



DREAM LOVER

**MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**  
***SPECIAL EDITION***

**DREAM LOVER**

**BY**

**Jewel Adams**

**MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE**  
[www.midnightshowcase.com](http://www.midnightshowcase.com)

DREAM LOVER

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**Credits**

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**\* \* \* Romance with a Touch of Spice – Time Travels,  
Historical, Paranormal, Fantasy and Contemporaries from Best  
Selling author Jewel Adams\* \* \***

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**SAVAGE DESTINY – The Story of Blackhawk and Cali  
by Jewel Adams**

Historic Romance – Indian White Captive

On a wagon train that journeys from Baltimore to the Northwest Territory, Cali discovers the land that touches her heart with its beauty. She pesters the old scout, to teach her all he knows, embracing the new land she needs the old man's knowledge to survive. But all her lessons can't prepare her for the very real Indian that hunts her down. And like the hawk that holds his captive in his talons, Cali looks deep into the coal black depths of the man that is her savage destiny!

Blackhawk's senses pulse in possessive yearning for the woman he took captive. Nothing will make him set her free, not even her own wild spirit. But can he save her from the dangers, ones that come from his own tribe and want her death? And when she believes he betrayed her, ordered her to be killed, will she see past her hate and fear, to find the love they once shared?

Two beautiful people find a love worth fighting for in the wilderness of 1795 in the Northwest Territory of the American frontier. Let your emotions run through the smoke fires that dry buffalo meat, feel the biting sting of a knife's killing blade and touch the love that finds ecstasy in SAVAGE DESTINY!

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5 cups from Coffee Time Reviews, 4 1/2 Flames from Sizzling Romance, 4 Slippers from Novel Spot Reviews, 4 1/2 Blue Ribbons from Romance Junkies...you won't be disappointed!

*Available at Midnight Showcase*

<http://www.midnightshowcase.com>

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**Riverboats & Rainbows by Jewel Adams**

Historical Erotic Romance Time Travel

The renovated riverboat appears to be the perfect solution for her aunt's annual fundraiser. Angela La Cross' busy agenda didn't include falling into the boat's hold. When she comes to and finds she is the

only woman on a boat full of men, she begins to think this wasn't such a good idea.

James McFarlain wanted his last trip up the Mississippi to be uneventful. The last thing he expected to see on the Silver Queen was a woman. Telling himself she was nothing but a mess of trouble didn't stop him from looking into her emerald eyes. When she silently sought his help, James knew he was done for.

Her trip back in time to 1875 became only a minor set back for Angie when compared to a good looking cowboy, cattle rustlers and one very determined Sioux warrior.

Angela might survive her tumble through time, but can her heart decide between the love of two men? Can she find the answers before time runs out? Her journey is not an easy one when love keeps changing the rules. Join Angie in the adventure of a lifetime, one that will capture your heart!

Note from the author: RIVERBOATS & RAINBOWS is an exciting and wonderful journey of one gutsy lady, Angela La Cross.

5 Hearts – The Romance Studio - Riverboats and Rainbows is a wonderful book. The triangle between the hearts adds quite a twist to the plot that skillfully takes you through passion, love and anguish.

*Reviewer: Angie*

*Available at Midnight Showcase*

<http://www.midnightshowcase.com>

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## **SLEEPING OAKS**

Time Travel Erotic Romance

Hostess of the Grande Ball to unveil the museum's renovated plantation, Emma Browning never suspects a mysterious mirror will whisk her back in time to 1825 New Orleans. Neither does she expect to find herself engaged to a total stranger. Unable to explain her sudden appearance in this breathtakingly, handsome man's life, Devon Chandler rather believe Emma is the bait in a conspiracy to destroy him, than in her outlandish claim she is from the future!

Join Emma and Devon as they discover their awakening love only to face its destruction when Devon's enemy kidnaps Emma. She escapes her captor, but falls prey to the evil and powerful Andre La Pointe. To protect Devon and their unborn child, Emma agrees to marry the man she fears!

Forced into a deathbed marriage, Emma refuses to give up and battles time to reclaim Devon's love. A love now buried in betrayal to save the man too stubborn to see the truth.

SLEEPING OAKS will carry you on a journey as unique as the love found in the realms of time!

4 1.2 Hearts - Sleeping Oaks will take you to a time when men were either honorable or scoundrels and true love was hard to find.

*Reviewed by Diana T.*

*The Romance Studio*

*Available at Midnight Showcase*

<http://www.midnightshowcase.com>

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### **Catching Shadows by Jewel Adams**

**Paranormal Erotic Romance in Midnight Showcase Erotic-ahh Digest Vol. 05-01**

CHARITY BECKER'S lover kisses her lips with searing passion and melts away as the morning light strikes her bedroom window. She steps through the fine line that separates the present from the past. Waiting for her on the other side is JACOB KINGSMAN, a man claiming her as his wife. Can Charity's passion to discover the truth regarding the real Mrs. Kingsman, free Jacob of his guilt? Together they scorch time with a hot, erotic passion in CATCHING SHADOWS.

**5 Hearts** – As with all of Ms. Adams' books this reviewer has read I was sad when the story ended. The characters become living beings in the pages of her stories, becoming like friends or...the lover we would like to have. As summer draws near, do pick up Catching Shadows and savor it as you crawl into your bed at night...but do leave a light on!

*Reviewed by Gina of Love Romance Reviews*

*Available at Midnight Showcase*

<http://www.midnightshowcase.com>

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Visit Jewel Adams for your next adventure in Romance with a touch of Spice! <http://jeweladams.blogspot.com/>

DREAM LOVER

# ***DREAM LOVER***

*By*

*Jewel Adams*

## Chapter One

### *Dreams Can't Be Real!*

*"I-Will-Not-Think-Of-Him!"* Mackenzie's fist punched out each word against the pillows. Blowing up at the hair in front of her eyes, she crawled around the bed tugging at the tangled sheets. "Grown women don't need fantasy lovers, Mac. Grow up!" Falling back into the pillows, she yanked the satin quilt up to her chin.

*Sleep, instant sleep, no thoughts, only dreamless sleep.* Tossing one way and then the next, she moaned over effort it took to relax. She heard the tiny gears in the clock turning as another number flipped. "This is useless," she exclaimed, irritation filled her voice.

Mackenzie reached for the phone, but hesitated before dialing Gloria's number. "That's right, Mac, call her and ruin all your progress today. You never should have asked her about the dreams." After suffering Gloria's prying questions all afternoon, Mackenzie figured it would take some major convincing to get her friend calmed down. One swift kick sent the covers off the bed. She slipped on the matching satin robe to her nightgown and let the soft material fold about her waist. Each determined step sent the satin swirling up and around her legs.

Jerking open the bedroom door, she headed for the kitchen. Absently rubbing the robe's sleeves, Mac never realized she held her breath until she flipped on the light above the stove. In a scolding whisper she said, "Tea, cinnamon rose—that should do the trick." The flame shot up under the kettle before she adjusted the knob and moved knowingly about the kitchen, gathering a cup from the cupboard.



"Stop woman! Stop this endless calling!" The deep, decidedly male voice filled the silence in the apartment, paralyzing her into stunned stillness.

Startled by the kettle's piercing whistle, Mac watched helplessly as the cup slip from her fingers and shatter in the sink. Spinning around she fumbled with the controls on the front of the stove until she killed the flame. Mac wrapped her shaking hands about her waist and took deep breaths, forcing herself to concentrate on the hissing stream of vapor.

"Let me go woman! Stop your witching ways. End this spell you hold me in!" Malice governed the familiar voice that had no right to sound so commanding, so alive.

"No-o-o..." The denial tore through her clenched teeth. She refused to turn toward the low, furious voice. "I won't see you!" Covering her eyes with her sweaty palms, she felt desperate, "This isn't happening. You aren't real! Go away!"

"Release me and I will gladly leave you!"

The threat in the man's seething response nearly made her cry out. *This can't be real, he was only a dream.* "I'm not dreaming now, am I?" She brought her hands away from her eyes and gripped the counter for support. Mac's frantic whispers swirled through the rising steam, "He's not here...this isn't real. I'm not even in bed, so I can't be sleeping!" To prove her own feeble belief, Mackenzie gingerly reached out to touch the kettle, quickly pulling her fingers back from the heat. "There, see, I am not sleeping. You can't feel pain when you sleep." Slowly releasing her breath she said, "He's not real, Mac."

"Mac? Tell him to show himself, for I am as real as you are witch. I will be glad to prove it to Mac if he be your protector! Turn around and face me, if you dare!"

Aaron's annoyance and anger rose in equal degrees as he asked himself again, *what manner of woman was this?* She was here, the one ruling his mind every waking moment...and the nights; never did he escape her alluring shadow. *God, what did I do to deserve this punishment?* Maybe it was not God's work, for surely she was some kind of witch. He never believed in witches and hexes, but nothing else made sense for the strange happenings in his life.

Aaron failed to find any sign of her protector and kept his eyes fixed on the vision before him, knowing he would use physical force to stop her should she try to escape his presence. He wished she

would turn to face him, allow him to confirm the image embedded in his mind. His haunting, blue-eyed enchantress could only be the beauty before him. He knew every delicate, enticing curve of that womanly body silhouetted against the soft, hugging gown where those golden curls ended. Soft as spun honey, the golden wisps floated on an invisible breeze, kissing her lovely... "Enticing sorceress!"

Clenching his hands until the knuckles turned white, he resisted the temptation to reach out and touch her. Aaron wanted, beyond reason, to hold the celestial vision that came to him so lovingly, seeking his warmth. Her enchanting curves brandished promises of passion born of innocence. He would wake, his body soaked with sweat, his cock steeled with his need to possess her. Every night the callings grew stronger, more ardent, filling his hours with pure, sweet torture; always she remained illusive, just beyond his grasp. So aggressive was her magic she began to come to him at all hours, haunting the daylight, casting her shadow about him until he thought he would go insane; demented, because he alone could see her haunting image. Aaron grew obsessed with the burning desire to experience and possess the libertine vision, regardless of the consequence. An act, he suspected he would burn in hell over, for only a witch could be doing this to him.

Aaron Masters was not a man to be trifled with. He fought her insistent pleas to come to her and the battle grew fierce. The internal battle of wills raged inside him. Tonight he vowed to destroy the hold she could wield over him. Dropping his barriers, he listened to her soft beguiling pleas, letting them grow stronger and stronger, until their intensity hauled him through the darkness.

She stood with him now, no longer an unreachable illusion, but a woman quivering from the same force that brought them together. As easy as reaching out and capturing her appeared, Aaron refused to let her control him. He wanted answers from her, but seeing her, being so close, almost proved to be more temptation than he could withstand.

"Woman, I said turn and face me. I have answered your summons. Now you will answer mine."

The air surrounding Mackenzie virtually danced with electricity. Taking a deep breath she reassured herself that this was only a dream...that is all this could be, a dream; her fantasy was now a nightmare. By facing her imaginary man he would vanish, *he must*.

As she turned, Mac braced herself, hoping that the vision she conjured up would be there, terrified of what might be in its place.

Sucking in her breath, she faced the image.

“Oh stars...” he was everything she fantasized and her eyes feasted on her creation, all imaginary six-foot plus of it. Tempting waves of thick black hair were pulled back to the nape of his neck, tied there by a silk bow. Had she created a new fashion statement with her vision? The modest ponytail, if loose would join the locks about his strong face, framing it quite handsomely.

Captured and stunned by what her imagination assembled, her fear shimmered away, dissolving into the darkness surrounding them. She took her first step toward him, her vision. Mac decided she would enjoy this night, knowing that like her dreams he would fade in the morning light.

Smiling into his dark, formidable eyes she whispered, “This is my dream, I would like it down.” Reaching up, she loosened the bow, letting it slip from the rich thickness. Fascinated with her creation, she fanned the satin waves about his firm jaw and sculptured neck until the locks rested on his broad shoulders.

Mac’s eyes glowed over the new effect. “There, not as harsh.” Her gaze drank him in. “Very nice, gentler...”

She stepped in front of him to take in every compelling feature of his proud face, reinforcing the memory of her creation. “So handsome...manly. Yes, very much a man.” He was only an apparition and the unexpected freedom she felt surged through her, pushing forward her desire to experience more of him. “It’s amazing.”

Aaron’s dark, hostile gaze snapped with hostility as it followed the strange actions of the resplendent beauty. She stood so close to him that he could smell her sexual sweetness. Allowing himself, Aaron inhaled, filling his senses with her lusty essence until he felt dizzy from the imprisoning enchantment. His every muscle cried out to take her, crush her seductive spice of feminine warmth to his fierce cock and taste the luscious temptation lingering so near. Her actions beguiled and fascinated him. He would let her take her liberties a little further and then he would exert his own.

Mac stared into his eyes, eyes so black they could reflect the stars, held her, making her breath catch in a whisper. “For a dream, you certainly are intense.”

She raised her hand to his face, wanting to soften the hardness glaring down at her. The contrast between their colorings fascinated Mac. His skin was tan and aggressive against her ivory softness. In a whisper touch she stroked his cheek; she tipped her head to the side, surprised when her hand didn't go through the image. "Are dreams this solid?" she wondered aloud.

Her fingers touched the smooth, strong plane of his brow before slowly lowering her exploration. She caressed every firm, vital inch of his face, as if by touching, the dream would stay forever. She couldn't resist the temptation to trace the full lines of his lips. The bottom lip was fuller and the knowledge sent thrilling promises through her sensitive fingertips. The shocking sensations made her pull away. Stepping back a little, she took in the full height and the width of his chest and shoulders. "So much bigger than my dream, I like it."

Afraid that she would destroy the image, she held back from releasing the thin cord holding the deep vee of his billowy shirt together. Mac could see the rich exotic tan beneath the material. Spellbound, her heated gaze swept over his chest to the firm lines of his hips, down the powerful stance of muscled legs covered by tight fitting, black pants. The breath caught in her throat as she took in the huge bulge at the juncture of his legs. Mac felt naughty and daring over what she wanted to do. He was beautiful, breathtaking, everything she imagined and more. She stopped to study the soft, black leather boots that came up to hug his calves before flowing into wide cuffs at the knees. "Hmm, they are so sexy."

The temptation proved too powerful and she let it pull her to him. Her palms went flat against his chest and began their slow, stimulating exploration. Beneath the fine linen she felt the harden nubs of his nibbles. Mac did the unthinkable and lowered her lips to one; her teeth teased the small rock solid nub. She felt the powerful muscles against her lips flex and grow tight, and the sensation shimmered through her, causing her own vagina to contract in sensual awareness releasing a wave of warm wet sexual heat. The excitement drove her on as her hands roamed the firm wall of his chest and she unmercifully teased his sensitive nipples through the thin material. The taste of salt became an aphrodisiac that lingered on her tongue as she slowly licked the taunt material over his breast...and Mac wanted more.

For a sane second she wondered if he felt her touch and what he might do if he could respond, but then she wouldn't be doing this if he were real. "Such a wonderfully, hot dream."

The sexual electricity caused by her touch made her suck in her breath, with it came his scent, untamed and exotic. The dream was never this vital, this intense. In bold abandon Mac continued her discovery. Freedom ruled, she gloried in the feel of him, the stone-hard length...her eyes flew up to his in shock over her own audacity and yet, her fingers remained on him and slowly slide over the shaft of his penis.

"My goodness," her lips parted as she ran her tongue over them, "hmm, I wonder if you'd taste like this, all salty and wild." She willfully stroked the power in her grasp, the enlarging size of his cock made her excited and nervous all in the same instant. "I certainly know how to create a dream worth savoring."

Mac felt her own body responding to the thrill of holding such a man. His size went beyond the dream, her eyes closed over the very real throbs of life coming from his penis. "I've never...I could...to a dream...what I want to do is shameless."

She could feel his body tense as her hands stopped the pleasuring strokes. Before she thought any further Mac untied the leather string on the pants and pulled it from the holes, allowing what she wanted to be free.

His cock leaped out as if trying to find her, Mac didn't look away or shrink back, but settled on her knees in front of him. Surprising even herself as she smiled over her audacity and with infinite care she took hold of the wild cock as if to gentle it with her touch...

Aaron reeled from the true touch of her hands on him. The barrier of clothes tortured him beyond thought, but Aaron feared any interference on his part would break the spell. And right now Aaron went beyond caring about mystical repercussions, he wanted all the vixen would give to him...*damn them both!*

But when her tongue slid in child-like wonderment over his cockhead Aaron nearly lost his resolve. He wanted to bury himself inside her honeyed spice, for she was sweet beyond any woman he ever fucked. And when she licked the love drop to taste him, his groan of delight joined her own moan of satisfaction. Those lips closing about him felt like angel feathers, but wait...*ach, the lords*

*would blush, for no angel would suck his cock with such vigorous appeal!*

He should end this erotic dalliance, but no man was that strong. Aaron gave himself over to the woman and her pleasing ways, for he'd not had a woman perform such an act on him. He gave pleasure such as this to women, but none returned his favor and the truth of what he'd been denied made his hands grip her head, bury his fingers in that lush mass of golden curls to hold her just, stay her course to its finality!

Mac felt his hands gentle as the last spasm of pleasure escaped from his cock. With little thought she rained small loving kisses over and around him as if wanting to reawake the beast for another round. But the gentle massage he gave to her shoulders said it was finished and yet Mac could feel the life still pulsing beneath her lips, it would be so easy to rule this man. She'd never experienced such power, the knowledge was thrilling.

She wanted the dream to stay just a little longer and let herself rest against him, feel him. How strange to feel the course roughness of his pubic hair, even sated his cock was still large. The image of a large cat laying in wait for its next attack crossed her mind and with it came a ounce of regret that he too would go in hiding, become the dream once again. Mac wondered if she could ever capture this again, be with him once more.

Time could be an enemy, for Mac knew he needed to go. She wanted one last look. In an almost fevered state, her heated gaze raced over him, wanting to remember every masculine nuance standing before her, thankful for the unusual clarity of this dream, knowing she would never forget him. He would vanish, maybe forever.

Drawn by desire Mackenzie moved closer until her breast pressed in wanton abandon against him. "Just one kiss...please?" she whispered, hoping it possible. Standing on tiptoes, Mackenzie gave into her obsession over his arresting lips. Barely touching the lips before her, she breathed deeply, taking in the essence surrounding him; a wild, heady aroma, filled with open sky and salt tainted ocean. The dark liquid pools of his eyes reflected her image, making her wish she could lose herself in their ardent depths, forever. She closed her own and moved closer, touching, seeking the dream... finding the man.

"I wish you were real." All her heart's longings came out in feathery softness against the impassioned lips now capturing her own. *Dream, so be it.* Mac melted against the surrounding heat. Feeling the pressure demanding her attention, she gave into the call as old as time. The pleasures flowing through her were so real, so powerful, they became her existence and she demanded more.

Unable to refuse her, nearly crazy with wanting her, Aaron folded the enchantress within the circle of his arms. Her touch was like the fires of hell, all sweet promises of ecstasy and he was already iron hard. There was no gentle taking as he brought her body against his own. Capturing her willing lips, he took her, deepening the kiss her haunting pleas begged him to master. His hands encircled her small waist, roaming freely over the delicately curved hips and firm buttocks. He wanted more and without thought Aaron molded her honey warmed spice over his inflamed cock.

Aaron tried to fight the ravenous yearning rekindling inside him, needing more to treasure the feel of her and experience the desire she so willingly gave over to him. He wanted all of her. Yet the moist touch of her spice against his cock became the master. Her excitement mounted and he let her discover the feel of his cock against her clit, so fluid and hot as she rolled over him, taking on what her hands started.

He lifted her off the floor and gloried in victory when her legs wrapped about his hips. They were powerful allowing him the freedom to discover his enchantress. Aaron dismissed the gown, then tore his shirt off. "Ah, I want to feel you my lovely."

Aaron went to his knees wanting more freedom to touch her beautiful body. Breast soft as kittens filled his palm and when his lips took possession of her nipples she cried out in ecstasy over his tongue's tormenting play. He released his hold as she settled into his lap, he captured her head between his ample hands.

"You are a beautiful woman."

He saw her lips part in a smile and it was all he needed to take her. As delicious as he expected Aaron devoured her mouth, then went back to the lush areolas, lavishing them into excited arousal so he could roll his palm over them and relish her rewarding torture. How she arched to his touch, her body was like a fine sculpture and Aaron loved touching the porcelain beauty.

Her freedom in touching him, working him with those small delicate hands and her lips, such pleasure should be cherished. When

an enchanting moan escaped her exquisite lips, Aaron feared he would be branded by the blaze she ignited. Pressing her closer, he molded her closer to his cockhead, confirming the power she held over him. When she moved enticingly over him, his moan blended with the music of her bewitching song. Holding her hips he laid back and kept her moist spice covering his cock. She moved on her own, back and forth in slow wondrous strokes. Aaron watched her as his fingers found her sexual core. She pressed into his touch her head fell back silently giving him the freedom to take her. In gentle intent he brought her to the threshold of pleasure, "do you want it?"

"Yes, damn you!"

"Tch, such a temper...here my lovely, here is a taste of what you called me to give to you."

Aaron released his hold on himself and with expert ease he brought the beauty to a climax that made her cry out! The flood of her pleasure washed over his throbbing cock and he knew she was ready for him.

With both hands on her hips Aaron raised her just enough to position his cockhead to her maidenhead and its throbbing life. With one hand he again played over the center of her arousal, she instantly fire with the need he created and began a slow rhythm against his head just as Aaron moved up to press his advantage. In one instant of equal assault she slid over his cock as he lunged into her.

Her cry was sharp and short but it didn't go unheard and Aaron froze over the truth he didn't believe. "You can't be!"

But be there damage it was forgotten as she started a stronger more forceful motion and Aaron gave up the thought of backing away and joined her dives onto his cock with his own lunge to sate the fire inside her.

This was no longer a game and Aaron took control, rolling with her he moved her under him and he plunged to the depth of her core. She took hold of his buttocks trying to hold him against her and he knew she wanted the pleasure he could give her by pressing into her passion nub. With the expertise learned in many countries, Aaron showed the enchantress how to feel and she reached for him, wanting every volatile sensation he could give her. The sexual fever took hold of Aaron and his thrusts were as violent as those of the witch beneath him. He felt her tighten around his cock and he went deeper and harder until she reach an explosive climax and Aaron allow his own



to flow into her, filling her with the steam of his seed until they were both spent and quivering in exhausted enchantment.

All rational thought fled, burning was worth the ecstasy he discovered in his arms. He would never let her go, not now, even if it meant purgatory for all eternity. Aaron would not be denied! Her provocative cries barely penetrated the thunder of passion swirling inside him.

“Oh, God! Don’t let him vanish. He’s my dream. I want to keep him. Please? Forever!”

Lifting her in his arms, Aaron gathered her unresisting body to him. Instinct drove him back toward the barren darkness. “You are mine, vixen! I will never give you back to whatever master you claim. God or devil, they will neither claim you. You are mine...witch!”

Through the burning flames capturing her senses Mackenzie’s mind heard the hostile vow. With it came a shuddering feeling that reached beyond the passion her dream pulled her into. She felt the man! The hot vital strength of his possession, one she created with her willful advances. His arms were strong and held her in an unbreakable grip against his rock solid chest. Reality came rushing in, bringing a flood of panic.

“Dreams aren’t real...not solid.” Groaning, she knew they didn’t carry the flames of overwhelming passion or have the sexual power she discovered.

“I am no dream, madam, and neither are you.”

“No!” she moaned. Her cry tore through the haze swallowing her, ripping deep against the very real danger rising to seize her. Fear brought with it reality and he was all too real!

Striking out in earnest against his steel hold, she battled. Mackenzie confronted the fear for the truth that she failed to see. No dream could be holding her like this, touch her the way he did, kiss... “I didn’t, couldn’t have.” Her groan of denial failed to erase passion’s rampant fire.

“Let me go!” Her gaze flew up to meet his scorching glare. “You must go! You’re not real...a dream! This can’t be happening!” Her voice was shaking, screaming out with the sudden urgency filling her senses.

“I assure you, I am no dream. The cock you held is alive and still on fire. Nothing will smother the flames you wrought, woman, nothing but burying myself to the core of your existence!”

Mackenzie's eyes grew large under the harsh words. The truth was there, beneath her hands. "Please...I made a mistake, I'm sorry. Put me down! You have to!"

"Why? Afraid of your master?"

"Master?"

"Devil or God, woman, he can not help you now. I have you and you are most certainly as real as I. Damned as I may be, I am determined to keep you!"

His eyes grew shadowy in their fevered conviction, stilling her panicky cries, ending her frantic movements. True fear filled her over the cold sneer now replacing remembered warmth, causing a frightened moan to escape unchecked from her trembling lips.

"I have what I want, woman."

Words failed her as his meaning sank to the depth of her panic, causing her to stare wide-eyed in shaking denial.

Turning with her locked in his arms, his challenging laughter struck out against the devouring blackness. Sinking into the void, Mackenzie lost herself in the abyss, clinging to him as they fell, her terrified scream filling the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

The pounding in Aaron's temples broke through the nightmare, making him hold his head to fight the assaulting pressure. Rolling to his side he forced his legs out and over the mattress as he strained to sit up.

"Ach, stop this infernal ringing!" Shaking his head to clear it, Aaron gripped the bed board to keep from falling back.

"The dream again! Damn that woman." Aaron concentrated for it seemed important. "If I had drunk the devil's own rum I would feel better than this."

Again the dream that plagued him came rushing back. This time her image was clearer, more intense in its beauty, no longer just the illusion he lived with these last weeks.

Night blackened the portal, another sleepless night.

Cursing the woman again wouldn't change the dream, one that felt all too real. He swore he could smell her flowery sweetness, still feel the heady warmth of her body, the fold of her moist spice covering his cock. And her voice, such heavenly music, never had it been so clear. Surely, he was bewitched or at sea too long. Yes, that must be it. He

longed to be home in Salem and finished with the voyage. Sighing with the relief this brought the tight hold on his lips eased.

The last shipment proved well worth the risk; the hold bulged with goods for the Boston merchants. Even after those infuriating taxes to the crown were paid, they would still have a good take from the load. Todd would soon follow in the *Seafarer* with the balance of the shipments.

Aaron swelled with pride. During the last four years, he built his shipping line up to eight well-rigged merchants. Making runs from England, the West Indies, to the Gold Coast of Africa, his ships were manned with reliable, hand picked men, under trustworthy captains. Even those damn pirates of Jacques Dubois stayed clear of his vessels. Aaron made sure his reputation would not be ignored. Tracking down the last raiders, and recovering his goods, paid off. Now Dubois thought twice about boarding his ships. Aaron invested too much of his life to have it line thieves' pockets.

For the last three years, he barely set foot on land long enough to get the feel of it. Now, three days out of Boston and unloading, then home to Salem and his new house. He planned to stay in port this next year and devote his time to running the business from his office. Plans for his next expansion would keep him busy.

Andrew should be waiting with the new trade contracts from Africa. Aaron looked forward to seeing his friend. He still marveled over the fates bringing them together five years ago. Andrew's contacts in Africa were proving invaluable. Once the trade courses were set and the two new ships rigged out, they would sail. Thinking on it, Aaron remained adamant about never transporting slaves. Whether Andrew realized it or not, he played no part in the decision. Aaron held no stomach for it and he refused to have his ships tainted by its revulsion. They could keep that wealth; there was enough honest trade to satisfy his needs. Yes, everything was finally coming together.

"Everything except these infernal dreams!"

The pressure must have brought them on. He'd been pushing himself beyond human endurance. *Why now?* Aaron worked hard for this day. Nothing would stop him from reaching his goal.

His head still pounded with the fresh images of the dream. She was the most exquisite creature even if she be a witch. Skin so soft it felt like polished ivory, lovely full breasts that filled his palm,

yearning for his touch, and her response to him was something new and fresh. Women did not give of themselves like that to a man.

“What am I thinking? Damn witch get out of my head!” Loud, his angry words filled the cabin. “I am talking as if the woman were real...if only she could be.” Feeling like he did now, he wondered if he would not choke her elegant neck, instead of devouring it with the hunger to which she drove him.

Putting his head in his hands, he fell back into the mattress, wanting the peace of sleep without dreams. The small moan meeting him the instant his head connected with the soft, yet firm mound jettisoned his body off the bed. Staggering hard into the map table, he sent the charts flying across the room. “By all the saints!”

Shocked, worried eyes struggled to see what he shuddered to believe possible in the darkened cabin.

“Damn!” Clumsily searching for a flint, he finally managed to light the wick. The lantern cast a bright glow over the shadow washed cabin. Raising the lamp, Aaron took a cautious step toward the bed, holding the lantern still higher as the womanly form took shape. Nearly losing his grip on the light, it took both hands to hold it steady when she came into view.

“How?” The question met silence, drawing him closer to the vision. “The dream...what happened?” Aaron fought the recall, closing his eyes against the answers.

She stood in a bright room, a cup slipped from her fingers falling into a silvery hole and breaking. Nothing else remained clear...only her.

Yes, he remembered now. He’d been furious with her. All day she haunted him, constantly calling for him. The sadness coming from her clawed at him until he could stand it no longer. Retiring to his cabin early to wait for her calls, Aaron knew they would soon return. When she reached out this time, he opened himself to her, letting her pull him through that thick blanket of darkness. No longer was she just an image, fading when he reached out. She stood there to be seen, to smell. He swallowed hard...to touch.

She seemed as shocked as he was over his presence. What did she say? “*Dream.*” Yes, she kept repeating that he was not real, but only a dream.

Looking at her, she appeared real enough. Experimentally, Aaron reached out, jerking his hand away when it touched the giving curve.

Slowly his hand went back, caressing the soft line of her hip, moving down the naked sheen of her nicely shaped legs.

A moan came from her. Pulling back, he watched as she turned onto her back. Wild, corn silk curls splayed out over the pillows, casting an unearthly light about her.

Aaron caught his breath over the beauty stretched out before him. He let his gaze wander over her, stopping at her exposed breast. He swallowed his moan over the memory, their taste and the thrill he created in her. The desire to touch her propelled through him, hardening his cock with its force. It was pure madness to want a dream with such longing, but she hardly qualified as an illusion any longer. No, she was laying in his bed, in his cabin, on board his ship, the *Wanderer*...his.

Somehow, he brought her back with him. He took a dream and made it real. He could not deny the truth no matter what logic he exercised. They sailed over three months ago.

Slowly, the night's darkness faded into dawn and Aaron found himself in the same position, still watching her sleeping form. His head pounded and the reason only intensified. Through the escaping night, Aaron realized many things. One, this woman was not going to vanish. All his wishing, denying and cursing against her existence failed to send her back. Smiling to himself, he knew he felt almost pleased over the discovery. He wanted her in his dreams, in that room, and refused to let her go when she begged him to do so. Now, be it anger or desire, it mattered little, now she belonged to him. At first angry, he decided her witching or some trick made him take her like that. Honesty made him admit his own desire to possess her forced his action against her, then he stole her from the power that brought them together. By his rash act, he wondered if he declared war on whatever god or devil she belonged to. Could he expect to win against such a force, against...*Mac*?

Gazing on her again, Aaron inwardly cringed. That moment, that one instant in time when she cried out...he remembered. Aaron cursed her for not telling him she was a virgin and himself for his lack of control. "I would do it again."

If he were her master, giving her up without a fight would never be an option. The admission steeled his determination concerning her.

Aaron would give her the chance to go back from whence she came. If she could leave, no doubt she would never haunt him again.

He wondered if she possessed any real measure of power. He alone brought her here; maybe he held the power? It mattered not, he would soon discover the answer.

