern to him that the

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heir to the kingdom desired the maiden and was speaking of marriage. Marriage could mean an heir. And, such an heir would stand in the way of his own plans for the kingdom.

Speaking secretively to a certain few of his trusted men, the chief offered ten gold ducats to anyone who could capture the maiden and keep her out of the prince's presence.

"I'll decide what to do with her when she has been successfully seized," Marten said frowning, and then grinning.

They searched the forest, even moving inwards and hunting around the secluded pond. But there was no sign of the fair Lucy. They then looked for the old hump-backing widow in black, intending to question her further, but she, too, had disappeared.

The prince had only the costly hair band to console himself that Lucy had not been a spirit, but a real person.

Returning to the palace, miles away across country, the prince described the encounter to his father, who joyfully appreciated the value of his son's interest in a young maiden. The king had thought the day would never come! So many lovely ladies had been presented at court, but the prince had not been interested. In fact, he had been ill mannered and impatient.

Had it not been for the king's orders that the prince always be accompanied by Ludwig and surrounded by vigilant bodyguards, Lothar would have spent all his time alone in the woods, riding and hunting.

"This...this...maiden. Lucy, you say?" the king addressed his son with great sentiment, "You would marry her?" At the light in his son's eyes and the smile on his lips, the king commanded, "Then find her. Bring her here so that we may become better acquainted. Indeed! Yes, we must learn her full name. If she is as beautiful as you describe, then many will have seen her. Hair almost down to her knees, you say...golden curls. Yes, and this hair band is not one belonging to a pauper..."

He smiled, understanding the amour in his son's eyes. The prince had not been interested in any female since his mother died eight years ago, when he was eleven. He had grieved for his mother deeply, inconsolably.

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“It will be simple. Indeed, it will,” the king declared, striding to a wall map. Pointing, “Here is the forest where you saw this Lucy. There are three villages in the vicinity. Send four brigades to search for her. She has another name, of course, but if she’s known as ‘Lucy’ then she’ll not be difficult to locate. We will find her tomorrow.”

Lucy had seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth. After two days of fruitless searching, instead of becoming disheartened, Lothar became more determined. He was, however, unaware that others just as determined—and offering a larger reward for information—sought to apprehend the young maiden.

Prince Lothar decided to turn the search towards the hump-backed widow, believing she knew something of the fair Lucy. He received reports of sightings of the old crone from far and near. Several widows were confronted, detained, and questioned, but none had the ugly hump and the raspy voice.

Village criers voiced descriptions of both Lucy and the widow, and word was noised that information regarding either person would bring a handsome reward, which grew larger each time it was published.

Nearly every one in Lotharingia watched and hoped that they would be the lucky subject to discover the whereabouts of these two women and make the coveted report to a local brigadier. The air was tense with excitement, but also confusion as to who truly wanted Lucy most: Prince Lothar, Sir Ludwig, or the Chief Brigadier?

Where was the illusive, mystical ‘Lucy’?