Remembering how fervently she fought when she thought him a dream, Aaron expected her battle over discovering a very real man would not be pretty. No, she would probably turn into a very real and furious cockatrice.

That posed the largest problem. How in the world could he explain her presence on board his ship? Answers continued to escape him, every excuse died by his own questions, never would they withstand those of his men. Her appearance earlier in the voyage could have been explained by a very believable stowaway story and solved everything. Now, there was only one thing to do and Aaron did not like the answer.

The stronger light moving into the cabin told him he must act. The consequences over her discovery were too great to bear thinking about.

Heavy movements filled with regret took Aaron about the cabin locating the items he needed. Pulling at the curtain cord, Aaron yanked it off its hold. Snapping it between his large hands, he tested its strength. Satisfied, he pulled down its mate. Going to the wardrobe, he retrieved a scarf, selecting silk over a rougher material.

He could not put it off any longer. Mister Baker would soon be seeking him out if he failed to appear on deck. The man's growing concern over his captain's actions of late would drive him to the cabin. Smiling sadly, Aaron wondered what Baker would do if he really knew the peculiarities of his captain's condition.

As gently as possible Aaron wrapped the first cord about her ankles, taking the length up to her knees, he secured it tightly, knowing all her movements would be restricted by the rope's hold. Taking her wrist Aaron moved first one, than easing her on her side he secured the other to the first, bringing the rope end down to her ankles. Only a small moan came from her during his binding. He hoped, knowing how badly he felt upon waking, that she was just suffering from the effects of the journey through that black void he now remembered. Touching her delicate wrists and ankles, Aaron worried over how frail they appeared. He would need to check the ropes continually to prevent any harm to her.

He hated tying her like this, knowing how frightened she would soon become. Only the gag remained. It pained him beyond thought to do this terrible thing to her, but remembering the fight in her, he could not chance her discovery. Lowering himself over her, Aaron hesitated, "Ah my beauty, you will hate me for this, but I will make it up to you, I promise. Just three days, bear it for three days." Sealing his words with a light kiss, Aaron placed the gag to her silent mouth. Easing her tied body against the inside wall of the bunk, he covered her with the quilts.

At the door, he turned to check on his handy work. From where he stood, she could not be seen and no one would pass this threshold. Thankfully, they were sailing the *Wanderer*. His cabin was in the stern, away from all the other quarters. The passenger cabins were empty and only he came to this section. To be sure, Aaron locked his cabin, something he never had call to do before this day. Neither had he ever tied up a defenseless woman, but her discovery posed too great a danger.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he would make quick with his rounds this morn. Remembering her softness and the cord's roughness there was little time before she did injury to herself.

## Chapter Two

### *No Escape!*

Smothering the groan that tore through her, Mackenzie failed to escape the rolling sensation. An excruciating pain started exploding against her temples. She wanted to hold her head, but her hands refused to cooperate. The struggles to dislodge her arms brought on the sinking realization her legs were also entangled in an unbreakable vise. Against the spiral of panic Mackenzie forced her eyes open. What appeared nearly made her fall back into the blessed blackness. The bed was large, yet set back in a walled cubby of heavy dark planks. Wood was all around her, there were no greens or blues, nothing of her room existed!

The sudden knowledge, that she could neither move nor speak, nearly drove her to hysterics. The gag covering her mouth became a mighty deterrent to any tearful fits she wanted to drown in. An escalating belief that she would suffocate made her crazy. Gradually she gained some semblance of calm by taking deep breaths through her nostrils. Each controlled breath brought with it the heavy scent of the ocean. Focusing on that discovery, she refused to acknowledge she was tied and gagged like some pig ready for slaughter. Mackenzie looked around the dimly lit area deciding it was some kind of cabin.

Feeling the rolling again, her heart sank. *If this was a cabin, the sea air, rolling...Oh God, she was on a ship!* The light filtering into the room opened her vision to the size of the cabin. Mackenzie held little desire to discover what came with this insight. How could she be in New York City, inside her apartment one minute and on a ship the next? What if it was more than a minute, a night or longer? As she closed her eyes, the troubled thoughts fueled her apprehension.

The rope's tightness bit her flesh. Whoever did this to her knew his business, rocking was even impossible. At least she was warm and begrudgingly thanked her tormentor for the quilt thrown over her naked...*naked!*



*Tormentor! That man!* She scoffed at the notion, *pure foolishness*. The memory trying to invade her mind made her squeeze her eyes shut. Her struggles against the ropes renewed in earnest. *He was a burglar or kidnapper that is all he could be. Had he done this to her?*

One terrible thought persisted; how did he look like that? It was more than a similarity; he was the perfect double for her imaginary man. No excuses dispelled that fact. *How did he find me?*

A sinking feeling told her she knew the answer, making her fight harder to break free. Her wrists and ankles were burning and her legs throbbed from the lack of circulation. The cords tightened because of her straining and nothing she tried would loosen them. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on controlling the pain.

Mackenzie's breathing grew strained and shallow, causing fine beads of perspiration to dot her forehead. Her mind swirled with the pain, causing her to miss the movement in the cabin. When the quilt flew off her, Mackenzie knew if not for the gag, her scream would have awakened the dead. There, hovering above her with a look that frightened her beyond reason stood her dream. The hands turning her over were blessedly real as they eased the rope's hold about her legs.

Her large eyes full of fright and pain watched every move he made.

Aaron expected she would do this to herself and questioned his anger with her. She would never do it again. One by one, he untied the ropes and rubbed back the circulation until her limbs glowed once again in their ivory color.

The warnings not to linger plagued Aaron. He could not allow anyone to get curious over his sudden change of habit. He realized he should say something to ease the fright he saw in her eyes, but was unsure how to explain. Aaron started to back off the bed when she moaned and her sudden movement halted his escape. The pleading depths of her eyes nearly choked him. He could only imagine how she felt. "Listen, I will be back as soon as I can. Do not struggle anymore, you will only hurt yourself."

Turning away from those eyes brightening with unshed tears, Aaron's long strides took him to the door. He looked back, knowing she could not see him. "I am sorry for this, but it cannot be helped." Telling her she must endure this treatment for three days seemed like an abusive thing to do.

The fall of the lock echoed through the room with deafening finality. Her mind screamed for him to come back. She feared being left alone with only her thoughts; they scared her more than he did.

His gentle touch proved a surprising contrast to the anger lighting his eyes. Last night he glared at her with the same stormy look. She'd seen more than anger in those dark, turbulent depths.

Mac groaned over the memories flooding her, she wanted to hide in shame for what she remembered. How could she be so wanton, so seductive and...Mac didn't want to remember any more. It couldn't have happened, she would never do something like that...to just throw away her virginity to a complete stranger! There was no excuse for her behavior, only that she did believe him to be a dream. Nothing more than a...*dream lover*.

It was impossible, he must be a burglar. But why did he pick her? How did he find her? If he were a thief, the chances of him randomly robbing her apartment were too great to even imagine. She had no money to speak of. A failing business would hardly be any great prize. What did he have to gain from all this and why bring her here? Looking again at what she could see, the ship appeared to be so different; so...old, yet it wasn't. A modern day pirate, on an antique ship?

Mackenzie's frustration started rising higher than the waves beneath her. Her deductions were getting crazier by the second; but it was better than dwelling on the dark thoughts she refused to listen to. What they implied truly frightened her.

The sound of the waves hitting the boards at her back mounted with each roll of the ship, lending little comfort to the turbulence of her thoughts. *Don't think about the roll, Mackenzie. Concentrate on something else!* As much as she hated admitting it, she wished he would come back.

He did return as he said he would. His visits were quick and efficient, although he refused to look at her. Being gagged became the worse torture of all when she so desperately needed answers.

By the end of the day, Mackenzie's thoughts were running wild. She hated him beyond reason. When he left, she thought she would die if he failed to return. She was hungry, confused and humiliated by the need to relieve herself. She tried not to think about it, but by nightfall, she grew desperate. Gag or no gag, she needed to make him stay and understand.

Through the long, agonizing day, Mackenzie thought over everything she could remember leading up to where she found herself. All her deductions were as full of holes as the colander on her kitchen wall. Mackenzie refused to believe in some weird nightmare. She found only one answer, it was absurd but she held to it...Gloria!

At first she felt ashamed over the thoughts against her friend, but because she knew Gloria's fondness for going to the extreme, Mackenzie believed she found her answer. Somehow, Gloria created this great elaborate setting, using a real actor to play her kidnapper. Mackenzie convinced herself her friend did this out of some fantastic need to help. It made sense. She savored the thought of getting her hands on her friend's lovely neck. Gloria's intentions might be in the right place, but somehow this had gone too far and Mackenzie was furious.

Enjoying her new anger, Mackenzie decided she would play along with them. Once she got home, she would have more than a few choice words for Gloria and that man, that actor. She would see to it that his handsome face never graced a glossy again. Feeling better over having an outlet to plan her revenge, Mackenzie refused to listen to the little voice disputing her conclusions. What the voice kept saying seemed too impossible to contemplate.

Neither did she want to dwell on her behavior with this man. So she gave him her virginity, most women her age wouldn't even have it fret over and they would certainly jump at the chance to make love to a man like...him. Yes, he was real alright and just seeing him made her sexual bells start to ring. She didn't know which was worse, her behavior with him or the fact that she still wanted him, wanted to feel his cock buried inside of her like he did before. The memory made her squirm and wish she could move her hands, relieve the hunger he ignited!

Mac prided herself on being a realist and refused to dwell on what she couldn't change. Crying over losing her virginity when she rarely thought about it would be a waste of energy when every muscle in her body screamed for release.

It grew completely dark in the cabin and he didn't come back for a long time. Mackenzie tried to concentrate on her plan to get even, but it soon lost its appeal. She grew frightened and very uncomfortable. Self-pity proved useless, but she lost the battle over the sobs racking her body.

Every time he unlocked the door and entered the room, Aaron expected to find her gone. Staring into the darkness, the weeping he heard told him she remained. He hated hearing her distress, knowing the state she must be in.

Lighting the lamp, he adjusted the wick until it cast an even glow throughout the cabin. Squaring himself, he faced the bed and braced himself for what would come. Her efforts to control herself reached him, the knowledge felt like a splinter digging deeper into his conscience. Lifting the covers from her, Aaron nearly moaned over the teary evidence of her ordeal. "I will untie you." Her eyes grew large over his words. "But only if you promise to remain calm and quiet."

Seeing how eagerly she nodded, Aaron sensed she would agree to anything at this point. The girl looked defeated. "If you fail to heed me, I will have no recourse but to bind you again. Do you understand?"

Furiously nodding, Mackenzie tried to make him believe her. *Oh God, how well I understand.* Trying to control herself as his hands loosened the knots, Mackenzie wanted to scream out with her impatience to be free. Schooling her emotions, she refused to give him any reason to carry out his threat. When he finally finished and began massaging her legs and arms, she thought she would cry. Every touch brought fresh pain and so much more. His touch was like an erotic dance and she failed to prevent her moans from escaping.

"I am sorry. This should help. You must take it slow." Releasing her, he reached out, causing her to shrink back from his hand. "Damn it, woman, do you not want the gag removed?"

She grew still, not sure if shame or the urgency to protect herself made her pull back. But causing his anger led to ropes and she possessed no desire to feel them again.

When the scarf fell away, instant relief flooded her. Gulping down the air, she laughed over the ecstasy it delivered. She refused to care that he watched her display. Running her hands over her arms helped to restore the circulation. There was no way around it, she must look at him and speak to him. Mackenzie chose her words with the utmost care. Her burning wrists and ankles were a constant reminder of what the loss of control meant.

Aaron marveled at the girl half sitting, half lying before him. The internal battle glaring out of those eyes grew mutinous. They held the

blue of a fathomless ocean, and like the ocean, they hid the turmoil beneath the surface. She was far too intelligent to allow her emotions to rule and the discovery filled him with respect for her. Aaron held no doubts over how difficult it must be for her not to retaliate. The knowledge kept him on guard, for she could explode at any second.

Yet, even in her disheveled state, she was extraordinarily beautiful and Aaron's eyes took their fill. Her futile attempt to pull the quilt over her breasts made him regret his lack of control. Her defensive act struck out at him stronger than her fist might have. He hated seeing her like this, so helpless. He wished they were off the ship, right now! Aaron wanted the woman he held last night. Her warm unbound passion and yes, even her valiant fighting spirit. Never did he want to see this fear in her eyes for him.

Rising off the bed, Aaron went to the wardrobe, pulling one of his shirts from the drawer. Going back, he tossed it to her. "Put it on, it gets chilly at night, winter is close."

Shocked by his sudden act, she could only hold the shirt to her chest. The garment's clean smell filled her flaring nostrils and with it, came instant recognition of the man glaring at her.

"Well, what are you waiting for, woman? Put it on!"

Snapping at her like that brought her back straight up. Scooting off the bed, every move registered its protest. Struggling, she lowered herself down off the high bed pulling the quilt with her. Standing shakily before him, she faced her tyrant. "I would love to accommodate you. Where is your bathroom?"

"Bath...room?"

Nearly screaming over her own impatient need, remembering the ropes, she remained as calm as possible. "The john? Toilet?" Each name she could think to say seemed to draw a larger blank from him.

"Woman, you are not cooperating."

"I...look, I want to put this on. Where can I do it?" As if understanding finally hit him, his eyes eased their hold against her. When he walked past her, Mackenzie wondered what he expected from her now. She followed him but kept her distance, never forgetting the strength he commanded and could use against her.

"You may attend yourself here. I will wait over there."

Looking where he pointed, she bit her tongue to hold her temper in check.

"Is something wrong?"

“No. I mean...is this it?”

“If you mean, that, madam, it is the best you will ever find on any ship.” Mackenzie nearly died of embarrassment as her eyes followed his outstretched hand and settled on the open area at the back of the cabin.

Turning from her, he went across the cabin and kept his back to her.

“I...”

“Yes?” he asked.

Seeing he was going to turn, she rushed on. “Nothing, it is fine. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Take your time.”

*Damn his arrogant hide. Antique ship my foot! This is too much.* Lifting the wooden lid, “Oh my God, it’s a chamber pot!”

Closing it quickly over the chuckle coming from him, Mackenzie hastily shed the quilt and slipped on the large shirt. Fighting the full, billowy sleeves, she finally managed to get both arms in it, the length reached her knees. The deep, open neckline showed more than she wanted, but it certainly felt considerably warmer.

Turning to face the only thing close to a toilet, she could only stare at it, wondering what to do. Her refusal to use it was short lived. Facing true embarrassment, she finished as quickly as possible.

Seeing the pitcher and basin, she washed as best she could. Running her fingers through her hair, she gave up the effort, knowing it was a frightful mess. She wished she’d not been so stubborn about cutting it for a newer, shorter style. The natural curls were impossible to control, the fact the long spirals reached her waist did little to help the situation.

“Are you finished, madam?” Not seeing her tested his patience. The guilt for not realizing her needs shamed him further. Tomorrow he would take his lunch here and give her the time she needed.

*He certainly played his role to the limit,* Mackenzie thought. All this formal speech and the cabin, now that she could see it, overflowed with antiques. Very valuable ones if all her browsing through those shops taught her anything. They went to considerable trouble. Regardless, she possessed little desire to indulge in this fantasy and she would tell him, in spite of the consequences.

“Yes, I am quite finished. Finished with this whole, elaborate game you and Gloria are playing. I want to go home...now!”

Aaron turned slowly to face the woman. Her amiable attitude did not last long. Smiling, he never expected it to. A rosy color tinted her proud cheeks, lending evidence to the flame of her mounting anger. She looked very young and lost in his shirt. He groaned. What a picture she made as she stood in front of the lamp. A very lovely lady, full of womanly curves, appeared through the material, so inviting. Her bare legs were exquisite and exceedingly tempting. Her stormy eyes were glaring at him in righteous indignation and he could hardly fault her anger.

"I said, Gloria's little conspiracy is finished, so take me home."

The time had come to discover what he dreaded all day. Aaron chose his words carefully, never taking his eyes away from her. "I cannot, but you are free to use your magic and go back from whence you came."

"Magic? This is too much. Look, I admit you are one hell of an actor, but God knows my patience is nearly gone. I won't be responsible for my actions if you continue this." She knew she struck a nerve by the renewed glare of anger in those awesome eyes. He was so damn handsome. She refused to think about him and last night. She could have kicked herself for the reminder, only she ached too much. All she wanted right now was to go home. She felt like Dorothy, only Toto was missing and he was a far cry from any wizard.

"As I stated, you may go. I will not stay you from using your powers."

"Powers? Magic? What the fuck are you talking about?"

He stepped toward her then and instinctively she moved back.

"Woman, if you continue to use such language, I will gag you."

Mackenzie blanched at the prospect, deciding the man never issued hollow threats. Trying another strategy, she went more carefully with her words. "All right, I'm sorry, but whatever Gloria paid you I will double it, just take me home."

"I know not of your Gloria. Is she another witch?"

"Witch? Right now I suppose she could very well be considered one."

"Then go forward, call this Gloria if you need her help to return. I will allow it."

Mackenzie knew her mouth dropped open over his statement. She nearly cried out in exasperation when he calmly took a seat and

waited for her to do something. But what? What was he talking about?

Realization came slowly to her. This man considered her some kind of sorceress with magical powers. If only she did possess them, she would blink him into oblivion!

“Well? Summon the other witch.”

Mackenzie had a sickening feeling any response she attempted would be wrong. Something told her he believed she could do it and what that meant really frightened her.

“Where are your powers, madam?”

“My name is Mackenzie...I have no powers.” Mackenzie heard the shrill tone in her voice and tried to swallow her rising panic.

“Then assemble this Gloria or your master.”

Breathlessly, she tried to make him understand. “I...I am not a witch.”

“You beckoned me and you deny your powers? Do you take me for a fool?”

Petrified by the way he kept looking at her, she started shivering about what his statement implied. “I did nothing. I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“No?”

“No!” Clenching her fist to her stomach, she barely kept the hysteria out of her voice.

“Then you cannot leave?”

She could, but not the way he meant. “No.”

“Your master will not take you back?”

There it was again, this master thing. She held back the smart retort screaming inside her head. “I do not have any master. I am not a witch. And, I do not possess any magical powers.” There, she denied all his accusations. He did not look too satisfied, but more relaxed. “Please take me home. I won’t say anything about this, I swear. I just want to go home.”

The plea in her voice and fear trembling through her told him she spoke the truth. He was relieved she was not a witch. If she professed no powers, how did this happen? He knew he was incapable of helping her any more than he could help himself. “I cannot take you back.”



"But..." Biting her lip, she stopped the words; they were useless. Something was terribly wrong. She needed to get some answers. "Where am I?"

Answering appeared simple, but he found it impossible to contain his mounting concern over her reaction. "You are presently two days out from Boston Harbor, if the trades hold."

"A ship?"

"Yes, the *Wanderer*."

Afraid, but not sure why, Mackenzie asked the question she feared the most. "What is the date?"

It was not a question he expected; but then, neither was she. Deciding to indulge her, Aaron answered, "The date is October 17, 1773."

She wanted to scoff at his answer; nothing made any sense. Gloria seemed very far away and the reason for all this even farther. All her earlier fears came rushing back with a force that stole her breath and sent the room spinning.

Her sudden paling startled him into action, enabling him to catch her before she collapsed to the floor. Lifting her in his arms, Aaron stood there holding her. The shock and disbelief that flashed in her eyes appeared all too real. Carrying her back to the bed, he moved to place her into it. The sudden grip of her hands on his shirt stopped him.

"Please, what happened? Tell me!"

"I do not know."

"You must, this can't be real it is August 6, 2003, not 1773! I want to go back!"

"I wish..."

"You did this to me! I remember. I begged you not to..." Nothing mattered; she struck out with the unsettling fear taking control of her. He could not be real, none of this was happening.

"Stop it, woman! I do not want to harm you!"

Blue eyes locked on black with the rage flaring to life. One of them was certifiably insane. "No? What do you call this?"

"I call this a..."

The knocking on his cabin door surprised Aaron as much as the girl in his arms, but he moved faster. Dropping her legs and bringing his hand over her mouth, he prevented her cry from escaping. Pulling

her to his chest, he ended her struggles. "Not one word, do you understand?"

Against her will, she nodded her head.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, I wondered if I might have a word with you?"

His stilling gaze drove into the hope lighting her large eyes. *Why now, what could he do with her?* "Mister Baker, I will..." The door came open before Aaron could react. The breath left him as Baker's shocked eyes took in the condemning scene he found his captain in. Baker's stunned stare was quickly replaced with the condemning knowledge Aaron feared over her discovery. He could feel his life slipping away, everything he worked for was yanked out from beneath him, and all because of this struggling woman in his arms. He could see Baker's eyes taking everything in and Aaron was helpless to stop the implications from forming. Aaron's stubborn pride rose and refused to be beaten by this; there was a way out. "Come in Mister Baker."

The older man's eyes finally left the girl, resting in disbelief on his captain. Stammering, "Aye, sir."

"Shut the door please."

"Oh! Of course, sir." As Baker fumbled with the door, Aaron's mind raced. Somehow, he would find a way to salvage this; if not, the damage would ruin him. Baker was a good man, very religious, he would be difficult to convince. Aaron counted on the man's years with him to prevail over the blatant evidence. Aaron's immediate problem rested in explaining Mackenzie and the hold he still maintained to keep her from speaking out.

"Baker, could you give me a minute, please? My lady and I are having a disagreement."

"Oh aye, sir. I will wait over here, sir."

"Thank you."

Moving back as far as possible, Aaron forced her to move with him, keeping his hand clamped firmly over her lips.

"Listen..." He shook her until she looked at him instead of Baker. "I will say this only once. You will remain quiet, not one word will you utter, for if you fail to obey me, I cannot say what I might do or what might happen to you. Your presence is as unwanted by me, as yours is to be here. So, unless you would like to try and explain it to two hundred men, who have been at sea for six months, without a

woman, I suggest you shut that beautiful mouth of yours.” To insure she understood, even if her enlarging eyes silently told him she did, he decided to reinforce it. “And, my pretty, they burn witches.”

She struggled in earnest over his words, but he held her fast. “No one would believe you, you little fool. Hell, neither of us can explain how you came to be here. So remain silent or I will not be able to save you. Do you understand?”

This couldn’t be happening...burning witches? Oh heavens, what could she do?

His arm jerked her up harder against him. His heat burned through his shirt. She remembered the older man’s shock at seeing her and the condemnation his eyes held. What choice did she have? Mackenzie slowly nodded her consent. She felt so alone.

“Good, now go and get up in the bed, and stay hidden. The less he sees of you, the better.” Releasing her, to be sure she understood Aaron raked his eyes over her breast, causing her to clutch at the open vee of his shirt.

Halting her with his whisper, “Mackenzie, what is your last name?”

Why she didn’t think his question strange made her want to laugh. “Richardson, Mackenzie Anne Richardson.”

“Aaron Masters at your service.” His finger lifted her dropped chin, shutting her mouth. “Mackenzie, please get up on the bed.”

“All right.” Stopping before she turned toward the bed, she looked up at him. “Aaron...I’m scared.”

He gave her a rueful smile, “I know, so am I.”

Why did he have to be so honest? Mackenzie refused to look at the other man, knowing his back was turned, thankful for his consideration as the high bed proved hard to navigate. She scrambled up and over, moving back to the wall and waited for whatever might happen.

She gave up trying to hear men’s quietly spoken conversation. Resting her head back against the wall, Mackenzie tried to make sense out of where she found herself. A dream taking place in 1773? No, that much she refused to accept. Maybe she just needed to finish the dream and she would wake up, safe in her bed, alone. Yes, that must be the answer. Soon, soon, it would all be over.

“Mackenzie?”

She could not make herself move away from the safety of the shadows. "Yes?"

"I have to leave for a while, but I will be back as soon as I can. I will lock the door so you will not be bothered. It would be better if the men remain ignorant of your presence. Mister Baker has agreed to hold silent for your safety. Do you understand?"

"Yes Aaron, I will be fine."

"Good, we will talk when I return."

He barely heard her whispered reply. He knew his declaration scared her. If she only understood how deserving her fears were. Exaggerating the number of men and months hardly diminished the threat they posed, even two days from port. The fact they would believe their captain enjoyed her company, the entire voyage, would be justification for a mutiny.

He stalled Baker, knowing he did not want her to hear his decision for the only believable explanation. Thank God that Baker did not find her tied. He'd been a fool to think he could keep her hidden. All those trips to his cabin were too noticeable, causing Baker to think him ill. Baker would believe his story because he was a good man and held faith in his captain. Aaron hated thinking on how he, himself, would react over a discovery of this magnitude. What he was about to commit to, seemed the only option open to him and Mackenzie. Denying his responsibility to her was impossible.

\* \* \* \*

The cool breeze off the night waves helped to clarify his thoughts as Baker waited patiently beside him. Aaron's course was set and gale force winds would not change what the man had seen. "Mister Baker, first, thank you for your understanding. I am embarrassed by my actions..."

"Now, sir, I know how women can be at times."

"Perhaps, please let me explain. The lady is Miss Mackenzie Anne Richardson, and she is a lady...my fiancé." Aaron waited a moment for his words to take hold. "We are planning to be married upon arriving in Boston. It was foolish of me, but I found it impossible to refuse her pleas to remain hidden. You see she feared the journey from England, especially being the only woman on a ship with... Well, I am sure you understand."

"Of course, the poor girl. But how did..."

"Ah, yes, we almost pulled it off, but she has been sick and I worried over her well being. I believe my frequent trips to check on her gave us away. We have no passengers, so I have been sleeping in the empty cabin during the evenings. I am relieved you understand. I regret not confiding in you, but men do unusual things for their loved ones."

"Oh aye, sir."

"I am sure you appreciate my concern over keeping this from the men. I would be honored to have you present at the wedding. Mackenzie is without family, due to her father's recent passing, an old friend of my family. It only seemed proper for me to step in and protect her. The news reached me before we sailed, leaving no time to arrange our marriage in England."

"I am sure she is grateful. I will keep your secret, by my word, sir."

"Thank you Mister Baker, and I hope my own honor has not been diminished for my foolishness."

"Hardly, sir. I understand completely. You have chosen a very beautiful wife, if I may be so bold as to say."

"Of course Mister Baker, she most certainly is that and more."

The man would never voice his doubts. He knew Aaron took the proper course, whether he believed the story or not. Now, all he needed to do was convince Mackenzie. He had two days; he hoped it would be enough. Smiling to himself...it would have to be.

\* \* \* \*

"Marry you? Of all the gall! How could you say such a thing?" Flinging her curls back over her shoulder, Mackenzie pushed past him and resumed her heated pacing.

Stars, she was glorious. Aaron hid his amusement, watching her stomp around him was worth her anger. Life could never be dull with her in it. She would be a handful, one he could barely restrain from touching.

After bringing her supper last night and finding her in an exhausted sleep, he decided to leave the explanations until today. Taking the room across the hall he hoped to satisfy Baker's curiosity, sure the man would check. Gaining the small bunk Aaron finally found the sleep he needed. No longer did the night hold her haunting cries. She still invaded his dreams, leaving him wanting her more than before.

Avoiding their confrontation until this afternoon appeared to be the easiest part of telling her about his decision. Why she refused to understand that marriage was the obvious answer taxed his patience. Mackenzie proved to be different from the women of his acquaintance. Every woman he knew, if caught in this position, would jump at the chance of marriage. In all probability, they would demand it.

He was considered a very good catch as husbands went. Any woman he might select would want for nothing. He owned one of the finest houses in Salem, on Chestnut Street. His associates considered Masters Shipping as one of the up and coming. "Mackenzie, I have told you, it is the only way. Once Baker saw you, there was no way around it."

"Really? Well, if you think I will just walk into some church and say 'I do', without so much as a whimper, you are nuts!"

"And if you do not lower your voice, I will put that infernal gag back on you!"

"Don't even try it!"

"Do not push me, woman!"

"The name is Mackenzie, try Mac if that's too difficult, Aaron. And I am not your...woman!"

He could correct her, but she would know the truth of it soon enough. Aaron thought hard over the commitment he put on himself and over the unusual circumstances that placed him in this situation. Neither of them controlled the *force* that brought them together. Mackenzie certainly did not or she would have left by now.

A smile came over him, *so she was Mac*. Aaron felt relieved that no man nor master named Mac would appear. He also declared her statement about 2003 a ruse!

Neither of them broached the subject again. Aaron felt confident he handled the situation in an appropriate manner, but to believe she came from the future; well, he refused to let her go on about it.

Mackenzie was his responsibility, whether she wanted his protection or not. He truly feared for her well-being if she were to leave him. As disorientated as she appeared on his ship, Aaron wondered what to expect once they reached Boston? She was the farthest creature from a witch, but her strange mannerisms and speech would draw unwanted attention. Of course, burning had been abolished, but the fear remained, especially in Salem.

“Aaron, you are ignoring me.”

“No, I doubt I could ever do that.”

“Oh...well, you didn’t answer me.” She wished his eyes were not so intense. She felt the warming deep inside her return. Just a look from those midnight ebonies could bring the flames of passion back to life. Mackenzie found it hard to concentrate on his words. His captivating looks were unnerving. Thick hair as black as a raven’s wing moved freely about his proud features. Those eyes could be hard as flint when angry or warm as a full moon on the open water, like they were now. His skin looked healthy and golden from the sun. His lean, masculine physique mirrored the man’s latent power. She never saw a man hold himself with the confidence Aaron possessed. In spite of the hardness he exhibited, there was gentleness inside him. She felt it in his touch, heard it in his voice, even saw it in those thick lashed eyes when she caught him staring at her.

Mackenzie wanted to hate this man for what he had done to her. Maybe the regret she sensed from him kept her hostility from flourishing. Even now, telling her she would marry him, she was angry, yet she struggled to keep it alive in his presence. She learned more about him every minute. His threats, when not accompanied by that thunderous stare, were filled with humor. She liked bantering with him, she felt exhilarated. He treated her like an individual, willing to listen, enjoying the moment. There was also a dark side to Aaron. Mackenzie experienced it that first night; that need to control, to dominate, a drive to possess whatever he wanted. She never wished to see Aaron like that again.

“Mackenzie, it seems it is you who ignores me.”

*Hardly.* She refuted his accusation in silence. Smiling, she forced herself to put some distance between them. His eyes seemed to pull her to him, making it extremely difficult to think. Last night Aaron’s words shocked her. Burning witches, 1773...shaking her head to clear it, she admitted she must be caught in some strange phenomena. She now existed in Aaron’s world. Aaron’s disbelief over her claim of coming from the future bothered her immensely.

This morning Mackenzie allowed herself to take an honest look at her surroundings. The ship and Aaron’s cabin could have come out of some adventure book. The various items in the room appeared authentic, down to the old map charts, but none looked over two

hundred years old. There was one thing she detested admitting, she was alone with no money...fingering his shirt...not even clothes.

When Mr. Baker brought her lunch, she learned Aaron was the captain of this ship. The man left no doubts concerning her precarious situation with the crew. The shouts she heard from the portal said there were many men on board. Not for a moment did she believe this to be 1773, but she would be foolish not to take note of the dangers she sensed. If they forgot to lock her in, she would do it herself with the key she found above the door.

Aaron told her they would be docking in Boston tomorrow. Once there Mackenzie would discover the truth. She needed to find a way to get back to New York. The suspicions she held that Aaron might try to stop her, convinced her not to tell him of her plans.

"Mackenzie?" The impatience in his voice made her jump. His hands came on her shoulders to steady her. She felt the controlled strength in his touch. Mackenzie wanted to lean back and let his unspoken offer of protection shelter her. "Sorry, I did not mean to frighten you. You were far away, Mackenzie. I need you here, talking to me."

"So much has happened; I have to make sense of it."

"It will be all right, let me help you."

Turning under the light pressure he applied, she faced him. It became increasingly hard to look at him. The prospect of deceiving him made her stomach feel like a skating rink; somehow it just felt wrong.

Tucking his finger under her chin, he forced her eyes to meet his. "Mackenzie, neither of us expected to marry so suddenly, but there is no other option, you must accept it."

"I'm trying."

"Good, is there anything you want to ask me?"

There were a hundred questions, but none she dare voice. Stubbornly, she remained silent.

"Mackenzie?" He hated the closed look she held out to him and what he suspected it meant.

"Yes?" Her voice sounded as stiff as the control she exerted to remain calm.

"You do see that marriage is our only course?"



No, she did not! She left behind a business she needed to save, a life to put back together and she missed Gloria. "Yes of course, Aaron. When will it happen?"

"It, will take place tomorrow. My priest will be shocked, but he will be pleased to accommodate us."

"Priest?"

"Why, yes, do you object?"

"No...no, why should I object?" How could this be happening? If a priest married her, it would mean they were really married.

"What is wrong, Mackenzie?"

She knew she turned twenty shades of red. She must say something. "I haven't been to confession in a while." Those words held the first hint of truth to pass her lips in the last five minutes.

Aaron laughed with relief over her distress. "I am positive the good Father Donovan will hear them before the marriage. Is there something else?"

Shaking her head, she wished he would leave. "Please, I would like to be alone." Dropping her eyes, she inwardly cringed over the flash of hurt marring his face, knowing her words were the culprit.

"All right Mackenzie, I will be back tonight. If you decide to really talk, I will be glad to listen."

Why did he have to be so considerate? When he turned from her, her heart cried out to stop him. "Aaron?"

"Yes." He held back from looking at her, knowing the anger he carried would show.

"Nothing." How could she tell him she was sorry and still deceive him?

The door closed hard under the tension hanging between them.

Mackenzie heard a moan and realized it came from her. There must be a way to avoid marrying Aaron. If they were wed by a priest, she held little doubt how Aaron would envision the marriage. Memories of the night he came to her, rushed back with all their heated clarity. "No! I must leave before the wedding!"

She visited Boston last Christmas for an ad campaign with her father. With any luck, Aaron would be taking this relic to the old dock area. Once they docked, she could get away.

Mackenzie spent the balance of the day planning her escape. Hoping she would not be caught she invaded his closet, finding another shirt and pants that fit enough to get by in. Shoes were

another matter; she never realized Aaron's feet were so large. Groaning over the absurdity of trying to wear any of his footwear, going barefoot seemed preferable to clopping about. The thought of walking on streets and sidewalks was disgusting, and could prove painful, but desperation set in.

By nightfall, everything was in place for her escape. Mackenzie felt her first tingle of hope since waking into this strangeness.

\* \* \* \*

Smiling to himself, Aaron pushed off his cabin door. Unfolding his arms, he blew a kiss at the locked door before returning on deck.

Breathing deep of the night air, he whispered to the moon. "Yes, life will never be dull."

"What did you say, Captain?"

"Nothing, Mister Baker. I will take the wheel for the first watch."

"Aye, sir."

"Would you take Miss Richardson some dinner and please give her my regrets. I will not make it back to bid her goodnight."

"Yes sir, but does she not expect you?"

"No Mister Baker, I do not think she does." Aaron's satisfied laughter carried across the deck.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Facing the truths*

“It’s stopped!” Mackenzie shoved the covers back and jumped off the bed. “We must have docked!” Running to the portal for her first view of Boston, Mackenzie felt the anchor chain cut loose. “No! Damn you!”

“Something wrong, my lady?”

Spinning around, Mackenzie reeled on Aaron too angry to think about what she said. “Why aren’t we at the docks?”

“Ah, well now, the docks are full.” Striding across the room, Aaron headed for the wardrobe. “Not to worry, the men are already lowering the long boats for unloading.”

“What are you doing?”

“What?” Pulling his boots off, Aaron looked innocently at her, letting them drop to the floor before he peeled off his shirt. Hiding his amusement over her reaction at finding herself anchored in the harbor was one thing; the look on her face as he disrobed nearly ruined him.

“You’re undressing!”

“One usually does when one needs to change.” Rubbing his hand over his chin, “And I need a shave.” Rummaging through the drawers, slamming one after another, “Now where did those pants go to?”

Mackenzie blanched, turning quickly away. “I’ll just wait over here.”

“All right Mackenzie. Could you pass me the drying cloth?” Aaron began soaping his face with the brush, watching her in the small mirror.

Reaching for the towel, her hands defied her efforts to stop their shaking. Grabbing it to her, she took a deep breath before going over to him. *He couldn’t possibly know, could he?*

She refused to look at his bare back, just knowing he was half naked sent her pulse screaming. Laying the towel by the basin, she wasted little time getting away from him.

“Mackenzie?”

A scream lodged in her throat. *Whatever did he want now?*

“I left something on the table for you.”

She cast a wary glance at his back before going to the table and picking up the small brown package. She wondered what he was up to. Curiosity could be a terribly defeating thing to possess. Pulling the string, the coarse paper fell away. In her hands rested the most beautiful silver comb and brush set she had ever seen. Blinking back the unexpected tears, she turned to face Aaron, thankful he was busy shaving and would not see her reaction to his thoughtful gift. Why did he have to be so nice?

“They are beautiful, thank you. I will always treasure them.”

“I am glad you like them, Mackenzie.” What Aaron saw in the mirror made him want to turn and take her in his arms. He wanted to shower her with gifts, dress her in the finest silks and richest velvets. *Soon, my lovely stranger, soon.*

Mackenzie could not bring herself to use Aaron’s gift in his presence it seemed too intimate. Standing at the portal, she tried to concentrate on controlling the rush of unwelcome emotions concerning Aaron. After everything that happened it was a wonder she wasn’t blubbering all over herself. Honesty made her admit the current state of her emotions had little to do with her predicament and everything to do with Aaron. Her strengthening feelings for this man were not wanted. They were there, even in her dreams, frightening her with its force. As a dream, she could deny it. Dealing with the real man defeated her.

She tried so hard not to let this happen, knowing she feared the marriage more than living the dream. Loving him was wrong, wrong for both of them. Either of them could be gone in an instant. To let herself love him and then lose him; she might not survive that kind of pain.

And what of Aaron? Mackenzie might be naive about relationships, but Aaron possessed a gentle heart. Would it break, like hers, if she vanished? Aaron’s eyes held a special light when they watched her. It may just be the flaring passion that glowed between them. Could he love her? Would he?

“Mackenzie, you can turn around now.”

Wiping her cheeks, she forced a smile, refusing to let him suspect what she just allowed herself to admit.

“My, don’t we look spiffy.” Forcing a note of gaiety into her voice, she used Aaron’s new attire as an excuse to collect her composure.

“Spiffy?”

“Oh, I mean especially nice.”

Impressed was mild for what she saw. The gray wool suit was exquisite. The knee length coat was darted to fit his trim waist. Large buttons headed the darts at his hips tightening the coat’s fullness. Grey slacks hugged his muscular frame to his knees and a silk brocade vest closed over a sky blue, silk ascot. Silk stockings graced his strong calves. Lace ruffled cuffs fell around his wrists beneath the coat’s sleeves, heightening the virile power of the man. A black ribbon held back his hair; she barely controlled the urge to tell him it did little to tame its wildness. Aaron looked so sophisticated, her breath caught over the commanding view.

Self-consciously, she pulled together the vee of his shirt, feeling very out classed and frumpy. Holding to her smile, she met his gaze. “You are an exceedingly handsome man, Aaron Masters.”

Seeing him blush over her honest compliment tickled her no end.

“And you my lady are too bold for your own good.”

“Maybe I am, but I refuse to take it back.”

“In that case, thank you.”

Uncontrolled, her smile widened, showing her dimples. Aaron’s finger touched her cheek, leaving them immersed in warmth.

“They are lovely Mackenzie, you should smile more often. I intend on helping them stay there, forever.”

Her heart nearly stopped beating as he moved closer. The black fire in his eyes was hypnotizing. When his lips took hers, she never thought of objecting. Closing her eyes, she drifted with him, feeling the sensual power in his touch. An undeniable hunger sprang to life, but before she could seek more he pulled back.

Holding her shoulders, Aaron waited for her to open her eyes. So lovely, her parted lips nearly drove him mad. Before his resolve faded, Aaron spoke, “I have to go, they are waiting.”

Those light, coppery lashes fluttering in confusion over her eyes made his body harden. He had to get away before the evidence of his need to possess her became apparent.

“Leave?”

“Only a little while, Baker will be on guard until I return. The men will make quick with the unloading and soon be ashore.”

She felt mesmerized, scarcely able to nod over what his kiss awakened and left unfinished.

“Will you be all right, Mackenzie?”

Pulling back from the torrent he set loose, “Yes, I will be fine.” Her voice sounded strained.

Smiling, Aaron kissed her brow, leaving her to stare after him. Hearing the lock click in the door snapped her out of her trance. She must be gone before he returned.

Taking the clothes from where she hid them, she quickly dressed. Tucking her hair into the knit cap she pilfered from his drawer, Mackenzie regretted not being able to use his gift. Staring at the brush set, she picked it up and stuffed it inside the billowy shirt. Mackenzie prayed her disguise would let her pass for one of the men on board Aaron’s ship.

Hurrying to the door, she raised on her tiptoes to feel the ledge above the door. “It’s not here.” Stretching up, she ran her fingers over the ledge again. “Nothing!” Trying not to panic, Mackenzie dragged the chair over to the door. Stepping up on it, she had her answer. “The key is gone.”

Sinking into the chair, she tried to think. Without the key all her plans to escape were useless. The portal was too small for her to squeeze through. She could try to call the men by screaming her head off. The noise filtering into the cabin told her they would never hear her and Mackenzie closed her eyes in relief. Defeat burned inside her. How could the key be gone? She checked it last night after Baker left.

Dragging the chair back, Mackenzie’s troubled steps halted at the portal. “Oh, that creep! How dare he! Anchoring in the harbor, no room my foot! How did he know?”

It couldn’t have been the pants, he dropped anchor before that. He knew all along that she was planning on leaving! “What’s he got, ESP?” She cried aloud.

Walking over to the wardrobe, she slammed the open door.

"Damn him!" Picking up the pitcher, she halted before heaving it to the floor and gently set it back on the stand. Scanning the room, she knew she had lost. "Why did they all have to be priceless?"

\* \* \* \*

Silence settled around the ship as Mackenzie watched the sunlight slip from the harbor. Her fury over Aaron's duplicity eventually turned into a chill of disappointment. Sometime during the afternoon, her mind registered the number of ships in the harbor. All bore the large masts of frigates. Mackenzie decided they probably looked like Aaron's ship. She refused to listen to the uneasy answers connected with their presence. New York held the answers and somehow she would find a way to get there.

The key turning in the lock startled her. She held her position at the portal, resisting the urge to turn and face him.

"Mackenzie, how was your day?"

*Was he being sarcastic?* Clamping her teeth together, she refused to satisfy the success of his trickery with an answer. She hoped he would never have cause to regret preventing her escape.

Aaron's dark gaze lingered on her tense form. Her refusal to acknowledge him was not surprising. Seeing that his pants still graced her fine limbs left little doubt over the extent of Mackenzie's anger. Aaron decided reasoning with her would get him about as far as bloodied fish in shark-infested water. "I have brought you some items, madam. I suggest you force yourself to cooperate and put them on before Father Donovan arrives."

Turning with what little control she had left, Mackenzie boldly faced him. "What do you mean? He can't be coming here!"

"Father Donovan graciously agreed to hold the wedding here, on my ship. After our consultation he agreed it would be better."

"Better? Better for whom, sir?" Throwing his formality back at him did little to ease her agitation.

"You, my dear."

Hissing at him, she vented her mounting anger. "You bastard!"

"It would please me no end, to shut your lovely mouth with more than a gag." Paling under his threat, Mackenzie barely managed to hold her position as he advanced on her. "If you feel the need for anger save it for when we arrive home. For now, I expect you to make yourself presentable for the good father and my friends. I explained

how much stress the journey placed on you, but should you cross me on this or embarrass yourself, I assure you...you will regret it.”

“Are you threatening me?” What she saw in his eyes caused her breathing to constrict in her chest.

“You are very astute, but it is not a threat. It is most definitely, a promise.”

Mackenzie’s sharp intake of air filled the room. Thinking became impossible as the feeling of being trapped closed in on her.

“Now, unless you want my assistance, I will give you fifteen minutes to get dressed. Everything you need is on the bed. I hope they are satisfactory.”

Fear drove her to scream at his retreating back, “You can’t force me into marrying you!”

Stopping at the door, Aaron turned slowly to face Mackenzie. “No? Think again. Would you prefer burning?”

“You wouldn’t do that.” Mackenzie could barely choke out the words past her disbelief.

“No, but you would, by refusing my offer.”

“You know I am not a witch!”

Moving closer to her, Aaron hissed at her, causing her to stumble back over each heated word. “I know nothing of the sort, and unless you can explain what happened, in a satisfactory manner, I suggest you keep it between us. Whether you believe me or not, you, my dear, are in a very grave situation, one that could cost you your life and mine with it. So you see I have every intention of seeing this through. I will not have my life destroyed because of your foolishness!”

The brutal honesty in his words devastated her. In stunned silence Mackenzie felt the cold truth. Hugging herself to keep the panic inside, she knew she believed him.

“One more thing Mackenzie. Our marriage, whether conducted on this ship or the Church, is lawful and valid in the eyes of the Church and man. You will be my wife in every respect and I expect you to remember your position. Have I made myself clear, madam?” If she failed to heed his warnings, Aaron hated to think what he might be forced to do. “I will have your answer, Mackenzie!”

Being devoured by his anger stole the breath from her. Through clenched teeth she forced her answer, “I understand...perfectly.”

“Be ready in fifteen minutes.” Aaron left her, slamming the door with a force that rocked the walls.



“Fifteen minutes, madam!” His shouted threat reached through the thick door, jerking her into action.

Throwing lids off the large boxes and seeing what they held, Mackenzie’s hands stilled in disbelief. “You are full of surprises, Mr. Masters.” Mackenzie was almost afraid to touch the beautiful Caraco gown. They used one once for an ad campaign, but it did not come close to the elegant gown Aaron brought for her. Gently, she lifted the brocade jacket of ivory satin from the box. Beneath it laid a creamy, peach colored silk skirt, with an ivory ruffle that matched the waist length jacket. To complete the ensemble there was a vee cut, silk vest, with intricate silver buttons running down the front. Under trembling fingers, Mackenzie examined the silken fichu that would be tucked about the inside edge of the vest. Satin slippers and undergarments, all of matching satin completed the garment.

Hearing Aaron’s tempered pacing outside the door, made her moan and nudged her into hurrying. Stripping off his pants and shirt, she slipped on the chemise, taking a second to feel the luxurious material against her skin. The wide laced cuffs of the chemise would extend beyond the jacket, adding to the elegance of the outfit. Marveling over the exceptional fit, she let the feeling of femininity soothe her frayed nerves.

Mackenzie laughed over the object uncovered in the bottom of the box. Picking it up and turning it over, she wondered where he ever found such a thing. A corset was something Mackenzie had only seen in pictures. The stiff, boned wall of heavy material left no doubt in her mind it should remain a thing of the past. Never would she wear the torturous contraption. Leaving it in the box, Mackenzie justified her decision by deciding it would be impossible to strap up the corset’s ties without assistance. Eyeing the door over the only person available to help her finalized her decision. She never knew women wore all these items, struggling through the unfamiliar items she redress once after discovering a new piece. “Pantaloons. My God this is ridiculous.”

Mac stuck her fingers through the opening in the crotch and giggled over the ingenuity. But her thoughts quickly turned from the hole’s true purpose to one that involved Aaron and that marvelous penis and how they make use of ... “I’ve got sex on the brain!”

Totally disgusted with herself, she gave up fantasizing and pulled them on under the chemise, nearly screaming when Aaron knocked on the door. "What?"

"Are you ready?"

Moaning, she yelled at him. "Men! Hold your bitches!"

"What?"

"Nothing, I'll be ready in a minute." At least she hoped so.

Leaning against the door, Aaron smothered his laughter. She came out with some strange expressions and when her temper took over, well he never heard such outbursts from a woman. Somehow the discovery fascinated him, although he would have to explain to her that others might take offense. Aaron discovered everything about Mackenzie could be exhilarating.

He would give her five more minutes. His impatience to make Mackenzie his wife and take her home surprised Aaron. Any man in his right mind would fight rushing to the altar, but Aaron found he could barely control his eagerness.

"Aaron, you can come in now."

When she turned, with her eyes glowing in expectancy, Aaron call on all his self-control not to betray himself to her. Mackenzie would always be an exceptionally lovely woman. Dressed like this, she could put royalty to shame. Aaron's pride swelled because she would soon be his woman. His conviction strengthened over their future. *I'll fight any power they throw at me to keep her.* His silent vow burned in his eyes and in his heart.

"You are beautiful, Mackenzie, Boston will never be the same. I truly regret not being able to give you a church wedding, for there has never been a more beautiful bride. I promise, I will make it up to you, Mackenzie."

No man dared to devour her with his eyes like Aaron did at this moment. A heated blush stained her cheeks, flooding her throat over the promises sparking between them. Blinking away the rush of tears, Mackenzie accepted the truth; she wanted to be with him, had loved him for so long. Could she live with the pain of knowing he may never love her? Mackenzie wasn't blind to the reason he insisted on marrying her. Aaron needed to protect himself, and her, if she allowed herself to believe in him. Mac's greatest fear rested on the belief she might go back to her time and never see Aaron again. No, she could never exist in such emptiness. If she left, right this minute, maybe she

could deal with life without him. Desperation drove her to try to prevent the destruction she feared.

“Aaron, will you listen to what I have to say? Please?”

The warmth vanished from his eyes, leaving in its place a cold, consuming blackness. “They are waiting. We can talk later.”

Grabbing his arm, Mackenzie refused his dismissal; she must try. “No Aaron. What I have to say, I must say now and you have to listen. It’s important to both of us.”

Rage flamed inside him over what he feared from her. “We have no time for this nonsense. I explained and thought you understood.”

“I do, Aaron, I do. It is not that. I will marry you, just hear me out first, please.” Aaron ignored her plea, seeming to listen only to the words he wanted to hear. Sensing the anger he barely contained, she knew she should stop. Taking a deep breath, she plunged on, “Aaron, I am afraid for us. What we are going to do? I can’t help but worry about what happened. I will marry you, but...” She didn’t know how to put the fear into words. “What will happen to us?”

For a second Aaron’s anger brightened his eyes and Mackenzie thought she might have reached him. Screaming under her breath, his stubbornness infuriated her. She cursed his damnable control, knowing the exact moment he shut out everything she said.

“Are you coming, Mackenzie?”

His dark, angry eyes held hers with such force; she was almost tempted to defy him. “Yes, Aaron.” Inside she screamed at both of them!

\* \* \* \*

The ceremony took place on deck, under a setting sun that cast their world in a rich, pink light. Aaron introduced her to his best men; David Brown and a large, intimidating man named Andrew. Panic constricted Mackenzie’s throat, making it impossible for her to do more than give each man an acknowledging nod. Mr. Brown’s encouraging smile nearly ruined Mackenzie’s control. Any thoughts over throwing herself at Mr. Brown’s feet and begging for a reprieve were quickly squelched by the forceful hold Aaron took of her arm.

Kindness must have been part of Father Donovan’s priestly vows. Mackenzie stumbled over nearly every word. The man’s patience with her was extraordinary. She suspected everyone believed her to be understandably nervous and chalked up her errors to the obvious. Mac wondered what they would think if she told them she never heard the

service conducted in Latin. Some of the phrases were familiar, but most left her at a loss during the ceremony; heightening the fragile hold she maintained over her emotions. Mackenzie might never have realized she was now Aaron's wife if he had not turned toward her.

All resistance deserted her when his arms pulled her against him. Aaron claimed her with a kiss full of promise, a kiss that sealed the spoken vows and whispered of the man's possession. But it was the leashed power beneath her hands and in the eyes commanding her attention that left her knees shaking violently beneath the folds of material. Nothing felt real. She lost the will to argue about the hold he kept on her waist, the one that said her she belonged at his side...as his wife!

\* \* \* \*

"Hold tight Mrs. Masters, it's not very far and the Captain is right below you. That's right, just keep looking up. No madam, I said up, not down."

How could she help not doing just that? Hanging over the side of the ship in a sling, swaying, she squeezed her eyes shut. Biting her lip, knowing at any second the rig they made for her would drop her in the water. All her whispered pleading, when she realized what they expected her to do, did not convince Aaron to let her change into the old outfit. He just rolled his eyes to the night as if seeking divine intervention. Well, he was not the one swinging through the air. She could have climbed down that rope ladder as well as he did, even in all these skirts, but he refused to hear of it.

"There my lovely, I have you now." Placing his hand on her tiny waist, he lifted her out of the swing to stand before him. "Mackenzie, you can open your eyes now."

"No, I don't think I want to, it's still rocking."

Coughing to hide his mirth, he said. "That is the boat, not the sling."

"Oh!" Looking timidly around her she was not sure if this *boat* was any safer. "You really should have let me climb down." Ticked over having to hang precariously over the side of his ship she didn't care if he knew it.

"It would have made a beautiful sight."

Following his gaze, she looked up to see Father Donovan's posterior descending. Blushing, she saw what he meant. Thankfully, the good father wore pantaloons of a sort under his priest robe.

“What, nothing to say?”

“Do you always have to be right?”

Aaron’s laughter sent the boat rocking. “Here, sit and do not move.”

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

Shaking his head, Aaron went to help the father to his seat before pushing the boat away from the ship. Aaron and David took to the oars. Mackenzie believed the man called Andrew could have rowed them single-handed to the docks. She decided he deliberately avoided her on the ship. Maybe he realized how overpowering his appearance might be to a woman. Mackenzie wondered what his reaction would be, if she told him she thought he had an awesome body. *Nah, these men would never appreciate her modern thoughts.* Picturing their reactions made her giggle. She seemed incapable of controlling her outburst, blaming it on Aaron and the unsettling affects of his kiss.

Aaron wished he could hear what Mackenzie and the Father were laughing about. Her current gaiety only confirmed his suspicions regarding her precarious emotional state. Aaron should be relieved she lacked the talent to hide her true feeling from him. Oh yes, the lady made an attempt to be coy during the ceremony by stumbling over the words as if they meant little to her. Perhaps he should have ignored her childish display, but something inside him wanted to make her understand she was truly, Mrs. Aaron Masters.

When they reached the dock, Mr. Brown and Andrew said their good byes. She overheard Aaron making plans to meet them at his office tomorrow afternoon. She bit her lip not to speak up and invite herself along. Somehow, she would find a way to be included; she really wanted to see Aaron’s business.

Busy fighting the folds of material in the dress, she failed to notice the transportation waiting for them. Taking her arm, Aaron escorted her to a carriage. Pleasure floated over her, making her stop to admire the black carriage.

“Oh Aaron!”

“I thought you would enjoy an open carriage so you could see Boston at night.”

“Yes, I would love to. It’s beautiful Aaron. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Aaron’s troubled gaze followed her examination of the coach. If a common hack could excite her, he wondered what he could expect

from her the rest of the night? Once seated, Aaron watch in uncomfortable fascination as she ran her fingers over the rolled blue velvet and turned the brass door handle to open and shut the door. Like a child, Mackenzie was unaware of the attention her actions drew from Father Donovan. "Ah, Mackenzie, we are going to take the Father back to the church." Aaron hoped he succeeded in drawing her avid attention away from the coach.

"Yes of course." Looking over at the priest and smiling, she couldn't understand the strange look on the man's face. Chancing a glance at Aaron, she wanted to groan over the half pleading smile he gave her. She did something wrong. The only course of action left to her was to ask what or sit quietly back and hope it would pass. Not liking either option, she opted for the first.

Ignoring Aaron, she confronted Father Donovan. "I can see, I have done something. Please Father, tell me? Never would I want to embarrass my husband." Remembering to talk so formally proved more difficult than she expected.

"Well child, it is nothing really."

"No, I insist." Mackenzie could feel Aaron squirming in his seat. She decided she couldn't make it any worse. "You see my father was a recluse and I rarely left our home in the country. To be quite honest, all this is new to me, Father Donovan. I am afraid I have not learned to control my excitement." That should satisfy the good Father, but hers was probably laughing down at her. Being in public relations taught her one thing, improvise when all else fails. Father Donovan's smile told her she just won him over.

"My dear it is I who should apologize. Please, anything you see that needs explanation I would be pleased to help."

"Thank you, Father."

"Aaron, you should have told me."

Before Aaron could answer, she interrupted. "Now Father, Aaron is not to blame. I begged him not to reveal my secluded childhood. I am afraid my own foolishness brought it out in the open."

"Nonsense, your secret is safe."

"Oh, thank you." Mackenzie reached over and gave the old man a peck on his cheek. "Is he not wonderful, Aaron?"

"Yes...he...is."

The Father's blush and Aaron's laughing eyes boosted her spirits. Maybe she would get through this after all.

When the carriage jerked forward Mackenzie's light, girlish laughter filled the air, soon being joined by two lower tones. Riding through town started what she decided was the most bewildering experience in her life. Within two blocks she immediately felt something missing or was it that everything disappeared. There were no cars, no motor vehicles of any kind. Jerking her head around to be sure they were not parked down a side street...nothing. The strangest thing was the lack of any noise, only the clip clop of their horse or those of passing...carriages!

"Mackenzie, is anything wrong?" Aaron lowered his voice to hide his concern.

"No, whatever could be wrong. The city is beautiful." Schooling her face into a passive smile, she hid well the quivering mass of fear building inside. Telling herself she must get through this, somehow.

Remembering the Father's reaction over the carriage steeled her not to reveal anything more. If what she thought was true, they could all think her crazy or a witch. No one must know. Her eyes never stopped searching. The exploration rendered a very frightening reality.

"Aaron are those gas lights?"

"Where Mackenzie?"

"On the poles, the street lights."

"I believe they are oil. They are lit in the evening."

Looking at the houses and storefronts there were no electric lights, no stop lights. She tried to cover her growing nervousness. "Where are we?"

Father Donovan answered her. "It is the main thoroughfare."

She walked on this street last winter, but it looked so different and yet it was familiar. Panic set in, she needed answers. Aaron's eyes were too intent on her, making her wonder if he would answer. She thought the priest would be a better choice.

"Father, is there a festival in town?"

"No child. Why do you ask?"

"The harbor is full of ships. I just thought something might be happening to bring so many into the harbor."

Aaron took her hand and squeezed it. She wondered if he were warning her to be quiet. "I see I will have to educate you on ships, my lady. As for the harbor, Boston is a very productive port. Many shippers run their lines from here."

"Yes, my dear, your husband's fleet numbers eight. Am I right, Aaron?"

"Yes, with two more to be readied by this summer."

Mackenzie's plastered smile faltered over the disclosures. Once started, the men continued their conversation. She hung on every word hoping to understand. The priest's next topic settled around her like a winter storm.

"Aaron has the crown decided to lift the tea tax?"

"No, I am afraid not and there will be trouble. I am sure Adams is furious, his group will never stand easy over another tax."

"No, I suppose not. I try and stay neutral, but this taxing seems so unjust."

"Taxation without a voice is rarely fair."

Bringing her hand to her mouth, she hid her gasp. *Taxation, the tea tax, Boston. No it couldn't be?*

Looking about her again, she nearly cried out before swallowing her hysterics. Time? Was it possible? The shock left her hopeless, New York, her home...were they impossible to reach?

"Child are you all right? Aaron, she looks quite faint."

"Mackenzie?"

"No, please I am fine. It must be the adjustment to land. I am all right, really." She waved them off, with a weak smile.

"Ah, we are here."

At Father Donovan's announcement, her head jerked toward the church. Maintaining her calm was exhausting. Hiding her eagerness Mackenzie quickly moved into action. "Father, Aaron, would you mind if I went in for a minute, I will not be long."

"No of course not."

Too shaken to refuse, she accepted Aaron's outstretched hand to assist her from the carriage. "Thank you, Aaron."

Pulling the lace shawl that Mr. Brown gave her as a wedding gift, over her head, she forced her trembling legs to enter the church. Warily, she took in every aspect of the church. Walking to the front pew she nearly fell before she could kneel. After quieting her ragged breathing, Mackenzie closed her eyes, "Daddy...you remember, we came here at Christmas," she said, looking around her. "It is almost the same, isn't it?" But she knew it wasn't. "What's happening to me?"



Aaron watched her from the door after saying good night to Father Donovan. Something was wrong; it started in the carriage and progressed as they rode through town. Mackenzie may have hid it well from the priest, but Aaron remembered the look of terror in her eyes. Nothing extraordinary happened on the ride to cause this in her. What did he miss? He wished he could hear her words; she seemed so vulnerable kneeling there. More than he cared to admit Mackenzie would never survive without him. The responsibility was great, but not a burden. No, she would never be that to him.

Calmer, she walked back to him. She hoped he would not press her for an explanation, knowing it might be impossible to give him a sane answer.

“Mackenzie, are you all right?”

“Yes, no...” Could she tell him what she felt? Would he think her a witch or worse...crazy? “It’s nothing, women always get emotional at times like this. Are we going home now?”

“Yes, it is very close.”

Getting back in the carriage, she tried not to see anymore. However hard she struggled not to look at anything they passed, she failed. Turning to Aaron to escape the condemning evidence, his eyes were already on her. She could see the concern he held for her, but thankfully he did not ask her any questions.

“Aaron where is your home?”

“Our home is in Salem, on Chestnut Street, a fine area. The house was just completed this year. I have been at sea most of the time so there is much to be finished, decorating and furnishings. I wondered if you would like to take it on.”

Salem...witches, Mackenzie started shivering over her thoughts. Forcing her mind back to Aaron, she latched onto the subject. “Yes, I would love to. I decorated our apartment, I mean house, my father’s and mine.”

“Your father?”

“Yes, he died in May, a boating accident.”

“I am sorry.”

“So am I. He was all I had, we were very close.”

“Your mother?”

“She died when I was born.”

Keeping his eyes on her, he saw some of her fears abate. Not wanting her to get any worse, Aaron hoped he could draw her

attention away from whatever was causing her distress. “How did you decorate your house, Mackenzie?”

She could see he was trying to help her. “Wonderful warm, summer hues; bright greens, soft blues and pinks, and white. I picked up special pieces in antique shops.”

“Antique shops?”

“Yes, shops where you buy very old things from past centuries.” Realizing what she just said, Mackenzie could barely control her nervous laughter. “I’m sorry.”

“Can you tell me what was so funny?”

“Someday I might and you might even listen, but right now I would like to hear about your business.”

Giving her what she wanted came easy to Aaron. The man’s pride shined in his eyes. His words told her how hard he worked to make his shipping line a success. Mackenzie might not know much about boats, something she would correct immediately, but she did know a successful businessman. No one gave him the line; he built it from one ship. A ship, she surprisingly learned he won in a card game.

Their laughter carried through the dimly lit streets. The carriage came to a stop, but she failed to notice, lost in Aaron’s eyes and his contagious humor.

“We are home, Mackenzie.”

## CHAPTER 4

### *History lessons*

After the upheaval in her life, Mackenzie wondered why Aaron's three story, red brick mansion should surprise her. Tipping her head back, she surveyed the height and breadth of the house, letting the reality embrace her. Mackenzie decided shipping must be a very lucrative business. Intricate wrought iron railings guarded the wide flagstone steps leading to the double red entrance doors. In awe, she smiled over the white shutters framing the large pane windows on each side of the door. The carved cornice spiraled out at regular intervals adorning the roof edge, but it was the railing higher up that gathered her attention; "It's a real widow's walk."

Mackenzie's excitement singed the air around Aaron. He looked at the house trying to discover the cause of her amazement. With a knowing smile, Aaron knew his fascination rested solely on the woman.

"Aaron it's beautiful and so large. My goodness, do you live here all alone?"

Dare he tell her he barely spent one night here? "Not any more."

Aaron broke her concentration on the house and led her up the steps. Mackenzie hoped her surprise over the man whisking the door open, remained hidden. The revelation Aaron employed a butler for his mansion nearly shattered her dissipating composure. After the carriage ride, Mackenzie decided no one could blame her for being a little neurotic. She forced her eyes away from Aaron before he could detect her mounting nervousness.

The man took their wraps. "Murphy, give us a few minutes, then send dinner up."

“Yes sir. Sir, Mr. Adams left this for you.” Taking the sealed letter Aaron nodded to the butler.

“Mackenzie?”

Taking the hand he offered, they started up the stairs. Mackenzie ignored the warning and let her curiosity rule. “Aaron, who is Mr. Adams?”

“Samuel Adams is an associate.”

“Samuel Adams?”

“Yes, why?”

“Nothing, my father knew a Samuel Adams, once.”

Could it be *the* Samuel Adams? Aaron spoke of the tea tax in the carriage. Her mind raced over the staggering possibility. The strangest feeling seized her. After seeing Boston tonight denial was no longer an option, this really was 1773. *My God, I really am back in 1773!* How could this have happened?

Seeing her sudden paleness, Aaron took her elbow, guiding her up the stairs. He hated the cold realization she was unaware of his actions. His needed to uncover and destroy the fear he felt consuming her.

Once in the room Mackenzie tried to get a hold of her emotion. Thankfully, the room emanated warmth, dispelling some of her chills. She let the room fill her mind to chase away the frightening thoughts she wanted to forget. Tiny blue flowers on heavy white, brocade curtains adorned the large windows with intricate lace valances hanging in the center. Surprisingly, lace dominated the room full of large mahogany furniture. The four-poster canopy draped in cotton ecru lace and dark blue bows, looked like sentinels above the gorgeous crocheted coverlet resting over a mound of downy quilts. There were two dressing areas at each end of the room, with a charming sitting area and table placed strategically in front of a tiled fireplace. An arrangement of fall leaves with slim tapered candles sat in the middle of the silver place settings.

Mackenzie knew Aaron’s anxious eyes were upon her. “Did you do this Aaron?”

Looking at him, she caught him off guard causing his cheeks to heighten in color. “It’s beautiful, perfect. It would be foolish to change anything in this room, it’s been done in exquisite taste. You did it all, didn’t you?”

He wanted to tell her it was the only room he left strict instructions on, down to the last detail. Aaron still felt embarrassed over his insistence at the time. Strange how this one room stayed in his mind for as long as he could remember.

She almost missed his cautious nod confirming her assumption. "You did not do the entrance hall?"

"No." He smiled over her appraisal.

"Good, then I'm sure you won't mind some changes there."

Laughing, he answered her. "It is a bit much, is it not?"

"Put it this way, it is not homey, definitely lacking warmth."

"And our home should be full of warmth, Mackenzie."

Fighting the battles raging inside her, she missed the intensity in Aaron's words. "Yes, warm and inviting."

He wanted to hold her, but held back. They needed to talk and he wanted her full attention. Aaron decided it would be better to wait until she regained some of her composure. "Mackenzie come over here, I want to show you something."

He stopped in front of one of the dressing tables, gesturing to a display of bottles and jars. "These are yours, of course you will need to get many more items, we will go shopping tomorrow."

Mackenzie's eyes grew large over the display. *He must have been a maniac running around to accomplish all this today.* Knowing how easily she could embarrass him, she held the revelation to herself.

"And over here..." she followed in his wake across the room, "I picked up a few things I thought you might need. You have a fitting tomorrow, at one, with the couturier."

When he opened the wardrobe, she stared in amazement at another beautiful dress of yellow brocade satin. There was also a gorgeous rose dressing gown that made her fingers itch to reach out and touch the silky sheen.

"You should change, dinner will be up soon. Your dressing room is through here."

It was all so magnificent, she never expected any of this. Looking at him, she could see he fit in here as well as he did on the ship. Mackenzie swallowed hard realizing Aaron possessed many sides. How many more would she see before discovering the total man?

Leaving her proved difficult, but he decided not to press her. Dinner would be time enough for discovery.

The gown was elegant, its softness felt like a feathery wisp against her skin. Aaron waited at the table for her with a look of determination she wished she could ignore. To still her mounting apprehension, she concentrated on the man now a part of her life. The thought became as staggering as the way he looked in the satin jacket, a very appealing rogue. The way his eyes followed her movements made her very self-conscious. They were warm and languid as they roamed possessively over her body. The material was a hint more than sheer, but his devouring gaze made it feel as if the folds were nonexistent.

Rising, he pulled the chair out for her. Before leaving, he lifted her hair away from her shoulder, placing a light kiss at the base of her neck. Closing her eyes, she let the heat from his touch flow through her.

“Wine?”

The huskiness in his voice shattered the remaining essence of his lips, forcing her back to reality.

“Yes, please.” Shock left a person cold; she let the warmth of the vermilion wine seep inside her.

“I hope you do not mind serving ourselves, but I thought we needed to be alone.”

“No, it is very nice Aaron.” The elegant table settings were glowing under the candles, the food looked inviting and she knew it would taste delicious, only her appetite was missing.

Dark eyes watched her nervous actions, sending off warnings inside him. Refilling their glasses, he wondered if she realized she downed the first with such speed. Deciding it might help calm the storm he spied gathering in the depths of her eyes he topped her glass.

“Do you want to talk about it Mackenzie?” Now was the time, eating would be impossible for either of them.

Twisting the napkin in her fingers, she cautiously met the fierce look he held her in, one that silently vowed he would quell any evasion she might attempt. “Aaron, is this really 1773?”

His brows furrowed in concern. “Yes, it is. Why, Mackenzie?”

She told herself not to answer; it would be safer. The need to talk to him about it was stronger. “There weren’t any cars or lights in Boston, not anywhere.”

“Mackenzie, there were lights.” He spoke with cautious curiosity.

“Oil lights, not electric!”

The disbelief in his eyes should have stayed her. "And you don't know about cars. Do you?" No, of course he didn't.

"Mackenzie, I think..."

"What? You think I'm crazy?"

"No, I think you are confused and upset over something."

"You are damn right, I am upset." Taking her glass she rose from the table, too nervous to sit and started pacing in front of him.

The gown swirled around her long legs with each graceful movement, adding to her enchantment. Aaron forced himself to remain in the chair, knowing she needed to talk this out. He had a gut feeling hiding his shock over what was coming would test his control.

"Aaron I am not crazy and am not a witch, you do believe me, don't you?"

"Yes."

How she prayed he was speaking the truth. She trembled under his scrutiny. "Tonight, what I saw from the carriage, told me you were right, it is 1773. I guess I knew it all along, but I was too afraid to believe you. It still seems impossible."

He knew exactly what she was leading up to and he loathed the knowledge. Aaron could feel his anger rising to battle whatever might try to harm her, even Mackenzie herself if need be.

"Aaron, I know how hard this may be for you to understand, but I am from the future. 2003, to be exact." Witnessing the control he exercised not to vault out of the chair told her exactly what effect her declaration had on Aaron. Maybe she expected too much to think he could believe her. The whole concept *was* outlandish.

"All right, even if you refuse to accept what has happened, just listen. I was born on November 16, 1978. I have a business. I am in public relations and advertising, we handle mostly political campaigns and corporate advertising. I guess what I am trying to tell you is that I don't belong here. I belong back in my apartment, in New York City. I belong behind my desk, saving my company; going over daily things, like taping and location shots that require my attention. Aaron, I am not from your world, somehow I am lost...lost in time."

Rising, his fist hit the table. "Enough! What you say is preposterous!" He wanted to shake her. Never would she leave him! His fear that he might truly lose her if she persisted in talking about this foolishness drove his rage out against her.

Swallowing her fear, Mackenzie refused to back down. “You asked for an explanation, well this is the best I can do. Can you explain it? Can you?”

“No, but what you say, I can not allow myself to believe. You are here. You are my wife and you will never leave!” Seeing her blanch under the force of his conviction, he advanced. She must stop this, here, tonight! “What proof do you have?” He hoped logic would stop her, if not, he knew he must.

Proof? Looking around her she realized she did not have a single piece of tangible evidence. No, everything belonged on Aaron’s side. Thinking, there must be some way of making him believe her, it became so important to her that he did. “Wait! I do have something.”

“What? Show me.” She had nothing, had come with nothing. Concealing his satisfaction, he let her go on, knowing she would soon see reason. The wild, desperate look in her eyes began to bother him more than his alarm over what she might call to life by trying to find an explanation for what happened to them.

“I can’t show you anything, you know that. But I can tell you about events that are going to happen, historic events.”

“Mackenzie...” The warning he issued sent chills racing through her.

“Please, you must listen. Tonight you received a letter from Samuel Adams.” Oh, please, let it be the same man. “He is one of the leaders of the American Revolution, against England, to gain the colonists independence. You also mentioned to Father Donovan the tea tax.” Catching her breath, having gained his attention, she rushed on, “Samuel Adams is going to lead a group of men, dressed like Indians, into Boston Harbor and dump all the tea off a ship into the harbor as a protest against the tax. It becomes one of the turning points of the revolution. It is known as the *Boston Tea Party*. I think it takes place very soon, sometime in December, 1773.” She watched him, silently cursing the man’s infernal control. “There, isn’t that proof?”

Aaron failed in answering her, afraid of what he might say. She appeared so sincere. He knew she was not crazy, but if she refused to let go of this, he feared for her.

“Aaron isn’t that proof? It is the same Mr. Adams, isn’t it? He writes letters against the crown’s activities, he formed some group. Oh, I can’t think of the name. The Committee of...Letters, or Laws,



darn, I forgot the other word. Whatever it's called, he sends them out all over the place and gets England really ticked off about it too."

He knew the name of Adam's group well. *The Committee of Correspondence* heralds the support of every Colonist demanding liberty from Britain's unjust acts. "Mackenzie, I am sorry, but what you are saying could never prove anything."

"It has to. There's more, I wish now I had paid more attention in class."

"Class?"

"My history class, I wasn't a very good student. I'm afraid dates aren't my strong point. There will be a war Aaron, the *American Revolution*. The Colonists will gain their freedom and form the *United States of America*. Our whole country is based on your fight, starting right now because of these taxes; the stamp act, sugar tax, all the unfair taxes. *Taxation without representation* is what they call it."

His eyes burned her. It was useless. Aaron closed his mind to anything further she might say. Mackenzie decided she made a grave mistake in trying to convince him. Aaron started to speak but she stopped him.

"No, don't. I never should have told you, but it is true."

"Mackenzie please, you must not let this effect you so."

"No? How can't I? You are here in your own time. It is not mine." She wondered how he would fare in modern society. Looking at him, knowing him as little as she did, she decided he would not like it. Stopping his protest with her eyes, she took a deep breath. "I have said all I will on the subject; unless you ask me, I won't bring it up again."

Watching the defeat dulling her eyes, Aaron felt satisfied she meant her words. Aaron doubted this was over and resigned himself that the pout marring her lips would undoubtedly get worse over what remained to be said.

Refilling her glass, he thought a moment as she held him under her anxious gaze. "I am sorry I can not believe you, for I see you honestly do think you are speaking the truth. I think it best that we never discuss this again." He held up his hand to still her protest. "For your own protection you must never mention this to anyone. I know you are neither crazy nor a witch, but others would not be as kind. Do I have your promise on this, Mackenzie?"

She hated admitting he was right about the others, but his refusal to even consider her statements did hurt. He chose to ignore his role of that night. "I promise I will only discuss this with you, when you ask me...and Aaron, you will ask."

She could wait; she had the strangest feeling she would be around to answer his questions. He didn't impress her as the type to let it pass. Smiling to herself, Mackenzie felt much better just knowing history stood on her side.

"I accept your promise. Now I would like to toast our marriage and our future together, for we do have a future together, Mackenzie."

Raising his glass to hers, Aaron touched it; the fine crystal sang through the silence. Holding her gaze, he brought the wine to his lips, drinking deeply, waiting until she followed suit.

The wine was smooth and rich. She didn't think the heat filling her came from it. Aaron's eyes held unspoken promises. A weakness seeped through her limbs and she felt herself being drawn to him. Somewhere the warnings sounded, but his gaze dominated her senses.

Taking the glass from her limp clasp, he turned back to her. His hand closed over her wrist slowly pulling her into his embrace. "You are beautiful, so soft, yet there is a fire in you that burns through to me."

His hands held their own flame as they moved over her shoulders, down her back to rest at the base of her spine, locking her in his hold. The closeness brought the evidence of his arousal against her vagina to sear her through the robe. Those dark pools of his eyes never relinquished their capture; her senses were alive to his slightest move. Mackenzie felt helpless to stop him as he drew her closer.

"Touch me Mackenzie."

Seeing her hold back, Aaron's hands grew bolder, refusing to let any space intrude. The force of his act brought his cock hard against her spice. Aaron used his hold on her hips to mold the warm folds of her vagina over him. Her palms flayed over the firm, muscled wall of his chest as a gasp of surprise escaped her parted lips.

"Aaron, I think we should..."

"Hush my sweet, you have a lovely voice, but you talk far too much."

His demanding lips locked on hers, silencing any protest she might have uttered. Her resistance shimmered as waves of sensation bombarded her. His large hand came up to hold her head, deepening

his kiss until she demanded her own. His other hand pressed her harder against his cock to play over the sensitive core of her spice that he remembered so well. Aaron left no doubt over what he wanted.

Mackenzie grew weak, leaning into his strength as her legs refused to hold her. His tongue sought entrance and she opened to his invasion. She thought he could devour her with his sweet assault. That hunger she'd felt since they made love reared, and she moved to capture him, not wanting to lose anything he might give her. They battled for dominance, she drowned in his warmth, his lips refusing her surrender. She clung to him, her breast pressed into his chest. Her nipples were on fire. Waves of sexual sensations started the warm sexual fluids to flow through her vagina.

Mackenzie couldn't remember ever feeling such heat, such an overwhelming urge to want a man to touch her, play with her until she exploded. "Do it to me again. Make me feel what I did the other night...please...hmm, yes like that."

Aaron felt a rush of satisfaction wash over him as she surrendered to his touch. His fingers entered the soft wet folds of her spice until they buried themselves inside of her. He remembered to be gentle, knowing she might be sore from the other night. She was liquid fire as the passion swam over her. Aaron ease his fingers out in a slow sating rhythm while his thumb rolled over her clit, teasing it until the moisture flowed out of her and he went for the one place he could answer her pleas. "Such sweet music Mackenzie, sing for me..."

"You are a tease Aaron, but yes, please touch me...yes there, play with me...now!"

And her groan of erotic pleasure led him on. His thumb worked over the swollen nub as his teeth nipped at her neck and sensitive ear lobe, she moaned and moved against him trying to bury herself over his stiff, throbbing cock. He could feel the heat of her spice through his pants and wished he'd thought to remove them. "Do you want more Mackenzie?"

"Hmm, oh yes."

"You are so hot...so ready..."

Mac cried out, when he pressed his hand hard against her, pushing but it wasn't his cock and she wanted to feel him. His fingers grew stronger their strokes deeper, but it wasn't enough and she growled out her displeasure, knowing he was deliberately keeping her from reaching a climax! "Aaron!"

“You have not said the magic word, Mackenzie.”

Through her kisses over his chest, “I told you, I don’t know magic.”

“Maybe not, but there is magic between us tonight...wife...”

It took a minute for her to comprehend what he meant pass the passion consuming her. Stubbornness struck her, not letting her say the word she now understood he wanted from her.

Her silence made Aaron growl into her neck as he retracted his pleasurable manipulation of her vagina and lifted her into his arms.

Aaron threw back the bedcovers and laid her out across the bed. In slow deliberation he untied the belt of her robe and slid the garment out from under her. He smiled at her avid attention to his every move as he proceeded to strip off his own clothing.

He stood before her and let her see just how much he wanted her as his stiff cock did a dance before her wide eyed scrutiny. “I want you wife.”

Aaron moved closer and pushed her thighs apart until she lay there spread open before him. He could see the opening that his cock wanted to enter. His fingers moved from her navel slowly down the fine line of her stomach, enjoying how her muscles jumped at his touch and how her knuckles turned whiter over the grip she maintained on the bed linen. “Spice the color of honey, you are breathtaking.”

He heard her suck in her breath as he moved closer and his head started to go lower and lower until his lips kissed the top of those golden curls. And as his mouth moved over the folds of her spice his hands kept her legs apart when she instinctively moved to protect that sensitive area. Aaron’s tongue became ruthless as it found its target. In slow deliberate hardness he licked her nub as if it were maple sugar spread out over the snow, for he had to keep on her as she sank down into the bed. His hands went under her buttocks and lifted her to his mouth. Aaron sucked on her clit, then nuzzled and licked the nub of her passion until she was dancing in his hold.

But Aaron knew well the way of women and he pulled back just before she rolled into a climax. “Tell me the magic name, wife.”

“You are a fucking beast!”

“Not yet I’m not, wife, but soon you’ll feel me fill your hot spice with my cock until my cockhead touches your soul, my lovely wife.”

“Husband! There you have your word! You are my husband and damn you I want you to fuck me, now!”

Aaron’s laughter rang out as he felt his cock jump and his chest fill with pride for the woman in his hold. “Gladly my wife!”

He pulled her legs up to his shoulders and her butt to the edge of the bed and without any more play he drove his cock into her wet hot vagina! Mackenzie’s legs stiffened against his chest to take the next plunge and he took hold of her hands, weaving his fingers with hers, then pulled her to him and over his cock, and again until he was as deep inside as there was room to go. Aaron knew his size to be more than most women could handle, but not Mackenzie, she wanted it all and he went to the hilt!

There was nothing easy about their fucking and Aaron lost any fears of hurting her after she linked her feet behind his head and forced him to use all his strength to meet and match her vivacious lunges. Her spice folded about him like a soft but potent vise, rippling about his cock as if she were giving him a second fuck over and above their shared one and Aaron gave himself over to the sensations until he felt his cockhead explode! Refusing not to feel her climax about him Aaron released her hand and immediately worked the nub of her passion until he felt her close about him as if he could save her from falling into the abyss of ecstasy. He didn’t want to gentle her climax and he played harder with her, and her groans grew fierce as he took her beyond her current passion until the blaze swallowed her and he thought his own cock would be crushed by the climatic force he drove her to.

Feeling her, hearing her surrender, Aaron’s hands caressed her ribs in slow madness until they reached her breast. Covering the nipples, he kneaded them until the buds hardened, seeking release. Capturing her bare nipples, he sucked deep with his teeth nipping at her swollen teats enjoying how she arched to give him full freedom with her.

“Hold me Aaron, never let me go!”

He heard her cry as he had so many times before, only now he could answer her. Aaron gazed down at the naked, ivory beauty...his wife. The knowledge sent a surge of power coursing through him. “You are mine Mackenzie, my wife, no man, no power on earth or heaven will take you from me.”

Bringing her arms up to encircle his neck she held him, praying he was right. Mackenzie's heart beat wildly against her ribs. Belonging to this handsome man was something she wanted, uncaring of the consequences.

"Aaron, love me."

Deep black eyes shined on her with a smile that melted away all her fears. "That is a promise I will never break."

## CHAPTER 5

### *Revelations*

Mackenzie sought the comforting warmth beside her and snuggled closer. Aaron carefully pulled the quilt over her bare shoulder, tenderly bringing her head into the crook of his shoulder. In the early morning light, she looked like an angel. Did heaven send her to him? Placing his lips against her warm brow, he smiled over the soft sigh escaping her lips. Her whispery breath teased his throat. The silken softness of her body entwining with his own began stirring the embers of passion in his cock.

She finally fell into an exhausted sleep with the coming morn. Aaron wondered if he would ever again find rest in sleep; she seemed to have stolen that luxury from him. Remembering their pleasurable night of heated love making, he smiled in defeat. Her exquisite body excited him beyond reason. That spirit she possessed could grow bold, seeking pleasure and matching him with her own fiery lust. Rubbing his rough chin through her silken tresses, Aaron felt unabashed over his pride for her. Proud that she never called on false shyness or womanly wiles to play any part in their many couplings. She allowed him to show her what loving could be. A fast learner, she went further in her teachings than he ever expected.

Aaron found his gaze drifting over her again as if to confirm her presence beside him. He found it hard to believe he could claim her as his wife. Aaron held very little tolerance for indecision and his own concerning Mackenzie burned through him. Her words about the future haunted him in the early hours. He thought over the turn of events that placed Mackenzie in his life. He always planned to marry someday, to have heirs to carry on what he started, but that plan rested in the future. His business demanded his full attention. The fact he found himself married, surprisingly excited him. Honesty made him

admit any woman he garnered would have been meek to a fault, a good wife, but just that, a wife. A woman to bear his offspring and remain in the background. Never did he expect her to be involved in his life beyond her assigned role!

Mackenzie has already become an integral part of his being. She took a breath of every waking and sleeping moment of his existence. He nearly laughed over the admission, knowing she would never tolerate being in his shadow. No, not his Mackenzie. Bringing her closer, he actually felt relieved over the truth of it. Mackenzie proved to be living excitement, warm and exotic, with a passion for life that thankfully matched his own.

The possessive feelings inside him were fierce and overwhelming in their magnitude; something he never expected to feel for a woman. His feelings for her were changing so rapidly, he was unsure where they were leading. Aaron realized Mackenzie would make protecting her difficult. She already showed him how resourceful she could be by the way she manipulated Father Donavon.

Realizing all that was Mackenzie made Aaron uneasy. Mackenzie married him because she needed him; he knew the truth of it. Aaron hated where his thoughts were leading, but it became impossible not to wonder what she would do when she no longer needed him. Would she leave? Run from him?

He nearly shouted out with the anger his fear created. Holding her tighter, he dreaded this from her. She tried to escape him before the wedding. Now, it would be impossible to stay with her every waking minute. His concerns over her longing to reach New York were not to be dismissed. Something rebelled inside him over letting that happen.

The only thing he was sure of, was that she came to him in a dream and now she was here and his wife. Honesty made him admit the truth to be just as absurd as her story. They were together and Aaron felt positive she was exactly where she should be. He would find a way to convince her she belonged here, in his embrace. Looking at her, he decided he would start now.

\* \* \* \*

Stretching her arms lazily over her head, Mackenzie snuggled deeper into the bed seeking his lingering warmth. Aaron was moving about the room, she should rise, but she wanted to languish over the wonderful night in his arms a while longer.



Aaron made love to her this morning and it had not been anything like the many times they came together last night. This morning he controlled her and took her beyond any passion she experienced before. Blushing, she admitted she craved every second of his ardent caresses. His masterful touch drove her crazy with the need to have him inside her again. Her wanton pleas were shameless under the exciting frenzy his touch created. Yet, he refused her pleas until Mackenzie thought she would never come back from the heights where they existed. There had been a force in Aaron, an unleashed drive to claim her. Oh yes, Mackenzie's intuition about his motives could not be wrong. She answered his greed, giving everything she possessed to him until they were both spent and quivering in sated exhaustion. If he meant to possess her, then Aaron certainly won.

She should fear his control over her, but regardless of what lay ahead she held little willpower to stop it. In Aaron's arms, Mackenzie tasted defeat, but she also found warmth and beauty. And something new, a feeling of victory that filled her being with a joy so profound, she wanted to shout her jubilation to the world! Remaining silent hurt, but to tell him she loved him, sadly was not possible. Aaron wanted to control her, possess her, even protect her, but she feared he did not love her.

There was the dream. One with a force so powerful it reached across centuries to bring them together. In her heart she prayed Aaron would someday find her more than a possession or responsibility. When he found his love she would be there with hers, waiting.

"Get up sleepy head, it is nearly ten and you have an appointment."

"No, go away. I'm so tired Aaron."

"Ah my lovely enchantress, you were not too tired to play all night. Should I remind you?"

Moaning, she started to move under mumbled protests. His teasing warmed her all over. Trying to sit up brought on a small groan over the tenderness in her limbs. "Aerobics were never this tough."

"What did you say?"

Smiling at his turned back. "Nothing."

Though she tried to hide it, he noticed what each movement cost her. "Mackenzie, I ordered a bath to be sent up for you, you should soak a while. I will send Mary up to help you."

A bath! Oh how she wanted that. "Who is Mary?"

Catching the high pitch in her voice, tinged with a touch of anger, he felt sure what he heard was jealousy. Hiding his smile, Aaron felt he might succeed after all. "Mary, my dear, is your handmaid."

"Handmaid? Aaron really, I don't need a maid." *A butler, now a maid, what next?*

"Mackenzie, it is expected that the lady of the house have a maid."

"Oh." What could she say? The slight warning in his voice told her the subject would not be open to discussion. Remembering his threat on the ship concerning her position, she wondered what exactly he did expect of her. Deciding now was as good a time as any, she approached him.

She stopped outside his dressing room, "Aaron?"

"Hmm?"

Biting her lip, she almost faltered. Eyeing the big copper tub filled with steaming water, maybe she should just take a bath?

"Mackenzie, what is wrong?"

Damn, he could read her too well. Facing him, he would never let her dismiss it. "Aaron we need to talk." The dark brows coming together showed what he was expecting. She rushed on, hoping to end the hostility in his eyes. "I'm worried."

Cautiously he asked her, "About what?" Her feet refused to be still and he wondered if the plush blue carpet could withstand her pacing.

"Please don't think I'm silly, but I have no idea what is expected of me. I mean, I have never had a maid or a butler. And that fitting you spoke of, what happens? What do I have to do?"

The laughter inside him never reached his lips upon seeing her brow creased in worry. As he knew, Mackenzie needed him now. How long did he have? "Start your bath, I will be back in a moment with tea and we will talk."

"Do you have coffee? I really need a cup of coffee, black no sugar or cream."

Clearing the humor from his throat, "Coffee, certainly we have coffee." If he did not, he knew he would get some. Samuel Adams would like Mackenzie; the man walked all over Boston preaching the boycotting of tea. Aaron grimaced at the thought of drinking the dark swill, no, coffee would never replace a good pot of tea. Blast the Crown and that infernal tax!

The hot water felt marvelous as Mackenzie rested against the deep tub. The soothing water absorbed the soreness in her body. Loving Aaron could certainly be hard on the body. She smiled, but oh, so enjoyable. Taking the heavenly scented soap, she began lathering herself. First her hair, after working it in Mackenzie sank under the water rinsing the glorious bubbles away. Surfacing, she opened her eyes to find him watching her. A crimson blush crept slowly through her.

Without saying a word he handed her the cup, watching intently as her lips caressed the rim. Turning to hide the response she instantly brought to life in him, Aaron went to retrieve a chair and his tea.

“It’s wonderful Aaron. I needed that, thank you.”

Seeing how much she enjoyed the coffee made the havoc he caused in the kitchen worth it. Tomorrow the staff would be prepared for her.

“All right Mackenzie, what exactly do you want to know?”

She settled back in the water watching him through the steam. “First. How many people are employed in your home?”

Strange she should say employed, instead of indentured. Shrugging, Aaron brushed it off. “I am not sure of the exact count. Let me see, there are Mary and Murphy, you know of them. Emily and Margaret run the kitchen and Charles takes care of the stable and grounds, though he was suppose to obtain a boy to help.”

Mackenzie’s eyes grew larger over each name he rattled off. She feared to ask if there were any he forgot to mention. Shipping was indeed a good business.

He almost missed her shock and wondered what she thought of him. Every household had this or more servants. “Mackenzie?”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“No? What is it you find wrong?”

“Nothing Aaron, I just didn’t know.”

“Know what?”

Why was he angry with her? “I didn’t realize you were so well off. It must cost a fortune to employ so many?”

He wondered what she would say when she knew of the hundreds he did employ at the shipping line. “I manage.”

“I guess you do.” She studied him, not sure how to take this side of Aaron. “Aaron you must be very proud of your accomplishments.

After what you told me last night, you should be. You must have worked your tail off to get this far, so soon."

He had, but the idea that she would say it, even acknowledge the fact, filled him with humor. He could never imagine any woman in the colonies being so honest with their husbands. "I am glad you approve, my lady. What other questions do you have?" Suddenly, he found himself eager to hear them. She was enchanting, so child-like in her wonder. Everything appeared new to her. That thought stayed with him through the rest of the morning as he listened, laughed and answered everything she put to him until Mary came to help her dress.

\* \* \* \*

"Aaron, why can't you come with me?"

"I told you, it is not done."

"I don't care." Pouting was so unlike her, but going into that dress shop, alone, bothered the hell out of her.

He had been marvelous this morning answering every question she asked, telling her more than he realized. Each new bit of information she gained told of the differences she would encounter in his world. The thought of facing women she had absolutely nothing in common with, without Aaron to support her, filled her with foreboding. Mackenzie held little doubt these women were smarter than Aaron liked to believe.

This morning she bit her tongue more than once over his dominant male attitude. Aaron and this society were devotees of chauvinism, making her burn under the indignation that came with the reality. Women were not considered individuals, let alone an equal. *Chattels, a possession to be pampered, oh!*

She dreaded discovering Aaron's views on the subject, sure her temper would rule. She fascinated him all right. She decided, he'd never run across a woman like her before. A knowing light brought her eyes alive, Aaron Masters had a lot to learn about this particular woman. The first being, she would not be shut away in his house like a piece of furniture. How well would she do promoting herself? Sighing, she realized she better pull it off.

This morning she allowed herself to be pampered at Aaron's insistence. Surprisingly, the result gave her a confidence in her beauty she never experienced before. Straightening the folds of the yellow brocade gown, Mackenzie still marveled over its beauty. A complete feeling of femininity floated around her. Thanks to Mary's expert

hands even her wild curls were tamed into a stunning style. Swept back from her face, her natural feathery spirals cascaded down her shoulders and back. Tiny, delicate wisps of curls framed her face, highlighting the indigo blue of her eyes.

Again her hand went to the base of her throat. She was extremely conscious of just how much of her *assets* showed. At first Mackenzie refused to put the corset on. Although Mary's tirade over her *mistress'* scandalous behavior might have overruled Mackenzie's dread of the thing, it was the worry in the girl's eyes that crumpled Mackenzie's stubbornness. Pulling and tugging, Mary, as small as she was, possessed the strength of a man and strapped that thing so tight Mackenzie thought she would faint from the lack of air. Mary refused to hear any of her protest to loosen it.

Mackenzie liked Mary. The small dark haired girl could not be much over eighteen. People would not call her pretty, but there was a softness to Mary, except when it came to that darn corset.

All those hours in the gym never produced a figure like this contraption accomplished. She felt like a china hourglass and what it did up top! Mary told her it was the latest style and it exemplified the female endowments.

Seeing how Aaron's dark eyes flamed to life when she came down the stairs, Mackenzie silently thanked the girl's handiwork. Something told her, her female attributes might hold some advantages to help her get what she wanted.

"What if I say something I should not? What if I embarrass you?"

She truly lacked the skills to play the coy female. How she could stand up to him, when he had been angry and threatened her, but fear going into a dress shop? Her bottom lip stubbornly protruded in defiance and he wanted to kiss her, right here in the carriage.

Frowning, the thought reminded him of the stares coming from men they passed. If one more man looked at her with that hungry longing in his eyes, he would be forced to call them out. "I told you all I could. I am confident you will do fine."

Whispering she tried one more time. His excuse that a man would not be seen in a dress shop was ridiculous. "What if they ask me questions about where I am from or about my family? What do I say?"

"You did very well with Father Donovan, I would stay with that, if you have to. Knowing the Father, the parish will soon know all about you anyway."

"Oh my, you mean he is a gossip?"

"I am sure the priest would say, he was helping the poor child settle in." Bringing her hand to his lips, Aaron lingered there. Raising his eyes from her hand, he looked at her while placing light kisses over her fingertips, causing her lips to part in lustful longing. "I have confidence in your intelligence to handle the good ladies."

Sucking in her breath, Mackenzie wished he would turn the carriage around. The fact he referred to her intelligence made her heart race. Was he seeing more than the passion they shared? "All right Aaron, I'll go."

"I am going to the shipping office. I will return to fetch you in about two hours. That should be enough time for you to finish."

"Two hours!" Her desire to accompany him to his office made her forget herself.

Shaking his head in laughter, "Yes, two hours. I will be here then and Mackenzie do not leave the shop. I will show you anything you want to see when I return."

"I'll be waiting, just don't be late."

Kissing her still clasped fingers, Aaron's eyes twinkled up at her. "Impatient, my lovely?"

She was, but refused to answer him as the carriage came to a halt.

He helped her down and the touch of his hand on her spine sent shivers of desire racing through her. She wished they'd never left the warm bedroom.

"Oh, I almost forgot. I instructed Madam Oulette to have a gown ready for this evening, we have a dinner engagement to attend."

"Did you also forget to tell me?" Deciding he should know right up front she detested being uninformed or lead around.

"No, I just did. I had other more provocative things on my mind."

A deep blush flooded her cheeks as she met his bold gaze with one of her own. "You, sir, are a dirty old man."

At first shocked by her words, than thinking on them, Aaron's laughter reigned unchecked causing people to stare. Heedless of the attention, Aaron took her to him and kissed her thoroughly. He was coming to know how zealous his lady could be. "And you, my wife, are to blame for my rakish condition."

Smiling, she pulled away and turned to enter the shop. “I had an extraordinary teacher.” It was her turn to laugh at the deep blush of admission coming from Aaron’s handsome face.

## CHAPTER 6

### *The Unveiling*

The bell danced over the door, setting off a flurry of chatter that reminded Mackenzie of a hen house. The disapproving looks leveled in her direction brought passages from the *Scarlet Letter* to mind. Glancing back at Aaron's departing carriage Mackenzie struggled to swallow the giggles overtaking her, *they certainly received an eyeful*.

The woman that came forward looked to be in her forties, though Mackenzie suspected the heavy makeup and high coiffure were denials of the fact. Her dark burgundy dress created a striking contrast to her stark black hair and china white face. Mackenzie wondered if they actually used hair dye this long ago, sure the woman's was phony.

"Mrs. Masters?"

"Yes, Madame Oulette?"

"Oui, it is a pleasure to find you are punctual."

The poor French accent did little to improve her assessment of the woman. Mackenzie's mind started conjuring up images of a bordello with gaming rooms in the back. Unable to tame her piqued curiosity, Mackenzie answered the woman in her best finishing school French. "Madame, le boutique que vous avez est beaux."

The woman's arched brows said she caught Mackenzie's ploy. Mackenzie refused to feel any contrition over testing the woman and let her defiance glared back at the Madame.

Remembering the scandalous display this one gave her patrons brought back Georgette's humor. "Please Mrs. Masters, come, we will start your sitting. My girls are anxious to begin. Your husband is being most generous to insure your wardrobe is completed by week's end. It is a shame about your trunks. Washed over, were they not?"



Georgette found Master's offhanded story hard to believe and there was something about the girl...

Eyeing the woman, Mackenzie sensed the subtle traps being turned back her way. Thankfully, Aaron thought to tell her about his explanation for her lack of possessions. "No, I am afraid they were devastated by sea water, to the last item."

Mackenzie wondered why the woman vexed her so. After all, what did it matter to her if the Madame was a complete fraud.

*So, this girl had backbone.* Georgette thought it would be interesting to see this one pitted against Boston's snippy matrons. Five years of waiting on these women, hand and foot, only increased her feelings of hatred for the aristocratic bitches. The truth that her dresses were the most sought after fashions in the colonies did little to erase past injustices. Georgette smiled over her trickery, they were such fools, believing her bogus background and connections for their vanity.

Mackenzie's desire to leave the scrutiny of the other women overrode the woman's highhanded manner in leading the way into another room. The plush velvet settees gracing the walls were impressive. In the center sat a small foot stage, positioned to capture every angle in the many gilded mirrors.

The clap of the Madame's hands set off a whirlwind of activity about her. Several giggling girls began undressing Mackenzie, quickly destroying what Mary spent an hour doing up. Thankful they left her covered in the corset and undergarments. Being on display so openly, made Mackenzie silently promise never to complain about shopping off the racks again.

To fight her uncomfortable feelings she concentrated on the Madame. Directing the girls in French, the Madame never ceased her scrutiny of Mackenzie. Every measurement, from her waist to her ankles, became a note in the ledger that the Madame held. The show was unnecessary, since the Madame appeared to calculate everything in her steel-trap mind. "The girls are impressed, Mrs. Masters. Please bare with them, they are almost finished."

"Please, call me Mackenzie, Madame Oulette."

"Of course, Mackenzie. You are unique my dear." Yes, she did like this one, so bold and unconventional, it was refreshing.

Closing her eyes for a second, she concentrated on not showing any of the wariness the woman's remarks instilled. "Really?" She said with a lightness she hardly felt.

"Me oui, the girls say you are the first they have found to hold...how do you say, perfect measurements?" She caught the flash of worry in the girl's eyes. Georgette decided a story hid behind that innocent look.

Mackenzie shifted uneasily under the telling blush burning her cheeks. This was too much; their constant giggles were becoming very annoying.

"Oui, it will be a pleasure to create for you. You will show off my designs beautifully."

How she hated admitting she wanted to see what this woman could create. "By chance Madame, would the corset be going out of vogue?"

"Why no. I am afraid most women need its assistance. The few, such as yourself, must suffer for the whole."

"I was afraid you would say that." The lady's laughter was the first honest thing Mackenzie thought she heard from the woman. Mackenzie wondered what made the lady so hard. She must have been quite beautiful, once.

"My dear, the girls will help you redress, please have some tea. I will only be a moment, I must make some adjustments on your gown for this evening."

Once the girls vanished and left her alone, Mackenzie had little recourse but to wait for the Madame. Eyeing the tea, she wondered again how long it would be before it filled the harbor. Just the thought of Aaron's reaction made her impatient.

Looking about the empty room, the strangest sensation of being watched invaded her. Biting her lip, she decided it must be the effect of standing nearly naked in front of so many people. The place gave her the willies.

Entering her office, Georgette noted the changes to the gown, it would be lovely. Shutting the door she stopped short.

"Jacque! What are you doing here?"

Turning to her, the brown eyes scathed her. "You failed to tell me who was coming today?"

Bracing herself she glared back at him, refusing to cower beneath his anger over her deliberate evasion. "The girl is incidental."

Looking back at the beauty through the concealed view hole, "Hardly that, Georgette. In fact, she is quite extraordinary. Masters out did himself."

"Masters! Always it is Masters. Leave it be Jacque, he is dangerous. He can ruin you."

"Don't you mean, us, sister? If I go down, so do you. That is why you will help me. Your little ladies would be aghast to learn their confidences about their husbands business dealings are being used to set up a very lucrative pirating business on the side." Jacque waited for his words to have their desired effect. Georgette was far too greedy to oppose him.

The plan forming in his mind over Masters' new wife would satisfy more than his need for revenge. Yes, he would find it extremely pleasurable in seeing her beneath him, those blue eyes heated in passion and fear as her exquisite body moved to his bidding.

"What do you want, Jacque?"

Pleased over his sister's consent, his gaze remained fixed on the flaxen hair beauty. "What is her name?"

A worried frown marred Georgette's brow. "Mackenzie and anything to do with her is going to be trouble. She is different."

"Different?" Studying the beauty, "She is that."

"Men! Can't any of you see more than a woman's flesh? This one is smart, she isn't a fool."

"I want some time with her. Dismiss her early."

Remembering the way Masters openly kissed the girl in front of her shop; Georgette felt her throat tighten. "Jacque, don't be a fool. Masters would not rest if anything happened to her."

Closing the door, she did not like the chill coming over her. The tea would warm her, but getting anything out of the girl would not be as easy.

"Ah, your gown will be ready and delivered this afternoon."

"I am sure it will be beautiful, Madame, thank you."

Mackenzie felt the woman wanted to say more and prepared herself.

"Have you known your husband long?"

"He was a dear friend of my father, but I'm sure you would be bored with the details." She hoped this would end it. Mackenzie sighed in resignation over the challenge lighting the lady's eyes.

"You are wrong of course. Your husband has long been considered the most eligible bachelor in the Boston area. So you see, we are most certainly curious about the fortunate lady that captured him."

Captured? Memories of Aaron's ardent love making instantly came to life. Battling the rush of infusing warmth Mackenzie wondered what these dear ladies would say if they knew the truth? "I can understand your interest, Madame, but it is really quite mundane."

The girl was being stubborn. Georgette tried another tactic. "Your family, are they going to join you here from Europe?"

"No, I have no family left in England."

"Oh, you poor dear, but surely you have relatives in the area?"

"None close enough to contact." Mackenzie nearly laughed over her choice of words. If her trip through time did nothing else, Mackenzie decided she would become an accomplished liar.

Georgette hid her frustration, "Well, I am sure you will have no trouble making friends. Your husband is very influential in Boston's social circles. You should be very busy."

"Then I am sure your gowns will be very useful, I am looking forward to seeing them."

"As you shall. Now I must be getting back to my other patrons."

Mackenzie almost felt sorry for the woman because of the vultures in the other room and how little she learned. Leaving the shop filled her with relief. She wondered how long she would have to wait for Aaron. Thinking of him, she put her thoughts towards visiting his office and the docks. Seeing everything first hand always gave her a better grasp of new things.

Jacque's brown eyes never left the girl lost to the happenings about her.

"You want I should knock her down?"

"You harm a hair on her exquisite head and I will personally track you down. Scare, not hurt, do you understand?"

The grubby man finally nodded his consent.

"No rough stuff, remember."

"Aye, I got it."

"Get going." Moving back into the alley Jacque waited for the man to do his job.

\* \* \* \*

The hard pull against her hand captured Mackenzie's attention. "No! Let go!" Her small arms flung out at the brute trying to take her purse. Raising her leg to place a well-trained kick where it would do some damage, she cursed the dress folds hindering her defense. "Damn skirts!"

"Lady, let it go!"

"I will not. You, let go!"

"You asked for it."

The big arm pushed her, sending her falling back and snapping the bag's straps in the process. Bracing herself for a hard landing, Mackenzie gasped as she felt herself being pulled into the solid, yet giving arms of someone behind her. Reflexes made her turn, ready to strike. Her arm was caught in mid air.

"Madam! He is gone, it is over." Jacque, at first surprised by her strength, found admiration for the woman held back from striking him. "Are you harmed?"

Her heart beat a wild rhythm against her heaving chest. Pulling firmly away from the man, she unknowingly rubbed the wrist freed of his strong grip. "I'm fine, thank you."

Looking around, she failed to see the brute that stole her bag, Mackenzie's lips pressed tight in exasperation. Brushing angrily at her dress, she still fumed over the antiquated obstacle. "Stupid material..."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, I am fine, thank you again." Meeting the man's questioning gaze, her breath caught in her throat. His dark, earthy gaze boldly devoured her. Pulling herself together, she thought she should thank him for his assistance, though he really did little to help. By the build on him, he could have beaten the man to a pulp making her wonder why he failed to try?

Turning to leave him, Mackenzie felt a sudden warning to escape his company. The unexpected hold he took of her arm prevented her exit. That iron grip from his large hands frightened her more than the mugger's rough handling. Not wanting to make another scene, she tried to remain calm and rational. "Sir?" Looking at his hold, she hoped he got her message.

Instead of giving in to her obvious snub, Jacque moved closer. His knee touched hers through the gown. Full of fight, the blaze in her eyes excited him. The instant her body fell back against his, he knew

he must have her. Taking what belonged to the man he hated would destroy Masters. Dubois let her see his desire, wanting it to burn into her memory. "Madam, you should be more careful. Unescorted women are prey to the roughens of this city."

He certainly fit that description, but she kept the distasteful truth to herself. His eyes rocked her. Mackenzie's nervousness mounted over the man's intent. "You are right sir, the city is...full of decadent men."

His tight smile said her words were received as given. "Your tongue is as strong as your swing."

"Then I should think the scoundrels of Boston would take warning and back off."

"Ah, but a gentleman could never leave a lady alone."

"The lady is not alone, Dubois. Her husband is very much in attendance."

"Aaron..." Mackenzie's relief echoed in his name.

"Madam." Aaron held out his hand to her. The hand on her arm finally gave its reluctant release. Aaron's eyes held a building tempest.

"Aaron, I am so glad you are here." She was, she had never been so happy to see anyone. His refusal to answer her or even look at her stiffened her in warning. Aaron's full concentration remained on the other man.

"Masters, your...wife was assaulted by a purse snatcher."

"Is that true, Mackenzie?" His concern did little to ease her apprehension.

"Yes..." Cutting her answer off, Aaron turned back to Mr. Dubois.

"Then I am grateful to you, sir, for your assistance."

"I only regret that your lady's purse was taken."

Mackenzie fumed over the man's words, still angry at her failure and his for doing nothing to foil the thief. Remaining silent, in light of Aaron's hold about her waist, did little to ease her temper.

"I must be going." Bowing to Aaron and then to her, "Madam, I will forever be at your assistance, should the need arise you need only call."

Feeling Aaron tense, Mackenzie knew the man was deliberately causing a problem. She did not intend to let it go any further. "I doubt, Mr. Dubois, if there will ever be another need."

The glare he held her in left little to the imagination. Her heart pounded furiously, realizing she just made the man very angry.

"The future is unpredictable, dear lady."

The man dismissed Aaron's move toward him and walked away. A shiver seized Mackenzie. Something told her, Aaron and Mr. Dubois were not strangers. She felt as if the man just used her and wondered over the whole incident.

Seated in the carriage, the silent concentration coming from Aaron only amplified her uneasy feelings.

"Please explain what happened, Mackenzie?"

Mackenzie told him everything, "...if this stupid dress hadn't stopped me, I would have put a hurt on that creep that would have ended his bad behavior. As far as Mr. Dubois, he was a useless prop."

"Prop?"

"He could easily have stopped the man, but he seemed more interested in stopping me." Her words brought Aaron's instant attention and she realized she might have just made the situation worse.

The first smile coming from Aaron confused her more when it turned into laughter. "Aaron?"

"Oh Mackenzie, you are a marvel."

"Really, well I don't see the humor. That Dubois was an obnoxious pig and he gave me the willies."

Turning towards her, Aaron's humor quickly faded. He lifted her chin so her hurt eyes looked into his own. "I am relieved you saw him for what he is. Dubois is a dangerous man. When I saw him beside you...I am afraid my anger blinded me."

"Anger, but Aaron, why? I would never..."

"Hush, I am truly sorry. Your words said what I should have realized. Forgive me, our relationship is too new and my confidence faltered."

His eyes were sincere. Trust was something she wanted from him, in his way he was trying to give it to her.

"Aaron, one thing you never have to be concerned over is my loyalty to you." To seal her heart felt promise she raised her lips to his, hoping he could allow himself to hear and feel the truth. When she pulled back, his gaze reflected the questions she ignited.

"Maybe you should tell me about this, Mr. Dubois. I have a feeling I better know."

\* \* \* \*

Dusk filtered through the lace valance throwing an intricate pattern of shadows across the royal blue rug. Deeper blue eyes stared in concentration at the slow moving changes of the ebbing day.

“Madam, would you like some tea sent up?”

“No thank you, Mary. Would it be too much trouble to get some coffee?”

“No madam, no trouble. I will fetch it. The gown should be here shortly, then I will help you get dressed.”

“All right, Mary.”

Mary’s eyes never left her mistress’ back as she exited the room. Giggling as she shut the door, she could hardly wait to see the commotion the lady’s request for coffee would stir to life in Emily. She liked her new mistress and felt proud Mr. Masters choose her to serve his lady. Mary’s happiness, over being part of this household, gave a bounce to her steps. The bleak future of being an indentured servant no longer held her in fear. Stopping in the darkened servant stairwell, Mary gave silent thanks to God for finding a man of Mister Masters caliber to buy her papers.

Humming to herself over her good fortune, Mary knew she would never do anything to change her lot. She would never say a word to anyone about the lady’s peculiarities. Her loyalty was to the lady as it should be. They only knew about the coffee and her insistence for two baths a day.

Mary’s humor returned. If they could have heard her over the corset, oh Lordy, how their tongues would wag. There were other things one would never think about, everyday items and conveniences that seemed foreign to the mistress. Even Mary knew of these things. Yet the fine lady did not. Mary decided to remain quiet and help her mistress, however she could. Above all else, the lady was kind and friendly to her, something she never wanted to spoil, even if it meant protecting her lady to keep it.

Entering the kitchen she hid her smile. “The mistress would like some coffee, Emily.”

“Would she now? Coffee? At this time of day?” The older woman started wiping her hands on the apron about her large waist. “First another bath, now coffee, she certainly is a quirky one.”

“Who is Emily?” Aaron’s deep voice ended all the kitchen chatter.



“Why, no one, sir.”

Seeing Mary roll her eyes nearly broke the stern set of his mouth. He’d been right to pick her for Mackenzie.

“My Lady told me, only this morning, Emily, how wonderful your coffee tasted. Just like home, she said.” Aaron played on the woman’s pride.

“Did she now? Well then, I know she will be pleased with this afternoon’s pot.”

“I am sure she will be, Emily.” Winking at Mary before he left them, Aaron listened in the hall as Emily told Mary how to be sure to serve the coffee hot, the way the mistress liked it. Mackenzie already endeared herself to Mary. Aaron held little doubt the others would soon follow. Even staid Charles could not remain immune to Mackenzie. Mackenzie’s outburst in the carriage this afternoon nearly defeated the coachman. Especially, when her anger over failing to thrash the pickpocket rested solely on her dress. Aaron had a feeling the thief was luckier than he realized.

Entering the study, Aaron wondered if he would ever be able to get rid of the memory of Dubois touching his wife! Mackenzie’s conviction that Dubois staged the incident kept fueling Aaron’s anger. For her protection she needed to realize the danger the man posed. Rumors of Dubois’ thirst for revenge against Aaron floated around the docks. This afternoon in the carriage, his simmering rage dictated his heated retorts to her thorough questions concerning Dubois.

That pirate was only a part of his worry over Mackenzie. Pouring a brandy, his worried eyes rose to the ceiling. The soft sound of her pacing in the room above him brought on images of the caged cat he’d seen in Africa. Did she feel trapped by him? Downing the brandy, Aaron rebuffed his thoughts. “You are where you belong, my lovely, you will see I am right, soon you will see.”

## CHAPTER 7

### *Dangerous Encounter*

“She is charming Aaron, I am envious.”

“As long as it remains only envy, David. I accept your compliments for my wife.”

“Aaron, old friend, I would never be foolish enough to cross your path where she is concerned.”

“Good, I am glad we understand each other.”

“Pull back the horns Aaron, I am on your side.”

Laughing as David gave him a good nature slap on the shoulder, Aaron realized he had been out of line. David was a dear friend, but David’s reputation with women put Aaron on the defense.

“I hope I am not intruding?”

“My lady, you could never be an intrusion. Your husband and I were just having a friendly discussion.”

Aaron looked like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, making her wonder if she really wanted to know any more. David Brown was certainly different from Aaron’s other associates. She liked him. He was as blonde as she was, and handsome, but it was his boyish nature and humor that endeared him to her. The serious side of Aaron needed a friend like David.

“Aaron, may I dance with your lovely wife?”

“Yes of course, if Mackenzie would like.”

“Thank you David, I’m afraid I am not very good.”

“Nonsense.”

The closer they came to the small floor filled with graceful couples, the more she wanted to hear some good old rock and roll. The parlor music coming from the harpsichord left her perplexed. Thankful to have David as her dance partner, she chanced confiding

in him. "David, please do not think me foolish, but I honestly cannot do these dances."

David's light blue eyes sparkled in humor upon her. Her obvious look of apprehension quickly made him believe her. "Would you let me show you? This one is easy, just follow my lead."

"I suppose I'm game if you are."

David's warm laughter helped calm her nervousness. She lost herself to the music and his softly whispered prompts. "There, see, you are doing fine. I knew you could do it."

"Really? I have only my excellent teacher to thank."

"The pleasure is mine."

More confident with her steps, she chanced talking to David. "How long have you known Aaron?"

"Long enough to know he is a drowning man."

Mackenzie sucked in her breath, thinking he must mean Aaron was in trouble over the shipping line. "Is the looting hurting him that badly?"

David stumbled, but quickly corrected his error. Mackenzie possessed an innocence he found very attractive. Smiling at her, "No madam, Aaron's business is fine."

"Oh?" All through dinner the men appeared eager to discuss their problems, holding back because of the ladies' presence. Frowning over her thoughts concerning the women, she pushed it away, Aaron was more important.

Those questioning blue eyes were hard to ignore. David knew now why she captivated Aaron. His friend had finally succumbed to a woman and he was glad it was Mackenzie. David suspected that Aaron's feelings for this woman were too fresh. "Do not frown so, your husband affairs are in good standing. It was not my intention to cause you worry."

Realizing she showed too much, she smiled. "You are a good friend to Aaron, I am glad."

"I hope my friendship will extend to his wife?"

"I would like that very much."

"As a new friend, you must know I always speak my mind and rarely think of the consequences." David held her gaze, wanting her to know he was serious.

"I take it you want to tell me something?"

"He said you were as sharp as a pin." David led her from the floor. He studied her before continuing. "I only want to ask you..."

"Go on David, I promise to listen."

David pushed on when he saw Aaron making his way towards them. "I want you to give him time."

"Time, David?" Mackenzie heard the apprehension in her voice and was thankfully David failed to notice it.

"Yes, time to come to terms with his feelings for you."

Hoping she understood his meaning, she felt her heart race. "Rest assured I intend to do just that. You see, I think time is on my side now."

"What is on your side, Mackenzie?" Aaron's tones were becoming familiar and she clearly heard the disquiet in his question. David never gave her a chance to explain. She watched with amusement at the interplay between the two men.

"Aaron, you are far too suspicious. Your wife and I were just discussing the various, intricate steps of the dance."

"Am I to believe you are now an expert, David?"

Aaron's disbelief became tinged with humor, releasing the unexpected tension inside Mackenzie.

"When it comes to coaching the inexperienced, I do have an edge as a master in the game."

Mackenzie nearly choked on her punch. Not even Aaron's perplexed scowl could end her merriment over David's hidden meaning. David again prevented Aaron from questioning them further. "Aaron, Mr. Blower is motioning for us."

"The meeting you spoke of Aaron?" Mackenzie wanted to bite her tongue for sounding so anxious. On their coach ride to this dinner engagement, Aaron told her about his concerns over the lack of intervention by the British authorities in stopping the pirating of the shippers' vessels. Unable to stop herself Mackenzie spoke up and suggested that Aaron approach the authorities from a different light. Her suggestion that Aaron should remind them of how much revenue the King lost in taxes from the stolen goods, surprised Aaron and thankfully he also appreciated her input.

"Yes, and you will be pleased to know, Mackenzie, there is a Mr. Turner here tonight. He is one of the King's emissaries." Aaron's wink turned Mackenzie's cheeks a rosy hue. It was David's turn to feel lost, turning to him, Aaron decided not to ease his friend

curiosity. "I will explain later, but listen well tonight, David. I think you will find it interesting. Go on over David, I will be with you in a minute."

Placing his arm about Mackenzie's waist he led her away from the crowd. "I wish I could invite you in, but I am afraid..."

Her fingers covered his lips. "It doesn't matter Aaron. Do what you must to protect your business."

Nodding slowly over her words, she refused to acknowledge the question in his eyes. Inwardly she smiled, knowing that through every action and word she opened herself for his discovery.

"Will you be all right Mackenzie? It could be a lengthy meeting."

She wondered if he was aware of the ladies' treatment of her. "I'm sure the women will keep me occupied."

Mackenzie managed to hide her nervousness since dinner. Their cold reception was difficult to deal with, but alerting him to the ladies' nasty undercurrent would only cloud his thinking. Lifting her head a little higher, she would take whatever came tonight, without Aaron's support.

"I am not sure I like the implication of that, my lady?"

"Then I suggest you follow the men and not concern yourself with it."

"In other words?"

"In other words, my dear...bug off." She hoped her smile took the sting out of her retort.

"Remind me to ask you about that particular expression later. For now I think I grasp the message. I will try not to be too late."

"Take whatever time is necessary, I can wait."

"If you need me..."

"If I need you Aaron I will tell you when we get home, now go before Mr. Blower gives you a personal invitation."

\* \* \* \*

"Murphy? Murphy!" Scowling, Mackenzie scanned the empty hallway feeling sure the man was avoiding her. Laughing and shaking her head, she couldn't blame him. She did hound him unmercifully these past eight days.

Aaron's sudden departure following that disastrous dinner left her at a loss. Promising him she would not go into Boston, under any circumstances, turned out to be her biggest mistake. She could have accomplished so much with the house furnishings while he was away.

With that plan dashed, she devoted her attention elsewhere. Gaining Aaron's unsuspecting permission to use his study and library proved a stroke of pure genius. Mackenzie felt fortunate Murphy's own snobbish attitude unveiled the butler's extensive knowledge of ships. Correcting her mistake when he overheard her misnaming a ship to Mary left an opening that Mackenzie seized. The fact Aaron's butler thought her ridiculously ignorant on the subject worked to her benefit.

Mackenzie learned more than shipping statistics from the man. She discovered her mistake concerning Aaron's household. All the staff, except Murphy were indentured servants. Remembering what little she did about the subject left her terribly upset over the discovery.

Mary told her exactly what they could expect somewhere else. Mackenzie also saw the fear in Mary over the prospect of serving in any other household. Time and ideals foreign to these people misplaced Mackenzie's initial shock. Somehow knowing how they felt towards Aaron gave her a feeling of warmth and acceptance.

Bringing her thoughts back to the notes in her hand, she again called for Murphy. When she failed to find him, she headed for the cheery warmth of the kitchen. The large open hearth, that she doubted she would ever master as a replacement to her microwave, always made her feel welcomed. The succulent aromas of Martha and Emily's delicious cooking also made her hungry.

"Emily, have you seen Murphy?"

Chuckling, the heavysset woman kept about her task. "No doubt he scurried off when he saw you entering the master's study."

Plopping into one of the chairs, "I thought as much." Her interest quickly turned to Emily's task.

"Well, you are a pest, Mistress, if'n you don't mind me say'n so." Martha's smothered giggle sent Emily's spoon a beating.

"Now Emily, you know I don't have much time before he returns."

"Why ye bother your pretty head about all his ships and such, I will not understand."

"I want to know, so we can communicate." Mackenzie smiled back at the woman's scolding glare.

"Communicate 'tis it? If'n I was you, I'd be speak'n in another way."

Blushing over the lady's blunt words, Mackenzie sighed, knowing she would never get anywhere with them. She did like Emily and Martha's new easiness with her. In Aaron's absence she approached them to teach her about cooking with what she felt would forever have her yearning for modern conveniences. Her attempts were hilarious. Once they realized she could take criticism and *give it back as good as got*, as Emily said, the friendships began to flourish. Once started there was no stopping them.

Martha was more reserved and a good foil for Emily, whose chatter never ceased. Folding her notes and putting them away in her pocket, she took one of Martha's hot cookies and nibbled at it. "What are you making, Emily?"

"Now don't ye start on me, child. Just cause Murphy ran off and left you dangling." The older lady's lips curved in humor over the mistress' pout.

"I promise, no lessons today. I'm just curious, it looks delicious." Mackenzie batted her eyelashes in mock pleading at the lady, knowing Emily's stern look was all show.

"Indian pudding. Suppose ye ain't never heard of 'tis one either?"

"Nope, can't say as I have. But I'm willing to learn."

"Ye ain't never stopped learn'n. I wager thee wore thy mama to a frazzle with all ye questions."

"I didn't have a mother, but I guess I would have done just that." When Emily's hand stopped the vigorous stirring, she looked up at the woman.

"'Tis sorry I be child, we'uns did not know."

Living all her life without a mother she sometimes forgot how others would take it or that she said anything at all. "It's all right, really. My mother died in childbirth, so I never had her love to mourn the loss. My dad told me about her. He loved her very much and said I was just like her."

"Then she must have been special."

"I know she was. Thank you, Emily."

Brushing her comment away, the lady began her dissertation on the Indian pudding.

The morning seemed to fly by. Martha overcame some of her shyness and soon put Mackenzie to making bread. Elbow deep in flour and dough is how Mrs. Brown found her. The illusive Murphy, at the woman's insistence, led her to Mackenzie in the kitchen.

"My, my, I can see David's concern was all for not. You seem to be keeping yourself very busy."

Mackenzie could only stand there and blow a stray curl off her forehead. "David?"

"Why yes, Mrs. Masters, I am his mother, Agnes Brown."

"Mrs. Brown, it's a pleasure, won't you be seated." Going back to her kneading, she watched closely how the woman would take her offer. Mackenzie decided since the dinner that she would be herself and the good ladies of Boston could just accept or reject her on the basis. She did regret that David's mother she was first initiative.

"Well, Mackenzie, I can call you that, can I not?"

"Yes, I prefer it."

"I could not possibly take a seat." Pulling the pin from her hat the lady took it off. The wrap came next. "No, never could sit still while others work. Do you have another apron?"

"Yes of course, Emily? And Martha could you put on some coffee or would you prefer tea, Mrs. Brown?"

"I too prefer, Agnes, and I love coffee."

"A lady after my own heart, Agnes." Together they kneaded their way through a very delightful and informative afternoon.

David's mother was a store of information and did not care who or what the subject was about. Agnes' opinion of the *ladies* was almost as unflattering as Mackenzie's.

Mackenzie's thought drifted back to that evening of the dinner and when they returned home. In his excitement Aaron failed to notice how upset she was. Her own shock over his announcement that he was going with Mr. Turner to present their stand to the King's council left her speechless. Aaron's insistence that she would only be bored staying at the inn, while he was held up in meetings, ended her request to accompany him. She felt another reason prevented him from letting her go, but couldn't put her finger on it.

When she mentioned she knew New York and would find it interesting to visit, she almost missed the sudden fire lighting his eyes. She sensed he did not want her in New York. Before any argument could come from her, Aaron rushed on; telling her how shocked the men had been when he told them his wife suggested the resolution. She could not believe he actually told them. Thinking on it, Mackenzie wondered if she might have judged the men of this time



too hard. From Aaron's recount of their compliments, she decided she might have to curb her opinions.

On the men at least. As far as the women they left a bitter taste in her mouth. From the snide comments that were made before she left to sit out on the porch, she felt their ill reception rested in the fact that she married Aaron. Seems many of the women had big plans for Aaron's future, either for themselves or their daughters. Agnes' comments on the situation confirmed Mackenzie's feelings.

Agnes left late, with two fresh bread loaves to show for her efforts and a sack of Martha's shortbread cookies. Agnes was sure David would devour them before dinner. She believed the lady's claim that she had not enjoyed herself so much in years. Mackenzie had Charles hitch up the carriage to drive her home. She made Agnes promise that she and David would come to dinner night after next. Waving goodbye at the door, Mackenzie liked David's mother. Feeling much better about her prospects of living here, she returned to the kitchen and ate dinner with the staff.

She refused to sit alone in the dining room the first night of Aaron's absence and told everyone it was ridiculous to go to all the fuss for just one person. Moving her place setting to the kitchen table ended their arguments. Shocking them certainly was not her objective, but gaining their confidence was worth it. Mackenzie determined if this was to be her home, she would be comfortable in it.

After dinner Mackenzie entered the bedroom alone. Humming to herself over the pleasant day she prepared for bed. Facing the big bed her happy mood faded like the light in the room. Without Aaron the room lacked its warmth; she missed him. Funny how in such a short time she could care so much. "Hurry home Aaron, I miss you. Be careful, my love."

\* \* \* \*

"I think they were very receptive this evening, Mr. Masters."

"Yes, it appeared they will at least consider starting a patrol."

"And why not? Your argument was flawless. The fact you and many of the others plan on arming your ships to fight the scoundrels made an impact."

"Without the crown's support we may not be very affective, Mr. Turner."

"Yes, well if things were better politically, I have no doubt you would have the support you need."

“Ignoring our problems will not help. If the crown showed support for the colonists, feelings might be different.”

“That, Mr. Masters, works both ways. Shall we call it a night?”

Aaron realized he should not have aggravated Turner. The man was a decent sort, but held no sympathy to the colonist’s plight. Being born and raised here did give a person a different outlook. Aaron knew that if it came to a war his ships would be a valuable tool against the British fleet. By bringing up the armament of the cargo ships, Aaron hoped any questions as to their motive would only point to the pirates. Should things settle down the guns would help in protecting themselves.

Turner was right about one thing; the council did listen to Mackenzie’s argument. They harbored little sympathy for the conditions forced upon the shippers, but he touched their greed. Aaron could not dispute the council’s claim England’s defenses were currently stretched to the limit, trying to maintain control over their territories.

“Mr. Masters?” Bringing his thoughts under control, Aaron faced the innkeeper.

“Yes?”

“A messenger left this for you.”

The clerk handed him an envelope. “Thank you.”

Only his name appeared on the white face of the letter. Turning it over he broke the seal.

*Sir,*

*Should you desire to see your goal become a reality, come to the Blackhorse Inn out on Drummonds Road, 9:00. You won’t regret it.*

Slipping the parchment into his pocket he summoned the clerk.

“Can you have a horse brought around in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Make sure it’s a good steed, able to travel fast and hard.”

Nodding the man left, but not before Aaron gave him a pound note to insure his request would be carried out.

Entering his room, Aaron quickly changed into his riding breeches and boots. A full sleeved, cotton shirt gave him the freedom of fast movement. Taking his pistols, he checked their priming before

slipping them into his waist. He slid a dagger into his boot. Swinging his dark cape around him, Aaron felt as prepared as he could be.

He made his way quietly down the back stairs and out into the moonlit courtyard. Checking the fine chestnut gelding he was pleased with the innkeeper's choice. Mounting the horse, Aaron decided to ask the man, "Is there another road besides Drummonds to get to the Blackhorse Inn?"

"You can take Dark Hollow; it's tricky, but quicker, just watch the gullies...Sir?"

The man's hesitation sent Aaron's nerves tingling. "Any information you have will be appreciated."

Nodding, the man looked squarely at the dark haired gentleman. His eyes rested on the pistols. Blake figured this one was aware of what he might face. He liked this gentleman, even if the company he kept was questionable. Blake nearly spit thinking of the King's crony upstairs. Something told him this man didn't hold much for the crown. "Blackhorse Inn is not the place where a gentleman frequents."

Aaron remained silent; the man's words confirmed his own feelings over the note.

"The roads there and back are always under attack by robbers and the like."

"A nice place for an ambush?"

"Perfect, lots of hiding places..." The man gave Aaron directions and the spots to watch for.

"What is your name?"

"Blake, sire."

"Well Blake, if I fail to return by dawn contact a Mr. David Brown in Salem. You can locate him at Brown Shipping at the Boston docks. Tell David what transpired and that I said he was to give you twenty pounds for your trouble."

"I will do that, sir."

"Thank you Blake, I appreciate your help."

The horse moved like the wind across the hard packed road. The dangers waiting for Aaron were replaced with images of Mackenzie. He missed the softness of her skin and how she smelled after having sex with him. There seemed to be no sating his lust to stake his claim on her. The way he buried his cock so deep inside her was shameless of him. Knowing she liked the feeling of his cock touching her very

essence eased any guilt he might carry. *The deeper the better*, yes that's what she teasingly told him the last time as her lips gently kissed his sated cock. And he, well he loved the way her vagina contracted all around his cock as if her hands were holding him, riding him to that magnificent finale. Aaron gloried in having the tempest in his life.

His eagerness to return to her became his constant companion since leaving Salem. Aaron told himself he should be concentrating on the shadows and the danger possibly hiding in their depths. Yet, all he saw were the soft outlines of firm breast and the honey curls of her spice, always warm and inviting, moist in her desire to take him in. Such sexual vigor in her thrilled him into instant hardness and the impatient need to drive into her willing flesh. He couldn't get enough of how she moved, how she would call to him wanting to feel his cock move into her again and again. When their climax came she would hold him to her as if she couldn't get enough of him and she'd pump him until the last drop of seed filled her. Only Mackenzie could claim this attraction from him. He wished he could hold her at this moment.

Feeling the horse tense beneath him, Aaron forced away her image and concentrated on the danger scenting the air. His senses flared in rhythm with the horse's heavy breathing. He dismissed the possibility he might never see her again, swearing that nothing would keep him from returning to Mackenzie.

## CHAPTER 8

### *To Catch A Thief*

“David, are you sure Aaron was not on the last coach?” Mackenzie felt the desperate urge to pace.

“Unless he has suddenly taken to disguises, he failed to make an appearance.” Hiding his own concern by making light of Aaron’s tardy arrival did not seem to be alleviating her fear. “Mackenzie, he probably got tied up in meetings, I am sure he will be here by tomorrow.”

She tried to believe him. The feelings that came to her last night still plagued her. The conviction he was in danger became a vise about her heart.

“Mackenzie dear, I wish you would not fret so. If he fails to be back by tomorrow night, David can go and see what’s holding him up.”

“Thank you Agnes, you too David. I am being foolish, aren’t I?” Trying to remain calm she smiled at her new friends. “Come, Emily will have my scalp if I ruin her dinner by my silly delays.”

“Child, you do say the strangest things.”

She sighed, when she was nervous it became impossible to think before she blurted something out. At least she hadn’t cursed this time. Mary set her straight more than once on the do’s and don’ts of a proper lady. Mackenzie had to laugh at little Mary, once she got going, the girl’s own colorful language came unhindered; sending her about the room in a titter, all the while saying Mackenzie drove her to it.

“Old habits, I’m afraid Agnes. You can blame my father. I grew up in an all male atmosphere.”

The lady’s laughter eased away her worries. It was good to have these dear people surrounding her. Without Aaron, she felt so alone.

She often wondered if she would have survived what happened, if he had not been there for her. Each day she managed a little better, but she still felt so out of place.

During dinner, trying to concentrate on Agnes' conversation proved useless. Giving up the battle, she turned to David asked him, "How dangerous is this Jacque Dubois?"

Shocked by her sudden outburst, David quickly recovered. Poor Agnes wasn't as agile. Refusing to be put off, she stared at David, imploring him to tell her the truth.

"How do you know him?" Caution rang through David's question, raising the hairs on Mackenzie's neck.

"I meant the man under dubious circumstances and Aaron told me about his suspicions concerning the pirate raids."

"Child you are getting yourself all upset."

"Agnes please, I must know."

Hearing that man's name from his friend's wife filled David with concern. "She's right mother. If Aaron already spoke to her about Dubois, than I doubt I can add much."

"Another point of view can be enlightening, please David?"

Looking into those soft eyes, Davis could see where it would be difficult to deny this woman anything. He'd seen love in her eyes for Aaron. Yet there was more to her and his friend's marriage than either of them spoke about. David found it difficult to understand why Aaron would have any misgivings concerning her.

Maybe telling Mackenzie about the lowlife Dubois would take her mind off Aaron's failure to return. "Dubois is a strange mixture of individuals in one man. That his character is questionable, no one doubts. If Aaron told you he is the pirate responsible for the many raids we suffer, it is indeed fact. I doubt you would ever find the man personally on board the ships, he's too clever to be caught in the act."

Taking in David's words, she voiced the suspicion she held since that first day. "Is there a connection between Madame Oulette and Dubois?"

"Why do you ask, Mackenzie?"

She felt foolish trying to put her feelings into words. "You may very well chalk this up to woman's intuition."

"Tell me, I promise to listen." David's smile told her he was reminding her of her own words from that disastrous dinner.

"It started the day I went for the fitting. After the measurements were taking I had to wait for the madam to return, well it felt like the boogie man was watching me. Then there was the purse snatching outside the shop, something wasn't right about that either."

David ignored his mother's gasp over Mackenzie's outburst. "How does Dubois fit in?"

"He was there, assisting me, if you could call it that. I mean he didn't try to help me really. It was more like an elaborate setup to get to me. If I am right, than he knew I was in the shop and staged the attack."

"You were distraught, child."

"No Agnes, I wasn't. The man's actions and attitude weren't right. Every word, every jester, carried a deeper meaning, as if he knew something or was planning something. And David, I know it was for Aaron's benefit, Dubois hates his guts."

Remembering things he heard about Jacque Dubois, David wondered if Mackenzie's instincts were not on target. "Why do you think there is a connection with the shop?"

Hoping she didn't sound too foolish, she decided to chance it. "Not just the shop David, but Madame Oulette. There was something about the woman...to be quite blunt; she a total fake, right down to her French accent."

"Mackenzie, really!" Agnes nearly choked on her wine.

His aroused curiosity made him impatient. "Mother, please. Let her finish. Go on Mackenzie, I honestly want to hear."

"There was something they had in common, their eyes were both hard, calculating. Dubois' were also cruel." Taking a deep breath she continued. "I started putting all the pieces together and I have come up with answers. Ones that really aren't based on any facts."

If only Agnes would stop glaring at her as if she were crazy. She needed David's help. If she was wrong, she vowed to drink tea the rest of her life!

Wishing his mother were home, yet knowing he would not be here alone with Mackenzie if she were, did little to help David's growing unease. Trying to snag Dubois had been like solving some giant puzzle with too many missing pieces. Maybe Mackenzie discovered the piece that would bring it all together. "Please go on, I think it is important, Mackenzie."

“David, really. Mackenzie is just upset over the mugging and now Aaron. You should stop encouraging her. She will never get any rest at this rate.”

“Mother, let her finish. You always say to go to bed unsaid is to be awake in dread.”

“So I do. Forgive an old woman’s intrusion.”

Patting Agnes’ hand Mackenzie steadied herself to go on. “It just came to me, everything points to it. The shop would be the perfect place.”

“Place for what, Mackenzie?” His eagerness surprised everyone.

“To get information. Facts on the shipments, times, dates, what was being transported, the routes...everything! The Madame could learn it all.”

“But how child?” Even Agnes appeared drawn into the excitement.

“The women, Agnes. You yourself told me every woman at that party frequents the Madame’s shop. In fact, I would go so far as to say, if you could name every raid’s date, you would discover the wife of the shipper or captain purchased a new dress at the Madame’s shop before the sailing.”

“Mackenzie, do you realize what you saying?”

“Of course, Agnes. Either I have just made a grave error in accusing the woman in a conspiracy or I have just discovered the how and why for, of a very well organized pirating ring.”

“Dubois, how is he connected with the Madame?” David’s mind raced connecting the wives with the raids he remembered.

“Now that, David, is the ultimate question. Somehow the two are working together. Tell me, do either of you remember when the Madame opened her shop?”

Agnes jumped in; pleased she could contribute. “Why I believe it was about five years ago.”

“And David, when did the raids start in earnest? I mean, when did you feel your shipments were being specifically tagged to be hit, not just random thievery?”

“About four years back. Yes, it was right before Aaron started his line.”

“It would take a year to establish her clientele and start pulling in the society mistresses.”



“Yes of course!” David rose out of his chair, pacing in his excitement.

Mackenzie did not voice the flaw in her conclusions. Aaron lacked a wife to set up the raid on his ship last year. The question she tried to ignore since the dinner party bared down on her. Did Aaron have a mistress? Putting the thought aside, she concentrated on David. Bringing her hands to her mouth over David’s enthusiasm, Mackenzie held her breath until his thoughts rushed out.

“Yes, your right. The women would talk of their husbands business ventures.”

“From the drill I was put through, I can guarantee the Madame is an expert at gathering information. The Madame’s shop is probably the biggest gossip center in Boston.”

“I can vouch for that.” Agnes added smugly.

“Thank you, Mother!” David bent over and gave her a loud kiss.

“And you Mackenzie, if you weren’t married I’d...”

“You would what David?”

All three turned towards the door. First stunned, than relieved to actually see Aaron, Mackenzie rose. Her blood racing, she ran to Aaron. Throwing her arms about his neck, she placed kisses all over his face until she reached his mouth.

Her reception to his arrival took precedence over his anger upon entering and overhearing their conversation. Aaron refused to let her end it there. Holding her to him he deepened their kiss, lifting her off the floor. If David and his mother had not come up to them, neither of them would have ended their embrace. Touching her again was all he thought of with every stride the horse took. Having to let her go nearly sent him back into the rage he’d felt hearing David’s words from the door. Refusing to release her gaze, he could see Mackenzie’s own regret at having company. No embarrassment showed in her lovely eyes and his heart swelled for what she allowed him to see, not caring what anyone thought.

“I’m so happy you are safe.”

The sudden brightness in her eyes said he hadn’t misinterpreted the meaning. Pulling her back in his hold, “I’m sorry you worried.”

Slowly pushing herself away, she looked him over in earnest. “Were you hurt?”

"No, the bullet missed..." Awareness passed between Aaron and Mackenzie. Before he could think of what to say David interrupted them.

"We are all thankful you are home. I am afraid your wife was concerned."

"I can see that. Mackenzie, I am fine."

"What happened Aaron? Why weren't you on the coach?" Aaron led them all back to the table. A fine film of dust covered his riding clothes. She noticed the way he flexed out his shoulders as he walked.

"Sit down, Aaron, I'll get you some supper."

Before entering the kitchen, she stopped to look him over again. Dirty and ragged he was the most wonderful sight she could ever remember. Mackenzie took a deep breath over the fact he was safe.

She took over Emily's kitchen, quickly preparing Aaron's plate. "Emily, prepare the water for Mr. Masters' bath please."

"Yes, mum."

In her exuberance, Mackenzie turned and hugged the woman. "He's back and safe, isn't it fantastic!"

"Yes, child, 'tis grand."

Taking the platters in both hands, thankful for those waitress days in high school, she pushed threw the door with her hip. Mackenzie refused any help, wanting to do everything herself for Aaron.

David bent Aaron's ear relating everything she told them about the Madame and Dubois. Not wanting to intrude she set out Aaron's dinner, refilled his wine and then stood behind him. He'd shed his jacket. Unable to resist the need for reassurance her hands began to massage the journey out of the tight muscles at his neck and shoulders.

Aaron used the last of his strength not to fall back against her warm breasts. The constant brush of invitation and the strokes of her small hands gave the most sensual sensations. She was lovely and sweet, and he thought this must be heaven.

Aaron's appetite finally abated, but not until she refilled his plate two times. He could not force down another bite to keep her beside him. Never once did she interrupt the conversation, though he felt the anxious tension in her body over David's speech.

Very quietly Mackenzie left them to check on Agnes. The poor woman was so tired she fell asleep in the drawing room chair. Placing the afghan over her, she made her as comfortable as possible.

“Mackenzie, come here.”

His voice was warm and inviting, refusing him was impossible. “Yes, Aaron.”

Pulling her into his lap, “What David told me is very interesting and could very well be the answer we have been looking for. If there was something more substantial, we could go to authorities, but...”

Her heart went out to him, knowing how much he wanted to stop the raids. Those damn English pricks! From what she just overheard, she could imagine the runaround Aaron probably received. She felt his reluctance over David’s enthusiasm.

“I thought of that.” When she spoke up, Aaron’s brow rose. “I think the only way to prove it is to set a trap.”

Aaron had no intention of letting his little minx get herself involved with Jacque Dubois. As David and he realized, Mackenzie did indeed have the key they never discovered.

“What kind of trap?” Damn, he hated the way her eyes glowed with the taste of adventure over David’s question.

“It would be easy enough to pull off. We can set them up. Stage a shipment of immense value, one they can’t resist. I can tell the Madame all about it. Of course, I will have to make her work for it. We’ll tell only her and no one else. That will insure we have the right source. You and David set sail as if everything is normal and viola! They make the raid and we have them. Guilty as charged. Naturally, this is only a rough outline; there will be all kinds of details to be worked out.”

The brooding coming from Aaron confirmed everything she feared from him. The tightening hold about her waist was all the warning she needed.

“Your plan sounds workable, but you will not be involved.”

Mackenzie’s spine stiffened against Aaron’s dictate. “Wrong, Aaron, I have every intention of being involved.”

“I said no.”

Her finger traced the stubborn jut of his jaw. “You can say no all you like.” Smiling confidently, she would have her way on this.

David watched, with interest, the interplay going on between them. He would have placed a small fortune on the outcome...Aaron was sorely outmatched.

“You seem awfully sure of yourself, wife.” Aaron deliberately emphasized her new status.

"I am, Aaron. You see, you have no choice." The scoffing way he lifted his brow at her, made her smile deepen. "You, my dear husband, can only trust David and I. If anyone else were to be involved, we could never be sure of the connection between the Madame and Dubois."

"She has a point Aaron."

Damn, he realized she did. Admitting it galled him. He detested placing her in that kind of danger. "No, I cannot allow it."

"Aaron..."

"Stop it, Mackenzie! The situation is impossible."

Rising off his lap, she gave in to her temper. "You are being unreasonable."

When she started pacing he hid his smile. Mimicking his words, she glared back at him. "Oh Aaron! You know I am right!"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? All right Aaron, you tell me who else could pull this off with the Madame? The woman is too sharp to be fooled. Any of the ninnies at the party would blow it and once warned, you would never have your answers."

"It's too dangerous. Dubois is unpredictable, anything could go wrong." Aaron's words carried the force of his concern for her.

Rallying her strength to face his anger, "You're right about Dubois, but unless he is stopped I have a feeling I will always be existing in the shadow of his vile threat."

Disputing her conclusion and its implication was impossible. "Aaron, you have to let me help, this affects me as well. I promise to be careful."

"No, you promise to follow my instructions explicitly, no deviations and no arguments."

Containing her joy over his acceptance, Mackenzie made a show of thinking over his words. "Yes, I agree...only..."

"No only, Mackenzie."

"Only one, Aaron." Smiling at him, she rushed on, "I have to be allowed to air my opinions on our plans."

Knowing how valuable her input already proved to be he would be a fool not to want her involvement. "All right, but I am serious. You will not be involved, unless I allow it and then only to do as you are instructed."

Her pride swelled for this man. He was so protective it made her feel safe. Strange, in New York she always relied on herself. Being thrown out of her element certainly affected her in unexpected ways. It was this damnable imbalance that existing here presented. She couldn't seem to come to grips with it. Something told her if she'd met him in her own time it would be the same where Aaron was concerned.

"All right I promise."

"Now, why do I find that prospect so difficult to swallow?"

Her laughter filled the room. She could barely contain her excitement. In her heart she knew that helping Aaron trap Dubois would be the starting point of becoming a part of his life.

The three of them planned late into the night, only taking a break while Aaron bathed. David busied himself with detailing the shipment, while she made a pot of coffee, thankful she watched Martha these last few days; conquering the mill and stove were major accomplishments. Aaron even drank the dark brew. She bit her tongue over the images of tea floating in the harbor.

They decided to meet tomorrow at Aaron's office to go over the cargo and ship they would use. It felt wonderful to be using her abilities again. The prospect of finally seeing Aaron's office doubled her joy, knowing her homework these last days would finally be paying off.

As they prepared for bed, there was one thing she still needed to discuss. She moved and stood in front of where he sat on the bed. "Aaron what happened to you?"

Lying to her was impossible. "A letter summoned me. I ruined their plans for an ambush."

"Who did it?"

"I couldn't see him." Still upset, Aaron failed to notice her quick intake of breath over the admission.

"It was Dubois, I'm sure of it."

Looking up at her, he said, "I believe you are right."

Taking a seat at the vanity, she hid the concern over his agreement.

"How did you get home?" she asked, brushing her hair to conceal her mounting worry. His hand took the brush from her. She watched his reflection in the mirror as he started stroking her hair.

“Deciding I did not want to push my luck, I purchased a horse from the innkeeper, a Mr. George Blake. Without his assistance, I probably would have walked into their trap.”

She closed her eyes over the admission, losing her dark thoughts to his ministrations. Each stroke seemed to ease away the fear she carried for him. When he stopped, she opened her eyes to look at him. He was watching her. “I’m glad you are home, I was so afraid.”

Turning her to face him, he knelt before her. “Oh Mackenzie, I am sorry you worried. For the first time in my life, I had a reason to be careful, a reason to come home.”

Touching his face over the emotion he failed to conceal, she drew him to her, holding his head to her breast. “Always come back to me, Aaron, I couldn’t survive without you.” It was all she could say; unable to tell him how desperately she loved him. Soon, she hoped she could say it to him, soon.

Aaron lifted her into his arms. She stirred a strange reaction inside him, yet all he could do was hold her under the force of new emotions surging through his veins.

Silence filled the room, touch communicated where words failed. Laying her across the quilt, he pulled the belt from her dressing gown. Unable to move he watched in fascination as her fine, slim fingers parted the soft material, offering her velvet beauty to his insatiable gaze.

“Come to me Aaron, I’m here for you...no longer a dream. I’m real, with a woman’s need to feel the warmth of your touch.” Mac reached out and wrapped her fingers around his aroused penis. With easy strokes she drew him over her until he straddled her hips. She refused to release her hold as she guided the damp head of his penis to move over the sensitive area of her clit.

She refused to close her eyes against the sensuous onslaught of feelings having him touch her like this could do and Mac saw Aaron’s head go back as he gave in to the carnality. “Take me, Aaron.”

His eyes drank her in and he smiled over the sultry look she held him in. “I’ve thought of little else my lovely wife.”

“I know, my stud of a husband, bury that cock inside me before I ravage you.”

Mackenzie’s soft laughter soon fled as Aaron’s amorous look grew dark and heavy with desire. When he steered her to roll over on

her stomach she quelled her question and gave herself over to him, trusting his intentions.

Aaron positioned her up on her knees but pressed her head down when she began to rise. “No my lovely, just relax and enjoy. You always want to feel me, I think you’ll like this.”

The feel of his enlarged penis moving between her thighs alerted Mac’s sense to what might come. When the head of his penis began a slow slide over the opening of her vagina across her clit to the inner top of her pussy’s folds she moaned out in pleasure. Her warm sex inflamed fluids joined his in lubricating the pathway his penis sought. But Mac soon tired of his game, she needed to feel him inside of her and moved to catch the head of his cock when he moved forward.

“Ah, my wife is a very impatient lady.” He spoke against her ear, then ran his tongue over its outline.

But Mac didn’t answer for Aaron’s cock found her and when he pushed into her she gripped the bed rail to keep from sliding across the mattress. So deep did he go she didn’t release her breath until he stopped, then pulled slowly back lubricating her as he went. She wanted to cry out over the rush of excitement when he slowly penetrated her again. He kept up the slow methodical pace until she felt her body respond and begin to increase the pace as she met his advance and rode his shaft, letting instinct take over.

“Oh Aaron, that feels so damn good, don’t stop.”

“You want more of me wife?”

“You know I do.”

And he didn’t hesitate in giving her all she wanted. Aaron took hold of her lovely hips and slammed his pelvis into her buttocks, driving his cock to the limits. Her cries of satisfaction were like a fire racing in his veins. Tightening his hold on her he pumped his cock with a power edging on fierce and still she cried out for more!

The sounds of their flesh slapping echoed throughout the room as the pace mounted. He could feel her sheath tightening around his thick member as he drove into her, faster and faster until she exploded in contractions around him, causing him to cry out over the pleasure as he eased back. But Aaron was far from being finished, his cock was still rigid with desire.

Mac sighed in excitement when Aaron once again picked a slow and easy pace.

He smiled over her comfortable acceptance of going another round, but Aaron wanted more from her. When the index fingers of both hands began working their magic over her passionate nub she rolled beneath him in ecstasy. His cock responded like a wild animal demanding satisfaction, making him drive into her, harder and harder until he felt her spasms contract around him once again only this time Aaron didn't slow down, he ground his pelvis into her. His cock pure fire, she felt smooth like a river, only wild and bucking and he wanted to tame her like no other.

Aaron's teeth bit into her shoulder, but Mac didn't mind her own nails were dug into his thighs to hold on to the wild ride he took them on. She could feel the power behind every thrust and how his cock lifted her nearly off the bed when he drove to the seat of her uterus. The thrill was exhilarating in a breath stealing moment. She pushed back sending Aaron back on his legs and she nearly sat on top of him. His hands gripped her hips to help her take the ride over. Mac didn't think she could feel more, but having him inside her and going up and down the full length of his dick made her gulp for air.

The sudden climatic burst came when she came down on him and took him in as far as he could go. His cum began hitting her uterus setting off her climax and her cries joined his as they reach that ultimate threshold.

Her head fell back against his shoulder, her energy spent. She could feel his cock shrinking and pulling back as it finished its last quiver of release. Every move it made caused her to contract and she wondered if the climax would ever stop. She actually groaned when he slipped out of her.

Aaron's hand reached around to ease her discomfort. She gripped his wrist when he touched her, gasping over how touchy her vagina felt. He stopped, but then she pushed his hand down. "Please..."

Mackenzie leaned back against his chest while Aaron worked his magic. She couldn't believe he could do this to her again and so quickly, how many times could she come? The question was forgotten over the trembling quivers taking over her vagina when his other hand came from beneath her and entered the wet valley his cock no longer possessed. But Aaron wasn't finished surprising her. She gasped over the touch of his finger as it came over on her anus. He pressed there, keeping the pressure on it as his fingers played unmercifully with her. His teeth were nipping her ears and neck and Mac found it impossible



to fight. She reached back and buried her fingers into his damp hair and gave herself over to his love making. Violent contractions rose against the hold he kept inside and outside. Tears flowed down her cheeks for she never knew she could feel like this and she drifted in amazement for what he gave her.

The waves of bliss slowly calmed. Rolling onto his back he brought her with him, settling her cuddling body to his. Her breath whispered across his chest, her heartbeat felt like butterfly wings that had just battled a high wind. Stroking the ribbon waves of her hair, he savored the way it fell in wild wisp about him. Aaron's chest swelled over his feelings for the woman secure in his hold. He would fight the devil to keep her, knowing full well he might have to.

## CHAPTER 9

### *Testing The Waters...*

*Temper, temper Mackenzie!* She concentrated on the scene outside Aaron's office window in order not to scream. Ships anchored throughout the harbor bobbed lazily, straining against their anchor chains. *Just like me*, she mused. *Held fast unable to maneuver*. Yes, that was exactly how she felt right now. That, and damn angry with herself, and Aaron.

Oh, he was good. Too good! He won this round. That was how she viewed what was happening between them. A silent, polite battle of wills. Hers, the desire to exert herself and contribute, and his, stubborn male pride driven to stop her at every turn. Dominance or protection Aaron's reasons mattered little, he was succeeding. And she was most definitely loosing her patience!

Turning back to the room, she surveyed his vacant office. She felt like a spoiled, pampered child, waiting for his return. Nothing went as she expected. Rising early, she prepared herself for any excuse he might use to prevent her from accompanying him to the office. Aaron joined her in the dinning room with his dark eyes full of humor. She should have realized right then what his companionable attitude meant. Aaron was marvelous. Not once during breakfast or the ride here, did he give her any hint as to what she could expect.

Giving her the grand tour of the shipyard Aaron explained how the ships were being mounted with cannons as they docked. He even took her around the office and warehouse, introducing her to his many, all male employee's, while explaining the various activities going on around them. Her mistake came in feeling confident. She should have known Aaron would never accept her involvement in the

plot to capture Dubois. Aaron definitely intended on holding her to her promise; his terms, his ground rules.

When David arrived, they came to the office. Removing her gloves and hat she was ready to tackle one of the most important parts of the plan, to snare Dubois with a cargo so tempting he himself would have to be on the raiding ship. His presence would insure that the authorities must accept the evidence of the man's guilt as presented. Bringing the pirates back in chains could not be brushed aside as in the past.

It was the way Aaron excluded her that prevented any argument from passing her pressed lips. "My lady, Mr. Abbot, my accountant, has graciously offered to show you how the shipping accounts are managed and answer any questions you might have."

At first Mackenzie felt genuinely pleased over his announcement, knowing her own curiosity on the accounting side of the business would be sated. Realization came quickly when Aaron turned to David and spoke about taking a long boat out to the *Wanderer*. It was the only ship she recognized by name. She realized immediately what Aaron planned.

Seeing her eyes blaze in fury in his direction, he came back to her. Taking her hand to his lips, he spoke in a warning tone. "Remember your promise my lovely."

"It seems I am to be constantly reminded of that particular mistake."

His teeth nipped at her hand over the anger laced reply. "Such fire should not be wasted on mere figures in my books. I am sure the coals will still be hot on my return." The seductive glow lighting his eyes caused a deep blush to consume her ivory complexion, leaving her weak and speechless as she watched him leave.

David's eyes looked apologetic, snapping her out of the dreamy state Aaron so easily captured her in. Her anger rose higher as she turned to follow Mr. Abbot. The poor man looked as terrible as she felt over his present predicament of entertaining a lady's whim. Ticked by Aaron's coy dismissal she felt little pity for the man beside her. His piteous attitude sent her into an internal rage. Controlling herself, she took her vengeance, firing pointed and knowledgeable questions at the man until she had him sweating and fidgeting beside her. All her studying of Aaron's library and her own knowledge of

accounting, soon sent the whole office scurrying about as Mr. Abbot sought ledgers and journal for answers she requested.

Turning back to look out over the harbor, Mackenzie knew she acted just like the tax auditors back home. Giggling to herself, she was sure that in the future, if forewarned of her eminent arrival, Mr. Abbot would find an excuse to vacate the premises. Mackenzie hated admitting it was Aaron she wanted to impress not his clerks. *Some day Aaron Masters, you will see how well I can handle myself and have to admit it.*

Unable to stand her plight any longer, Mackenzie decided to change it. Gathering her things, she strode determinedly out of the office. Locating Mr. Abbot, she bit back her laughter over his grieved look upon finding her standing in front of his desk.

“Mrs. Masters? Did you need something else?”

“No thank you.” Feeling somewhat contrite for what she’d put him through, “The efficiency in your department is over shadowed only by your own exemplary expertise. My husband is very fortunate to employ such a dedicated and educated man as yourself.” She really laid it on thick, seeing the man puff himself up in front of his clerks she felt she absolved him of any embarrassment he might have suffered. After all, it was not his fault Aaron left her here.

“Thank you, Madam.”

Smiling, she nodded. Mackenzie also congratulated herself for mastering the formal speech of this era. “Mr. Abbot, would you be so kind as to inform Mr. Masters I have gone.”

Oh dear, she did it again; the man was working himself into nervous state. Watching him look around at the other men, then move around his desk to her side, she could not imagine what she might have done to deserve his concern. Taking her elbow he escorted her to the far side of the room. Wanting to alleviate the man’s strain, “Mr. Abbot, is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just, Mr. Masters left explicit instructions you were to remain here until he returned.”

“Oh, I see.” Maintaining a pleasant attitude was difficult. “Well, I am afraid that is not possible, I have errands to complete.”

“I am sure he won’t be much longer.”

“Mr. Abbot, we both know that once my husband gets involved with his ships he loses all notion of time.” At least she sounded convincing. Rushing on before his face got any redder, she wondered

if he really did have the nerve to stop her. “Besides, Charles is right outside and will accompany me. Now, be sure and tell him I will see him at home, won’t you.”

“I...yes, Mrs. Masters.”

She did not envy the man. Facing Aaron was not something she particularly relished. Taking a deep breath, she steadied her own sudden rush of queasiness over the imminent prospect. Entering the carriage, ignoring Charles’ questioning glance, she refused to stop. The fresh air felt good, if one ignored the unpleasant odors from the docks. “Charles please take me to Madame Oulette’s shop.”

“Yes, Mistress.”

Sitting back in the open carriage she pulled her cloak over her knees. The air held a hint of winter that would soon arrive. For now the bright day felt lovely and she intended to enjoy it.

“Charles?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Please take the long way, I would like to see some of the city.”

“Of course, Madam.” Charles was almost as bad as Murphy. Although, she felt with Charles it was more a mannerism of reserved observation, rather than snobbery. The little smiles and twinkles in his knowing glances told her he missed little. If he felt her foolish by leaving the office, she knew he would refrain from saying so.

Relaxing and enjoying her new freedom, her eyes took it all in. Unlike that first night the sights no longer scared her senseless. Now she looked with curious eyes, to gain knowledge of where she found herself. The Boston she viewed was like a child in its development stage. Familiar hints were everywhere of what it would matured to be. She took extreme pleasure in the hidden knowledge she possessed. It made her appreciate the struggle these people were living and the achievements that would come from their efforts.

It suddenly came to her; she was actually living in history and a part of everything to come. The realization was both terrifying and thrilling. The excitement over her discovery too great to contain, sending her astonished laughter out.

“Is anything wrong, Mrs. Masters?”

“Wrong? No Charles, everything is suddenly very wonderful and exciting. It’s beautiful and I am glad to be alive.” Laughing over her words Mackenzie gradually regained her composure.

“We have arrived.”

“So we have Charles.”

Staring at the shop, as Charles assisted her down the carriage step, she realized she had no idea what she was going to say. Shrugging, and remembering she always worked better under pressure, she went forward. The shop, as usual, held the constant drone of cackling hens. Silently she reminded herself that beneath this glitzy surface lurked a den of thieves.

“Ah, Madam Masters, excuse me, Mackenzie, how are you?”

“Wonderful, Madame. I see your business is thriving.”

“Oui, it is as always.”

“You are fortunate.”

“Ah oui, but what brings you? Are the dresses satisfactory?”

“Hardly satisfactory, they are a work of art.” They were, the woman possessed unexpected talent. Again, Mackenzie wondered why the woman would become involved in pirating? Greed seemed the only likely answer.

“I accept your compliment with pleasure, Mackenzie.”

“It is given in the same.”

“Please tell me what you need. Here, we will go in the back.”

Not wanting to chance fate in that room again, Mackenzie declined the offer. “Perhaps another time, I really must be going. I only stopped by to make an appointment.” The lady’s interest was pricked. “I need a few more items.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, a very special gown for a coming event. It has to be different and I know what I have in my mind, but I need your expertise.”

“I would be happy to assist you.”

“Wonderful, if I sketch it would you be able to make it?”

“Oui, that would indeed give me a better idea.”

“Good, I will work on it. I also need a riding habit.”

“Riding, madam?”

“A certain costume. I had one in England, much more conducive to remaining astride a horse.” Pants were out of the question, but she was determined to have culottes.

“I can hardly wait to see your designs.”

“They may not be up to your standards.”

“But I can see it would not matter, it is what you want.”

“You are very perceptive.”

"I am here to please my clients."

"Thank you. Well, I must be off."

"You seem in a hurry?"

"So much is happening, why I can hardly catch my breath." Taking in the woman's raised brow, it pleased Mackenzie to know the woman was beside herself with curiosity. The first stage of her plan rang in success. Now for the parting hint to leave her wondering.

"You seem to have settled in quite well, Mackenzie."

Perfect, "I have. What with the house, meeting new people and Aaron's new business venture, I have much to keep myself occupied."

"Your husband is very successful and still he expands. You are very fortunate."

She was as good as Mackenzie imagined. No wonder the women spilled their guts to her. "Yes, he is a very capable individual." Mackenzie turned to leave having said all she intended for now, the seeds were planted. Now she would let the sprouts root themselves. "I will get the drawings to you by next week."

"I am anxious to see them."

Smiling, Mackenzie just bet she was, but hardly over the drawings. Leaving the shop she resisted the urge to look back. Feeling those violet eyes boring into her back confirmed Mackenzie's success. Charles stood by the carriage, but before he could assist her another set of hands captured her elbow. The hold froze her movements.

"Madam Masters, we meet yet again."

Barely turning her head, Mackenzie fought the quiver trying to invade her. "Mr. Dubois." Nodding slightly, she deliberately pulled her arm from his grasp, offering her arm to Charles for assistance. Charles needed no prompting, nearly colliding with her to accommodate her imploring look.

"You seem in a hurry, Madam?"

Biting back the nasty retort she wanted to lash over his audacity, she took her seat and held the carriage door shut against him. It was a small barrier for the evil looming towards her. "Good day, sir."

"It will be, in the near future, Mackenzie."

Her eyes met his cold stare, the angry determination he allowed her to see forced the breath from her lungs.

"You may ignore me now, but I intend to change that very soon." His smile lacked any warmth, gripping her in a fear so volatile she grasped the carriage door to keep from swaying.

Charles shot the carriage out into the lane. Mackenzie took deep cleansing breaths to quell the reaction the man left in her. "Thank you, Charles."

"That man is no good Mistress."

"I think I would say he reeks of evil."

"He does that."

Drawing closer to the house, Mackenzie's nerves seemed to develop a mind of their own. She would soon be facing one very angry man in her husband. If Aaron heard about the confrontation with Dubois, he would never allow her to be involved in their plan. Mackenzie feared she would lose everything she gained with him by her own rebellious act to defy him.

When the carriage stopped Charles waited patiently for her to gather her wits enough to step down. Hesitating, she wondered if she dared ask for his silence.

"Mistress, the master would be very upset over learning what occurred."

Trying to keep her hope in check, "Yes Charles, I'm afraid my little ride will already have his temper flaring."

Smiling, he looked down at her like a father would an errant child. "I am afraid you will hear on it."

"There is no way around it."

Smiling sadly over her admission, he continued. "I fear he has enough worry over your welfare at the present. Shall we not add to it?"

Unbelieving blue eyes filled with relief and gratitude. "That would be wonderful, thank you Charles." Squeezing his hand, Mackenzie watched in amazement as the man lead the carriage around to the courtyard. It was terrible of her to drag another into her conspiracy. She never would have asked him. He did offer and she would always be in his debt. Turning to the house, Mackenzie felt somewhat more prepared for what she would undoubtedly face with Aaron.

Closing the front door, the house seemed deathly quiet to her. She wondered if it were possible to run and hide? No, she would take whatever he gave. Murphy's absence seemed the final confirmation



that everyone knew exactly what was coming. The only question was Aaron's location? Walking down the hall she felt gripped by apprehension.

"You are late, Mackenzie."

She nearly jumped out of her skin hearing his voice directly behind her. Forcing a smile she hardly felt, she turned with little confidence of coming out of this in one piece. "Aaron. Did you have a nice day?"

"It proved eventful."

She couldn't bring herself to look any longer at the fierce set of his jaw. He was certainly in a state. Busying herself, she tried to prolong the inevitable. "Did you and David accomplish anything?"

"We did."

His answers were getting shorter, she feared it an indication of his waning control.

"And you, my lady? Where did you go?"

"For a ride. Too bad you were so busy, you would have enjoyed it."

She was rambling and for the first time, since her arrival, he believed she was at a lost for words. The fact should have pleased him. Discovering her flight had thrown him into a rage. One that could not be cooled by David's assurance she could take care of herself. Nor, by the undaunted pride he felt over Abbot's enthusiasm for her obvious knowledge of accounting and business techniques. Everything he knew about Mackenzie told him she took this defiant act much further than just a ride. "Would you like a brandy, Mackenzie?"

"No, I better go change."

"I think you need one, in my study...now, Mackenzie."

*So much for civilities.* Moving past him into the room, she could feel the tension coiling in the air. Telling herself she expected this didn't help.

Shutting the door he took his leisure, studying her. It was easy, considering how determined she became to avoid looking at him. There was a slight flush to her high cheeks, accenting those lovely sea blue eyes. At the moment they lacked the confidence he normally expected to see. Pouring the brandy, he moved towards her, holding out the glass. Those beautiful fingers curling about the crystal caused the liquid to quiver. Smiling, Aaron moved closer, knowing she

would be unable to avoid looking up at him. "Your ride, was enjoyable?"

"It was."

"Where did your excursion take you?"

"Oh, around."

"Around? You are being evasive my dear."

Her eyes flared at his, she immediately regretted her defensive action. The confidence in the man annoyed her. "Alright Aaron, I went to Madame Oulette's."

He held back the rush of anger, not sure if he wanted to shake sense into her or scream in rage over her foolish act. "Explain yourself, woman."

The deathly calm in his voice over her gender, sent off warnings that told her how fortunate she might be to be one at this moment. Reminding herself she caused this rage, she searched for the courage to tell him. "I started the ground work on the madam."

"Really? On whose authority?"

He had her there, damn that promise. "Aaron, before you get any angrier, would you listen?" She almost wished he would yell or something, instead of staring at her so threateningly with those shameless dark eyes.

"Go on if you must."

She didn't like the sound of that, not one bit. "She is hooked." Either he refused to understand or her description was too foreign. "She is interested. I used an excuse that I needed a special dress and a riding habit that I would give her drawings of by next week. Before I left, I let it be known you were involved in a new venture, and believe me that caught her attention."

"Thank you, Mackenzie. You have completed your part with your usual efficiency. David and I will take it from here. You better get ready for dinner."

Dismissed! Oh yes, he just slammed the door! Worse yet, she wasn't sure what to do about it. "But she expects my drawings, Aaron. When I take them I can give her a little more information to hook Dubois."

"That won't be necessary."

"What are you saying?"

"I think you know...your services are no longer required."

"Of course they are. How else will you tie the Madame to Dubois?"

"The Madame is incidental, she will be dealt with in time. Dubois will be hooked, as you say, in another fashion."

"Aaron?"

The way he turned away sent shock waves off in Mackenzie. She feared the deeper meaning coming from him. "I have work to do. I will join you at dinner, Mackenzie."

Afraid of what she would do if she remained, she headed for the door hoping her legs would not fail her.

"Mackenzie..."

Stopping in the doorway she held back from facing him. "Yes."

"You may send her your drawings through Charles. I am sure the Madame would be pleased to fill the order from them."

Tears blurred her vision, choking back any response. Bolting from the door, she raced up the stairs. Entering the room she leaned heavily against the door, shaking her head over the devastation she felt filling her being. "I've lost. Oh God, I've just lost so very much." Sliding down to the floor under the weight of weakness, the sobs racked her crumpled body.

\* \* \* \*

"Mary? Where is the mistress?"

"Sire, she said she is feeling poorly."

"Is she coming down for dinner?"

"She said no, sire." Mary curtsied, hurrying to leave his presence; fearful he would seek more answers. Her loyalty rested firm with her Lady, even if the sire held her papers. She could never lie to the master; it was best not to tempt him further. Entering the kitchen she asked Emily for the pot of coffee.

"'Tis she better, Mary?"

"No, I fear she be worse. She stopped crying so, but now she just stares off. I fear for her, Emily. There 'twas no shouting. What happened, Emily?"

"Sometimes Mary, a good shout clears the air. Things unsaid can leave a well of hurt."

"Whatever will we do?"

"If she gets worse, I have some tonic to make her rest."

"Alright. I best get back to her."

Leaning against the doorframe, he watched Mary scurry up the stairs. Slamming the door and walking back into his study, he poured a large brandy. Quickly downing the amber fire he let it burn into his lungs, wishing it could sear away the ache inside. Instead of venting his anger he hurt her and the rage still flared like a cinder inside of him.

She deliberately defied him! Twice in the same day! By doing so she placed herself in jeopardy. If she acted so foolishly, then it rested with him to protect her from her stubborn behavior. Ending her involvement was the first step. Damn it! She was right about the Madame, but a few well-placed words would end the jezebel's lucrative business.

David could entice Dubois with the shipment. The man would remain a threat to Mackenzie until he was caught. Aaron would take any measures necessary to prevent danger from coming near Mackenzie. If he must control her every movement, so be it!

Staring at the quiet ceiling he cursed. The glass shattered in his grip. He had no other choice! Even if it meant hurting her, he would protect her at all cost!

\* \* \* \*

The night seemed endless. Mackenzie gave up hope that Aaron would come upstairs. Unable to sleep in the large bed alone, she stared out the window watching the moon progress across the starlit night. She never really watched the stars before coming here. The city lights blocked them out.

*New York*, she moaned. Everything from that life seemed like a distant memory. Knowing Aaron was close, but chose not to be with her, hurt deeper than what he was doing to her. She lost more than the freedom she craved. Destroying the respect and trust beginning to flourish between them, felt like a mortal blow. All her tears failed to banish the devastating chasm she created. Pushing off the rumbled bed she went to sit at the window. "I'm sorry Aaron. So very sorry for both of us."

\* \* \* \*

Kneading the bread, Mackenzie tried to block all other thoughts but the task. A lone tear slide past her eye lashes. Blindly, she brushed at it with her upper arm, heedless of the flour she left across her cheek. Sighing, she seemed helpless to control the depression she existed in since the night he failed to return to their room. She would

always remember it as the beginning of the “*great rift*.” The guilt over her part in this break sat heavily upon her heart.

She could not fault him. His behavior towards her, if anything, remained overly kind and polite—except for the fact, that she would classify herself under house arrest, per the master’s orders. As he emphatically stated, *it was for her own good*.

If he expected an argument, she failed him there as well. Her lack of spirit ceased to concern her. Mackenzie decided her spirit died when Aaron failed to return to their bed. His continued absence from their bedroom, grew harder and harder to deal with. Her eyes still smarted remembering how Aaron had Murphy moved his things across the hall that next day.

Remaining in the room revolted her. She forced herself to get up and function with a semblance of normalcy. Completing the sketches of the dress and riding outfit, she’d given them to Charles to deliver to the Madame’s shop. The culottes arrived last week, with a note saying the dress would take more time. The madam raved over the pant skirt, saying she already received orders for them. Mackenzie wonder if she should have asked for a commission on the design, but she lacked the heart to even try them on.

Aaron saw the drawings on the sitting-room table. Watching him from the hall, Mackenzie kept hoping for some reaction. Anything to indicate he cared. Instead, all he gave her was a very formal acknowledgement, “You have many talents, mistress.”

Mistress! She’d gone from witch, woman, my lady, to this! Such a dry collection. Once he did call her *my lovely* Sadly, she questioned whether she would ever hear the endearment again. His eyes, when they did look at her, were sternly void of any emotion. Oh yes, she searched, whatever he felt, even if it be hatred, he hid it well. She was nondescript, a wife to exist in the background. An undemanding, unimportant person to fill a void. God forbid she have an expressive thought, show intelligence, or have the slightest urge for some independence!

Hitting the bread dough, she could not help but wonder why, whatever *power* sent her here would go to all the trouble. Was she so unimportant that shifting her around in time meant nothing? Her thoughts confused her. The realization suddenly came to her that she was, very, no extremely...angry!

Punching the dough with each of her silent words, *Well Mr. Aaron Masters, you have just what all good, upstanding colonial men desire, a good, quiet, obedient wife!* Picking up the large ball of bread dough, she threw it into the pan for the final rise. “Damn you if you don’t!”

“Mistress, I think that there bread will take a week to come back after that beating.”

“If it’s got any sense, Emily, it will do exactly what it is suppose to do.”

Turning and smiling to herself, Emily’s wise eyes lit up over the first sign of life in their young mistress in weeks. Looking up, Emily’s smile quickly faded seeing the master enter the kitchen. If the girl were coming out of it, seeing him would most likely send her right back into that dark mood.

Aaron would have to be blind to miss the sullen faces coming from his staff. During Mackenzie’s fight with the dough she failed to notice his presence. Trying to look away from her proved impossible. She looked so lovely attacking that dough like a mad woman. Flour covered her flush face. He’d not seen that much life in her in weeks. She certainly put herself into her task.

God, he ached to hold her. His self-imposed exile was driving him mad. Seeing what his actions were doing to her, proved the worst torture he ever lived through. But if he ended this, he knew she would soon be back to her old ways.

Trying to keep his mind on business, with what he faced every day kept him in a foul mood. All these plans going on with Adams and his group over the tea boycott did not help. Anger ran high all around over the King’s ill use of the Colonist. Adams could not remain passive much longer.

Aaron’s own involvement with Dubois captured all his spare time. Adams understood saying if Aaron succeeded it would be as effective as his own plan of retaliation against the authorities. Giving Adams all the assistance he needed, Aaron hoped the man’s patience with him held. Adam’s was certainly pleased over the additional armament of the ships. As much as Aaron disliked the idea, he felt sure they would be used, and not to fight pirates.

They set sail next week. Dubois had been hooked, as Mackenzie called it, by a shipment of gold. David played his part by staging one hell of a fight between them, then storming off in a huff to the nearest

pub, while Aaron watched Dubois follow. Mackenzie's little hint at the shop left Dubois hanging around the harbor like a bad odor.

So many times he wanted to tell her how very right she was about the connection with the Madame. Aaron's own spies confirmed Dubois' comings and goings at the back entrance of the shop. The first being his exit and approach to her that very day. Aaron confronted Charles that evening with the report. The man's protective stance for Mackenzie was admirable. It took all of Aaron's well-chosen words to convenience the man to tell him about the incident. Hearing of Dubois' threat against Mackenzie steeled Aaron in his present action against Mackenzie. Conquering his need to hold her and end this distance between them, became a constant struggle. These last weeks her defeat crippled her, Aaron felt no victory.

Seeing her now, he felt a flicker of joy in his heart. The spirit he admired was stirring again. He needed to finish this business with Dubois; especially if what he saw in her took hold. Nothing would hold her in check this time. He would be on the receiving end of every bit of her mounting fury and love every fiery minute of it.

She finally looked up from her pounding. He saw the play of emotions change so quickly on her face he could not be sure which way she would go. As much as he knew he still needed her to remain docile, he silently cheered on the anger seething to a peak across her beautiful face.

"Well, Aaron what ever brings you into the kitchen? I thought it was off limits to you?"

She was furious! Moving his hands behind him he fought the urge to reach out and end what he'd done to them. "Mistress, I came in to discuss a bill I received."

It felt wonderful to speak her mind again. "Really? Now what could be so important about a food bill?"

"It is not important, Mistress, it is where it came from."

Mackenzie knew exactly what bill he spoke of. She personally purchased every item on it. "Then I am sure it is, I, you want to talk to."

"You, madam?"

"Yes, sire." Throwing his formality back at him, "The bill is for various items, spices?"

"Yes it is."

"I bought them."

“Really?”

“Yes really, Aaron. I felt like French food, so I needed ingredients.”

“And how did you get them?” His own temper came quickly over his suspicious thoughts.

“Sorry to disappoint you dear husband, but they came to me.”

“How?” The raised timber of his voice made her blink in surprise.

“You’re yelling husband. If you want answers, I suggest you resort back to your recently, sticky sweetness or would you prefer to call it, acting overly polite, for conversation sake? Now if you don’t mind, I’m busy and if you have nothing better to do, than to read my grocery bills, I suggest you go build another ship!” Slapping the dough against the board she stared him down.

Aaron left in haste, afraid his happiness would burst out. Locking himself in the study he let it come. Laughing until tears fell. “Oh my love, thank God I did not destroy you.” Realizing what he had said, he stopped. “Yes damn it! I do love her. What a fool I have been refusing to admit it.”

He sat there thinking over the truth of his feelings. Brooding over what he failed to see, and the damage he nearly caused, Aaron cursed his tomfoolery. Thankfully she possessed the strength to survive his smothering control. Aaron feared he had much to amend. He’d practically made her a prisoner in her own home. To do that to a woman like Mackenzie was cruel!



## CHAPTER 10

### *Acceptance Before The Loss*

The door flew open, jerking Aaron's eyes up from the shipping schedule. He could barely contain himself over the sight of her. First the kitchen incident and now...she looked beautiful and dangerous.

"Why so shocked Aaron? You saw the drawings, if you had objections they should have been voiced before the drawings were sent. I fully intend on wearing this and using them. They are called culottes, the Madame loves them and already has orders for them." Her temper led her to confront him and now that she stood in front of his desk, she decided she would not retreat. No, Mackenzie refused to let this situation continue another day! Turning, she deliberately gave him a full, slow view of the green velvet, split skirt. It came up above her ankles, which was as high as she dare go. Her boots hid any skin that might be objectionable. She hoped he was cringing.

"What? No comment? Personally I love them, they feel almost like my old wardrobe, of course my others were much shorter." She raised his ire that time. It felt positively wonderful just knowing he was not immune to her. For some ungodly reason she would never fathom, she realized Aaron staged this whole elaborate charade. Well, enough of his games! Shock treatment was in order. She might let him protect her, but it would be on her terms!

She captivated his senses. The daring skirt hugged her curved hips as if it were caressing her. God, he could feel his need flaring to life and he not but touched her with his eyes!

"Alright Aaron, if you insist on remaining distant that's your problem."

If she only knew how close he wanted to be, she would stop flaunting herself so openly.

“As I said, I intend on using these. They are designed for riding. Which by the way, is another of my hidden talents. I have no intention of breaking my fool neck at it either, so the need for these as you will soon see. I’ve taken the liberty of telling Charles to saddle your black and for me the gelding you brought back from New York.” Watching his face twitch, she wondered how much longer he could remain passive. His gaze hadn’t left her. The heat burned through the velvet, making her desire for him become intensely uncomfortable. Raising her arms to put on the riding hat, with its large feather plume curving down and about her braid, she could feel her blouse pull tight across her breast. Knowing his eyes were following every movement, she hid her satisfied smile and dallied over adjusting the hat. *You are cracking, Mr. Masters.*

Slipping on the matching velvet jacket she nearly lost her resolve when she saw him close his eyes, tightly, over the effect. Running her fingers slowly down the lapel, she hoped the act she put on for him worked. If not, she faced a terribly long, frustrating night, alone.

“Well, what are you waiting for Aaron?” His eyes popped up from her breast. She almost laughed over the flush creeping over his darkly handsome face. “I’m going riding with or without you. I would prefer your company. I am trying very hard to abide by your restrictions on my freedom. So if you are so damned concerned about me safety, I suggest you come with me.”

That did it! He almost rose, but quickly sat back down, refusing to embarrass himself before her. “I would be glad to accompany you, Mistress.”

“Good, I will wait in the yard for you.” Turning at the door, she smiled sweetly at him. “Oh, one more thing Aaron, if you call me mistress one more time...I will flatten you. You do know what flatten means, don’t you, Aaron?”

“Assuredly, mis...Mackenzie.”

“Thank you Aaron, now please hurry or I might leave without you.”

Aaron did indeed hurry; positive she would do as she said. He was still dressing as he raced down the stairs, pulling on his jacket when he reached the back door.

There in the yard was Mackenzie, sitting very determinedly *astride* the gelding. He bit back the anger over seeing her sitting on a man’s saddle. What was Charles thinking not to use the sidesaddle?

Walking to her, he took the bridle in his large hand to stop the horse from prancing. "Mackenzie, if you will dismount I would be pleased to switch the saddle."

"No thank you, Aaron. I prefer this one. Don't look so horrified, I doubt anyone will see us if we ride out of town. The ground is hard from the frost, so it shouldn't be muddy."

"No side saddle?" Even Aaron heard the resignation in his voice.

"No Aaron, this is the way I ride." In silence she finished her thought. *And like me Aaron, this is the way you will accept me. For my darling, I am different and you can't make me into what I am not.* She determined never to hide the fact again.

Her eyes never relented their stance and he knew she would not allow his interference. In truth, she held him in such warmth it melted whatever ire he carried. *The hell with propriety, she meant much more than all of society's restrictions.*

He mounted the black and just touched the saddle, when she raced out of the courtyard. Spurring the animal he raced up beside her. She smiled and let him take the lead. Neither spoke as they rode leisurely out of Salem.

When they reached a country lane she came up beside him. Sighing she said, "Its beautiful out here. I wished we had ridden sooner, the leaves are nearly gone."

Aaron remained silent too enthralled in watching her and wondering what she would do next. Having her back filled him with such relief he forgot all about her outlandish costume and the brazen way she enticed him in the library. She was letting him know, in very plain terms, just what he could expect from her from now on. Thankfully, she was no longer the quiet woman of the last three weeks.

"Thanksgiving is coming up. I want to invite David and Agnes over. Do you mind?" Mackenzie smiled at him, glorying in the way he looked at her.

"No, I would like that. What is thanksgiving?"

"Oh really Aaron, I shouldn't have to explain it..." Mackenzie realized the warmth in his gaze failed to obscure his confusion. "It is a dinner, held with family and friends to honor the Pilgrims' struggle."

"It sounds interesting. I've heard of the claim about a dinner with the savages, I'm not sure I believe it. After all it is highly unlikely they would survive such a meal." Aaron caught the way she stopped

herself from saying anything more on the subject, except to say that they would have dinner on Thursday eve. The day after Mackenzie's dinner party they would set sail, but now was not the time to speak on it.

"I go all out on holidays, so be prepared. I decorate and bake up a storm. For Christmas, I want a big tree that will reach the ceiling and it should be at least six feet around. A blue spruce would be wonderful." Ignoring the way his brows came together wasn't easy, but Mackenzie refused to let anything interfere with their new found camaraderie.

"Christmas is still a long way off." Aaron laughed over her enthusiasm.

"Yes, but I am putting in my order now. And you must give me hints of what you would like for a present."

Dare he tell her all he wanted was her? He feared she would hate him. Yet, she seemed to be ignoring everything that happened. Understanding her was difficult. Questioning anything she did since the kitchen was the farthest thought in his mind.

"Well?"

"Well what?" They were bantering, teasing each other and he never wanted it to be any other way between them, ever again.

"Aaron if you have to think that long, over a present, I will never guess it." His burst of laughter warmed her beyond thought. It had been far too long since she heard that deep roar. "I can see you are going to make it hard. All right we will play the game, animal, vegetable or mineral. You have to tell me which category your wish falls in."

"None."

"None? Oh Aaron, you're not playing fair."

"I promise to leave hints all over the house."

"Alright, I guess I can live with that and I will do the same. Come on Aaron, I will race you to the bridge."

"Mackenzie wait!" She was gone too fast to hear the fear in his call. The gelding took his head, his long strides moved over the hard road in a breathless clip. Urging the stallion on, Aaron prayed he could reach her before the bridge. He knew it well and the ice usually covering it. Lying out across the horse's neck, they quickly gained on her.

"Pull up! The bridge...Ice!"

She couldn't hear his words, but his tone sounded strange. Pulling back on the reins, she tried to slow the gelding. The animal had taken hold of the bit. Plow reining him, she gave a hard pull about to the left, hoping to check him. "Aaron he's got the bit!"

The bridge drew close, the trees were too thick to move into and she felt fear taking over. Again she tried to turn him.

Aaron reached for her just as she leaned, trying to rein the horse off the road. Wrapping his arm about her he pulled her up and over onto the stallion as they came slowly to a stop.

"Aaron the gelding!"

The horse hit the first plank of the bridge, but it was the next step that sent him off balance. The ice beneath his hooves prevented him from correcting his footing.

"Oh no, Aaron, he's falling!"

Hitting the rail the horse plunged sideways into the icy river. Mackenzie's hand pulled at Aaron trying to break his hold about her waist. "Let me go Aaron! I can help him get out."

"No, its over!"

"No! Let go!" Lowering her to the ground he gave in to her distress.

Running to the riverbank she halted, searching the steep sides in a desperate attempt to find a lower spot. About 12 feet up she saw what she wanted and headed for it. The gelding thrashed wildly about in the water. The floating ice told her he would soon lose the battle he waged. Calling failed to draw his large whitened eyes to where she stood. Putting her fingers together in her mouth, she let loose the loudest whistle she could create. His ears perked forward; again her shrill filled the air as he struggled towards her. "Come on boy! You can do it!"

Whistling repeatedly, she kept his attention until his footing hit the solid bank and he gained ground. Scrambling out of his way, she fell back, landing half way into the icy river. Crawling back up onto the bank, she was too happy to care her precious riding habit was ruined with the black mud and ice caked into its soft material. Gathering herself together, she climbed up the bank to where Aaron held of the frightened horse.

"Is he alright Aaron?"

"Cold and scared, but he looks fine."

The large chestnut head pushed affectionately against her, rubbing his wet head over her chest.

"I think you have a friend for life."

Laughing she hugged the large animal's neck. "He was so brave Aaron, he refused to give up." She was a sight. He would always remember the way her small arms went about that giant animal. Her long braid had come free, she looked as wild as the country around her and she was as dirty.

Aaron's large hand began brushing off the leaves and dirt from her backside. "Mackenzie! You are soaked!"

Her teeth were chattering, but she hardly noticed, still too happy over the horse surviving the fall. She shivered more from the realization that if Aaron hadn't reached her she would have been in that river with him. Turning to Aaron, she threw her arms about him, finding the reach nearly as difficult as the horse had been. "Thank you Aaron for saving me."

Feeling her against him, he quickly overcame his shock, folding her in his arms. Burying his face in her silken tresses, he wanted to lose himself there. Hating to release her, but feeling her violent shiver in his arms his concern took precedence. Letting her go, "Take off that wet coat."

Trying to do as he said, she found her fingers were too numb to work the buttons. Brushing her hands away he quickly pulled it off, wrapping his coat around her. Lifting her up he placed her on the stallion. She was shivering too much to protest. Taking the reins, he swung himself up behind her. Making sure she was covered, he moved the animals out with as much speed as he dared for fear she would fall.

Damn she was cold and nothing seemed to help. Leaning back against him she sought his warmth, feeling very tired. Realizing how little exercise she had of late, she blamed her weakness on her stubbornness in not acting sooner. "I'm so tired, Aaron." Fighting the shaking in her body, she pushed the words out.

"I should have let the fool horse drown." But she was already too close to sleep to hear the fear in his words. When she went limp against him, he pulled her up in his arms. "Hang on, my love."

Reaching the courtyard, his loud cry brought Charles running. "Easy, take her Charles." Jumping down he took her back, racing into

the house. Mary came running towards them as he started up the stairs.

“Oh lordy! What happened?”

“She’s freezing, bring hot water, heat some stones for the warmer and blankets, lots of them.” Kicking open the bedroom door, Aaron quickly had her on the bed. Stripping off her boots and clothes, he wrapped her in the quilt.

“Mary!”

“Yes sir.”

“Get a tub and fill it with water, as hot as you can stand. Hurry!

Fool that I am. Close to you for a minute and my good sense falls away. Why the hell did I listen to you? Why?” Holding her limp body, that looked lost in all the blankets, he moaned, knowing his mistake could well have cost him her life.

“The water is ready.”

Carrying her over to the tub, Aaron gently lowered her into the steaming water. “Keep hot water coming, Mary. We will switch it to keep the temperature steady.”

Mackenzie’s moan tore through him. “Ah girl, I know it hurts.” The shock of the hot water against her cold skin moved through her. He saw her body jerk harshly as the heat seeped into her. The color coming back to her lips was a good sign.

Aaron kept his vigil up for an hour. Lifting her out of the tub, with Mary’s assistance they vigorously rubbed her skin until she was perfectly dry and a rosy pink. Dressing her in the warmest nightgown Mary could find, he also placed her velvet robe around her before tucking her into the bed.

Her even breathing told him she was in an exhausted sleep. “Mary, ask Murphy to bring my things in here, please.”

“Ah...”

“What is it?”

“The mistress already had your things put back, after you left.”

Laughing and shaking his head. “I should have guessed. Thank you, Mary. She will be fine, I will stay with her now.”

The girl left, smiling as she closed the door. Looking at the steaming tub, he shed his clothes and sank beneath the water.

Coming back to the bed he slipped in beside her. Careful not to disturb her he eased her warmed body over beside his own. “I may be

a fool Mackenzie, but I can not exist as we have been and you have already told me how you feel.”

\* \* \* \*

The dream was so real she wanted it to last forever. He was holding her close and safe within the comfort of his large strong arms. “Don’t ever let me go, hold me forever, Aaron.” Over and over she pleaded with her dream image not to go. Desperate when he began to fade, she reached out for him; holding fast, refusing to let him go. Light invaded her senses, she tried so hard to keep it out and retain his image. He felt so real. “Aaron...so real.”

“Mackenzie! We are not a dream! Wake up love. Wake up!” God, he was scared. Her mumbling roused him. He held her all through the night and yet at that moment he swore she faded, almost disappearing before his eyes. Panicked, he refused to accept what was happening. “No! Mackenzie open your eyes, see me, I am real!”

Gripped by fright she did as he said, blinded by the brightness surrounding them. “Aaron! Help me! Hold me. I don’t want this, please God, no!”

He held her, yet he did not! Aaron could feel her being torn from his grasp. “No! I will fight you. You can not have her! Never will she return! Mackenzie, fight it!”

She heard his anguished cry. Holding herself, she struggled against the pull on her body. “It can’t be happening again. I love you Aaron, help me!”

The room changed around them. Familiar, but so unreal. The kitchen glowed bright; the dark blue sofa shimmered in and out of reality. The deep green carpet and sky blue wall came and went. Forcing her eyes away, refusing to see any of it, she concentrated on Aaron and the fear torturing his beloved features. But he was far off and moving away at a frightening speed. She knew now, what she feared since the very first was happening. Rebelling against it, she screamed out, defying the cruelty. “You’re wrong! Let me go back. I love him! You are killing us. I won’t leave him, ever! Please God, send me back!”

A ringing started, shrilling about her with such force she covered her ears trying to stop the pain. Screaming over the horror, “Please! I love him!”

Blackness consumed Aaron, taking the last of his image from her sight. Mackenzie raged at the injustice, fighting the force that kept her



from him. Pulling on every bit of strength in her possession, she lunged into the darkness after him, refusing to stay. She must return to his time, where she now belonged. A sense of falling caught her, throwing her about like a top off its string. Spinning out of control through the abyss, "Aaron! Aaron help me! Don't do this! Don't let me lose him! Help me!" Fear filled her, she couldn't see him or her apartment...nothing, only the darkness, so impenetrable. It was wrong, so very wrong...

Aaron's cry filled the black night. He was back, back in their room, but she was gone. Tearing at the bedding he searched frantically for her, hoping beyond reason. Nothing!

"I will never give you up!" Trying to calm the hysterical panic stealing his mind, he fought it. Concentrating on her image he called to her, "Come to me, Mackenzie. You are mine. I love you. You are real and belong here with me!" Repeating it, each time with more force. He swore he heard her desperate screams for him. Then they too faded. The silence condemned him. Words choked in his throat, hot tears scorched his eyes and face. He failed to hold her. Failed to protect the only one that mattered.

Through the coming dawn, the devastated cries of his violent sorrow filled the air. "I promise to find a way, my love! Somehow, I swear I will come to you!"

The tortured images of what happened would always be a part of him and his guilt for ever doubting her. The truth, he saw it all this time, he knew exactly where they had gone. The colors were all a part of Mackenzie. Her home, what had she called it, her apartment? He knew his own fears made him refuse to listen to her. Laughing through his sobs, the fear came regardless of his denials. Sadly he wondered if he had listened, would he have prevented this? How did one fight a power that could do this kind of thing to a person?

Aaron fought to hold on to what little hope he possessed over getting her back. Yes, hope; hope from her own words. She loved him, he heard her declaration, heard her denial to accept the power's dictates. Her plea to stay and the tortured cries for his help would never leave him!

He would not fail her again. He would find a way.

Aaron refused to answer the knocks on his door. He needed time to remember and plan. Moving about the room he touched every article that belonged to her. It seemed to help confirm her presence.

Everything was still here; somehow Aaron felt they too would have vanished if she were lost to him.

\* \* \* \*

“Aaron! Aaron, open the door, it is David!”

The insistent banging broke through to Aaron. He moved as in a dream to unlocked the door.

David pushed past his friend. Immediately his gaze took in the ravaged state of the man and the room. “Aaron?”

Swollen, clouded over eyes came to David’s. Desperate to know, regain some semblance of sanity out of what he existed in. “She is gone, David.”

“Gone?” His eyes scanned the room. “Mackenzie? She would never leave you.”

“Thank you God, thank you for this piece of reality.” He knew now he had a chance. She did exist in his time and could again. “She did not leave me on her own. I almost wish she had.”

The chance Aaron was about to take was great, but he needed an ally for this fight. David was the only man he trusted to at least listen.

“Alright Aaron, you better explain what happened here. I will get some strong black coffee sent up.”

“Black coffee, she loved the brew.”

“You mean she thrived on it, let us hope it works on you. Mackenzie almost had you liking it.”

“Yes, she did.”

“Wash up Aaron, you look like hell. I will be right back.” Softly shutting the door, David fought the panic over what he just faced and heard. Aaron looked like death and if what he said were true, he knew why. Making sense out of all this proved impossible. Gathering his wits about him, he would face one problem at a time.

“Emily, I need coffee, strong black coffee and lots of it.”

“Master David, ‘tis the mistress sick?”

“No Emily, I will explain later.” Something told David the unlikable prospect of Mackenzie being sick would not be as difficult to correct.

Heading back up stairs, he tried to put everything since Charles’ frantic summons this afternoon into order. Everyone was aware of the problem between these two. When Charles informed him of Mackenzie’s colorful afternoon with Aaron, the accident, and Aaron’s reaction to her, everything finally seemed to be back as it should be.

What the man related over this morn and afternoon threw him into despair again.

After seeing Aaron he was glad Charles summoned him. When all their attempts to call Aaron out of the room failed, they feared Mackenzie's death during the night. What has happened, if he could believe it, was just as bad.

Walking back into the room, he saw Aaron had washed. The man's hand shook so badly he was incapable of shaving the dark growth of beard. "Forget it Aaron, cutting your throat won't help her."

Laying the blade down Aaron wiped away the lather.

"The coffee is here. Mary set it down at the table, thank you."

Looking about the destruction in the room, she stood there fighting her dismissal, needing to find her mistress. "Sir? Where is she?"

David could see the girl was shaking violently over her fear to brazenly confront Aaron for answers. Sympathetic to her need, he wondered what to say to alleviate her concerns. Aaron stepped in ending the dilemma.

"Mary, I am afraid my wife has disappeared."

"Gone sir?"

"Yes."

The vigorous shaking of the girl's head told of her disbelief.

"Mary I find it hard to believe myself. What I need is time with Mr. David to plan and help get her back to us. Can you be patient with me for a while longer? I will explain, but I need your silence for a short time more. For Mackenzie's safety, please Mary?"

Mary's eyes were large and filled with feeling for the man. "You love her, sir?"

David's gasp did not end her defiant glare on her master.

"Yes Mary, with my life. I have been a fool not to see it. Can you understand?"

"That I can sire. Get her back."

"I promise Mary, I will. And thank you, I know how deeply you care for her and she for you."

"She is a good lady, she loves you too." With that the girl left.

Seeing David's amazement over the maid's behavior, Aaron felt a need to defend Mackenzie's friend. "I deserved that David, do not be

too hard on her. I am afraid my actions of late have all been in the wrong directions.”

“You wanted to protect her, Aaron.”

“Yes, but I failed her, did I not?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Hopefully, after what I tell you, you will find it in yourself to believe what I refused to. And because of it, lost her.”

Sitting down hard, David shakily poured their coffee, hoping it would fortify him for what was coming.

“David did you ever wonder how I managed to hide her on a ship for three months? Or why she seemed so different? Or why I never mentioned her existence before my marriage?”

Seeing his blue eyes deep in concentration, he knew his friend had, but out of loyalty never voiced the questions. “It is time for honest David. I will start from the first, you need to hear it all to believe what has happened.”

Aaron told him, refusing to leave out any incident forged in his memory. David listened, keeping his composure and questions until Aaron related everything about Mackenzie up to their ride yesterday.

Lighting the candles, David listened to the fantasy Aaron spun. It was fantastic and yet it held so many answers. As Aaron spoke, David found his disbelief being replaced by the painful truth coming from his friend as he spoke of losing her last night. David found himself looking about the room, seeing her dresses flung out across the bed. The reassurance they gave him must have been Aaron’s own. When Aaron finished, David stared at the man’s visible pain and the tears streaming down his proud features. His eyes glowed with his love for the woman...from the future. Yes, he believed all of it! Knowing the man before him he could imagine the struggle Aaron waged against believing in such a force. A man like Aaron needed to be in control, intangibles were too illusive to wield power over.

David hoped the determination he glimpsed in those steel black depths could accomplish the impossible. His misgivings over how to get her back were strong, for Aaron’s sake he prayed Aaron was stronger.

“She was real Aaron, I am sorry.”

“Thank you David.”

“But how Aaron? Where is she? Back in...?” He could not bring himself to say it.

"2003? No, I can not believe she is there. She tried to follow me, I saw her run into the void. I heard her cries and the fear she felt. She would never go back, I am sure of it."

"Where then, another time? God Aaron, if that happened how can you possibly expect to find her?"

"I have thought of nothing else all day. Somehow I don't think she went anywhere else. This thing...the power, it's like a door opening and I feel it can only have one beginning and one end. It opened here this time, when she slipped back to follow me she had to come back to this time, somewhere."

"I hope you are right. But where?"

Relieved David believed him, it was time to move forward with his plan to get her back. Aaron felt more alive than he had in hours.

"That David, is where I need your help. I need time to find her. I need you to help me here."

Awareness came quickly. "Run the business for you?"

"Yes, will you? I know it's a burden, we can draw up a partnership, combine the lines, giving you all the freedom you may need."

"But Aaron your line is ten times more productive and worth far more."

"It is worthless without her."

No further words were necessary. David listened and agreed. Aaron was virtually giving him the business, knowing he would hold it as long as necessary for his friend. "How are you going to start looking for her?"

"I will conduct my own search, with a few good men I can trust to help."

"What about posters, you could offer a reward."

"No, every bounty hunter in the colonies would start searching. Heavens knows what lengths they would take. Or what manner of girls they would end up dropping here for their claim."

"I see what you mean."

"There is also Dubois. If he even sniffs news over her disappearance she will be in grave danger. It may take longer, for her safety we stand a better chance this way."

"Aaron, how will she survive? I mean she has nothing."

For first time Aaron smiled at his friend. "I hope she finds someone decent. But David, remember it is Mackenzie and though I

never gave her the credit she deserved, I have every faith she will survive. Then my friend, I will spend my life making it up to her.”

Nodding, David would do anything to help them. “What are you going to tell everyone? I mean...”

“So they will not think me crazy?”

Red faced, David nodded his agreement.

“For her, that is the one thing I can never let happen. Nothing must interfere with finding her.” To say she disappeared would draw too much attention and involve the authorities. He might as well hang up wanted posters.

“David, do you know if any ships left for England on the tide?”

“Yes! One, Macomb’s, he pulled anchor early this morning. It would work as far as any inquires go. You’d have at least six months, maybe longer with winter, before he returned. What about your household? Mary looked as though she could have attacked you.”

“I can only hope their loyalty to Mackenzie will hold their tongues.”

“You can’t tell them...”

“No, I took a big chance on your friendship. I would be a fool to trust anyone else. I think the best thing to do is tell them the truth...”

“Truth?”

“At least a good part of it. I will tell them she is gone. Left during the night because of our misunderstanding.”

“You could tell them the same about the ship.”

“No, none of her things are gone. Mary would never believe it, besides they would wonder why I didn’t just sail after her.”

“God Aaron, what then?”

“I will say she left me in anger, left a note saying she needed time to sort things out. Knowing her, they will believe her capable of taking off on her own. I will say, I am going to look for her and beg her forgiveness, and that the story of the ship is to keep others from seeking her and scaring her further away.”

“I hope it works, Aaron.”

“It will have to. I will beg them if necessary.”

“I will go with you to face them, the way you look I shouldn’t think begging would be necessary.”

Facing their condemnation was difficult. That they blamed him for her desperate act was understandable. He blamed himself, but for far different reasons.

He could have kissed Emily. “Well, you know we will help sire. You just find her. We know you were confused, but I for one am glad you see what you lost. Now go and get her back, and make it up to her.”

“Thank you.”

“We will keep quiet, won’t we.” Her look dared a one of them to defy her order. “It won’t be easy sire, she’s a smart one.”

“No, I fear it won’t. I need time.” Time? How he was coming to hate that word. “I leave tomorrow, I want someone here at all times, in case she contacts us. I will keep in constant touch.”

“Yes sire, and if anyone gets too nosey we will tell them what you said.”

“Good. Charles I will want the gelding saddled.” Before Aaron could follow David to the study to draw up the necessary papers, Charles approached him.

“Sir, I would like to accompany you.”

Seeing the man’s concern he lost the heart to deny him, “I would be pleased to have your help.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Take the black, Charles. We head for New York at first light.” Aaron’s confidence grew stronger. *Hang on Mackenzie, never give up, I am coming for you.*

## CHAPTER 11

### *Discovery*

“Only a little farther old man.” The long ride would be the horse’s last. Nick knew he would have to find another before heading out to Boston. But then he knew there were many changes to be made tomorrow.

Tugging at the drag-line he moved the fur laden packhorse up closer. God he needed a rest and a hot bath. He needed more speed out of the horses if he wanted to find it tonight. Rest, he needed that more than ever after this assignment. Per Cohen’s promise his part would be finished once he came out of the frontier with his report. The end of this job couldn’t come fast enough to suit Nick.

Yeah, that was all it was, a job, another assignment in a string of them. Only this one had been different and he didn’t like his feelings over it.

Nick snorted over the thought he suddenly held over going home to England. What the hell was waiting for him? An estate his uncle controlled since his father died. Nick’s enthusiasm to fight for the estate wasn’t any stronger now than five years ago. With a year’s worth of leave built up, time wasn’t the problem. Everyone thought him a fool for not going back and taking over the estate, maybe they were right.

Eight months in those mountains gave a man too much time to think and Nick did his share. Maybe he just didn’t have the stomach for spying anymore? Why had he gotten into it in the first place?

War, fighting for his country, all the right reasons for any man of honor. After the war the excitement and intrigue, and having nothing better to do. John Cohen, best friend and his commander would fight Nick’s decision to leave. He could hear John now “I’m losing my best



man.” Nick laughed into the impending darkness. John would cool off and eventually see Nick’s side.

His dark brows came together over his continued thoughts of returning to England. He still found it difficult to pinpoint exactly when his thinking took a dive over this assignment. Spying never bothered him before. He actually liked each new role of deceit, enjoyed the thrill of discovering hidden secrets. He never thought of anything but completing the mission, regardless of the risk. There hadn’t been much risk involved in posing as a trapper. Not unless one took into account the everyday threats that abound in the wilderness. Mostly natural dangers, some from men, so why did he feel as if he fought a vicious battle and lost?

Spitting into the dirt road he knew his answer. The Colonist, the settlers he spied and lived with, laughed and ate with at their tables...and ultimately betrayed. Yeah, that is what tore at him. Rendered him weak, made him question what he was doing and what it all meant.

These traitors to the crown touched him too deep and it wasn’t suppose to happen! Their determined strength to survive in a wilderness that wanted to swallow them whole left its mark. And yet he would give his stinking report!

Cohen was waiting in Boston for it. He would rat on the outpost, the rag tag defenses, expose their weakness, use all their confidences to beat them. His duty! But then by God, he would be rid of the whole ugly mess.

Striking gray eyes squinted hard through the failing light. One very disagreeable thought stayed with him as he maneuvered his entourage down the road. “I’m the only traitor amongst them.”

Straightening his broad shoulders, Nick urged the mount forward, wanting more than ever to reach the inn and a hot meal. Tomorrow he’d get rid of the furs and be on his way. Looking back at the evidence of his labors, he scowled. He should have disposed of them.

“Damn pride!” He wanted the satisfaction of selling them. Feel his pockets heavy with the earnings of honest labor.

His jaw tightened over the admission. Honesty didn’t fit what he was involved in. He needed distance from this place. No more delays or sidetracks this time, he would be on the first ship out of Boston.

Years of surviving in danger made every nerve sensitive to the sights and sounds about them, and Nick’s came alive in warning.

Slowing the horse, he scanned the encroaching wood line as he slid the long rifle out of its sheath. Something was there.

Instantly he dismissed thoughts of a trap set specifically for him. No one knew when he would come out of the wilderness. Being this close to civilization meant highway robbers, the thieves of the night.

Dismounting, Nick moved soundlessly into the woods. Like a panther he made his way through the thick forest of trunks. Whoever was there, would be the prey, he was the hunter.

Cresting the ridge he edged closer to view the road below and the adjacent area. Trained eyes quickly found their target. He moved in and positioned himself to release the hammer on the rifle. The large callous finger froze in motion, the barrel's mouth held in midair over the target, so close he need move only an inch to place the cold steel against the object. But he didn't move and neither did the form.

His gaze traveled slowly over...the woman. No, she was a fallen angel. Blowing out his breath, he decided that was exactly what she looked like. The mass of shimmering blonde curls framing that small vision could only be a golden halo.

The realization over the threat he might have walked into sent him down to his knees. He waited for the trap to spring as he took in every feature of the bait they laid out for him!

Minutes passed...nothing. The shock of finding a woman lying in the woods began to fade. In the failing light Nick forced himself to see if she breathed. She might not be part of a trap, but she was the most enticing woman he ever stumbled upon. His eyes ran the length of her; the material hugging the small curved body left little out of the mystery.

Nick's breath rushed out when he saw the soft rise and fall of her...fine, well-shaped breasts. The firm globes outlined in exquisite detail were pressed in full abandon against the nightgown. Lace graced the curvy contours at their top. He lost himself in the cream milkiness of her exposed neck and chest. He mentally traced the smooth line of her delicate chin, but his eyes stopped and lingered over the full pink mouth.

Swallowing hard Nick knew he'd been in the woods far too long. He was practically drooling. The fact she was a rare beauty didn't make the guilt for looking at her like that any less, he hadn't moved to help her or even to see if she was hurt. "What the hell is she doing out here?"

Just as he was ready to move towards her and decide what he should do, a weak moan halted him. All resolve left him. Her hypnotic blue eyes left him immobile. They slowly ceased their delicate flutter, struggling to focus in the failing light.

Squeezing them shut, the pain throbbed in her head, drawing out a low protesting moan from her. Small trembling hands came to hold her head against the assault. Again her eyes sought out the darkness; this time shapes appeared and began to register through the pain.

Dark, large and forbidding, the huge menacing trunk loomed beside her. Their thick leaves were silhouetted against the fading light.

Woods, yes she knew they were trees. Tentatively her hand moved touching the ground and wet leaves. Jerking back from the contact, she touched herself as if in confirmation of her own presence among these dark giants.

The soft material beneath her palm sent her fingers shaking...nightgown? She was in her nightgown! Lying in the woods? Moaning over the discovery, she turned her head away from the trees.

What greeted her confused gaze froze all her movements and thoughts. The dark circle pointing at her didn't need any name. The fear inside her became a living thing. Enlarged blue eyes followed the cold steel barrel up, up to a hard large hand holding it and the finger resting on the drawn back hammer. All captured her full attention. Breathing became difficult, short frightened gasps escaped her lips, the agitated rise of her chest brought her breast in contact with the weapon and her panicked groan sliced the air.

*Shit!* He had forgotten about the gun. Carefully Nick moved the muzzle away from her. His eyes sought hers in apology; the total fear he saw in those deep pools nearly drew his own moan. Nick tore his eyes away before he lost himself in the deepest blue ones he had ever seen. Remembering his first thoughts on entering the woods and why, he braced himself against what she seemed to cause in him. *No deviations!*

"What are you doing here?" His voice came across too harsh she flinched.

*Doing here? Dear God, she had no idea.* Closing her eyes against his dark massive image, she fought to think. *Think, damn it! What am I doing in these woods?* Moaning, she didn't even know where here

was. Fighting her panicky thoughts she formed the only words left to her. "I don't know."

Nick saw her confusion and bewilderment over her surroundings. He didn't doubt her answer. He didn't like his own reaction to her. "Are you hurt?"

Was she? No, she didn't think so. "No."

Her answer was barely audible. Physically she did feel alright, but there was something very strange and frightening surrounding her, a feeling she couldn't define, especially not to this...this giant! Heavens he scared her. My God he had a gun on her! A gun! The shaking over took her as her eyes again fell on it.

Seeing immediately where her eyes went and what it did to her, he cursed his stupidity. Laying the rifle down Nick knelt down on one knee beside her.

"Look I am sorry about that, but I didn't expect to find...a woman, lying in the woods in her..." His eyes strayed and he could have kicked himself when her hand clutched uselessly at the gown's bodice.

"If you will tell me where you live I will take you there."

If only she wouldn't looked at him like he was going to eat her. Something inside him stirred and wrenched in his gut, adding to his uneasy feelings concerning her. Thoughts of why and how she came to be here rushed in and his anger astounded him.

Closing himself off from his thoughts he waited patiently for her to answer. Getting her wherever she needed to go was something Nick wanted to do, immediately.

What could she say? Panic seized her when she failed to think of anything. Tears walled up behind her lids, constricting her throat. Something was so very wrong.

"I know you are frightened, but I won't hurt you. Where do you live?"

Looking and concentrating on him she wanted to believe him. She needed to believe she would be safe. Even kneeling he was so large, so broad. His hands hung between his knees, they were large coming from a massive forearm. In fact everything about him emanated the strength of his build straining against that fringed buckskin.

She seemed consumed by that thought. The bulging neck muscles lead to a firm square jaw that was set against her right now. The pressed lips lead her to believe anger or maybe concern consumed

him. Steel gray eyes studied her, waiting patiently. They could become harder, icy if provoked. Feeling some relief over what she saw in their depth now, at least they were warm now. No, he wouldn't hurt her, but she knew he didn't like the situation. Her own defenses began to stir and edge back some of the fear. She didn't like this either! But neither did she know what to do about it.

"Well?"

"I don't know."

He fought back the urge to scream at her, wondering why he wanted to. Why was he so confounded angry? He couldn't even hide it from her.

"I'm sorry I just don't know..."

Seeing how upset she was getting, he needed to do something. "Can you get up?"

"I think so." She wanted to, lying here with this giant standing over her was only adding to her nervousness.

But when she rose, staggering to her feet, the incessant pounding in her head turned into a deafening roar. Crying out she grabbed her head as the blackness came rushing in. Terror gripped her. "No!"

Nick's arm caught her, lifting her up. Like a small fragile child she cradled against his chest. Uncontrollable shaking seized her and just as quickly left her limp.

Staring at her, he wondered what the hell he was going to do with her now?

Retrieving his gun, Nick started back toward the horses. Unbidden his eyes kept going down to her. His hands burned over the softness against them. A fragrance of spring flowers engulfed him, filling his nostrils. He hadn't smelled anything so sweet and lovely in a long time. Trying to concentrate on all the problems probably connected to the feminine shape in his arms proved impossible. "Who are you? And why the hell are you in the woods like this?"

It wasn't his problem. Damn it, he didn't need any complications and certainly not one like her. He would take her to the authorities.

Looking about him, it was late. Nick scoffed at the thought, not liking the excuse. What concern was it of his? Let them worry about her.

When his eyes fell to her again they drew a heated curse from his lips. She wouldn't stand a chance and he knew it. Leaving her at the

fort with that ragged assembly would be like throwing her to the wolves. She'd be better off out here alone.

He could take her to Cohen. Yeah, John was a gentleman. Fine, that settles it then. John would handle the problem and Nick could be on his way.

Reaching the horses he jerked his fur jacket off the horse. She had to be cold; he gently folded her in its billowy warmth. "Cover the temptation old man, you don't need this kind of problem."

Righting them in the saddle he eased her against him in a protective hold. Her hand instinctively groped for his shirt. The strength of her hold stunned him. What it did to his insides...he refused to acknowledge.

That unexplainable anger entered him again. Gazing upon her his eyes softened. Unthinkingly his rough hand stroked the wild curls away from her cheek. His thumb brushed away a smudge of dirt marring her lovely brow.

Slowly his hand left her satin softness taking up the stiff rein. The contact helped clear the mist in his mind. No smile graced his stern lips. "Maybe you would be better off with the authorities, my lady?"

Lady she was. The fine gown told him that much. Beauty like this was someone's treasure. Who claimed her? Nick tried to call forth a man's image, but none met his muster. Dismissing his foolishness he concentrated on the road and the troublesome problem snuggling against him. Seeking the renewal of his anger, it was a safer emotion than the ones she summoned up.

\* \* \* \*

Standing at the door Nick waited for Mr. Blake to unlock it.

"There you go sir. Are you sure Mr. Travis I can't fetch the doctor for your poor wife?"

"No, thank you sir. She is exhausted, sleep is what she needs."

"Poor girl, traveling is always hard on women."

Nick waited in smoldering patience while the man fidgeted about the room.

"If you need me, I am in the room behind the front desk. Your furs will be safe in the lock up and I will see to the horses. You just take care of her."

"Thank you, I will."

Locking the door behind the man, Nick went over to the bed and threw the coverlet back before placing her gently into the thick cushy

mattress. With infinite patience he pried her hand away from his shirt, placing it across her stomach. Pulling away his coat he quickly covered her, tucking the quilt about her.

Straightening away from her, Nick moved about trying to settle in. He felt the tightness in his brow over his thoughts as his gaze kept returning to her.

“Why the hell did I do that? Calling her my wife was an idiotic thing to do!”

Stating the obvious didn’t settle the turmoil it left him in. Bypassing the Blackhorse Inn when seeing the rabble there, he pushed on until reaching Blake’s Inn. Nick realized the man’s respectable Inn wouldn’t tolerate a questionable situation and so he improvised. Rationalizing his act as a protective jester for the lady’s sake didn’t end his dilemma.

For a man that wanted no diversions, having an instant wife constituted a hell of a big one. “Why didn’t I just hand her over? Because Nick Travis, you couldn’t do that to her.”

He thought of little else these last couple of hours during their ride. No lady ends up in the woods dazed and obviously frightened unless something, no someone, put her there. Whoever left her there meant her harm. That same person could easily get her back and try again.

Lady? Fine material didn’t made one. So why was he so certain where she was concerned. Maybe it was those innocent blue eyes that had held such bewilderment and fright.

He thought again of the man that she must belonged to. There was no ring to justify his conviction on this. He refused any thoughts she may be a kept woman. No, he didn’t want to believe that of her and wouldn’t. She was a lady, one in very dire trouble.

His decisions concerning her gave him very viable excuses to protect her. Whatever the damnable reason, Nick knew he was committed and it galled him. He could be doing her more harm than good.

Pulling a chair up against the door Nick settled in.

“For tonight my lady you have your protector, but tomorrow I want answers.”

Smiling for the first time since he discovered the unexpected wood nymph, “I have a feeling the wilderness was tame compared to what dangers you may conjure up.”

Something woke her. Pushing herself deeper into the cozy warmth she didn't want awareness to come. Something told her she wouldn't like what it held.

She felt safe at the moment and instinctively knew reality held an unknown fear. She could not face it, not yet.

Nick glanced back in amusement at the bundle curled up there. She was waking, but how she fought it. Nick scrapped the last of his growth away with the razor as he watched her in the mirror. He wondered how she would look upon waking. All soft and tousled, flushed in warmth, very nice. Trying not to think of her in such a way proved impossible and he gave up the fight in the wee hours of the morning. The moonlight caressing her womanly curves during the night destroyed every barrier he erected. But her rambling dreams finally destroyed any good intentions he might have held onto concerning her.

Her dream words were broken and left far too much out. Only his feelings over how she came to be in the forest were proven true. She did suffer something very shocking. He could still hear her cries and what they did to him. If the one responsible for hurting her like this...Nick decided it best not to think about his reaction.

Right now, he needed answers. Getting her where she belonged must be done first and without delay.

"Wake up sleepy head." Reaching out his hand to rouse her it stopped in midair. Indecision? Gritting his teeth, in his line of work that could be fatal...so could she. Nick brushed the thought away. *A strange woman, stranger thoughts.* Yes, he needed to be rid of her.

Clutching the blanket over her head, she went perfectly still. Her thoughts raced as she tried to remain calm and think. Who did that voice belong to? Squeezing her eyes shut wouldn't make him go away.

Forcing herself she pushed the blanket down, she cautiously scooted up. Taking a deep breath, blue eyes locked on gray.

Those silken curls falling about her were extraordinary, bewitching. She looked soft and warmly inviting. She made a man want to hold her, touch the mystery behind that alluring gaze. Nick forced himself to move and break the spell she innocently wove in silken threads about him.



Watching the man, recognition and memory came slow. The woods, gun, it was him, the giant. Apprehension came with knowledge.

Clean shaven and dressed as he was now he wasn't quite as intimidating. The buckskins were gone and in their place stood a gentleman. She wondered if the wild strength straining against the fine suit would ever be tamed.

He felt her eyes on him wondering how much she saw. Her gaze was bold and fearless. Caution shined there in place of fear. She possessed a confidence he rarely found in a woman. His interest rose over the discoveries that awaited him. So far she pleased him more than he wanted to admit.

"There is a hot bath waiting. Are you up to it?"

"Yes." A bath, how she wanted one.

"I will go out for awhile, there are things I need to tend to." Damn, he was acting nervous. He needed answers, later. He didn't think she would leave.

She didn't move only continued her scrutiny. Broad, unharnessed strength carried the man. So tall, she knew she would have to look up when standing beside him. She might reach his shoulders. He reminded her of the dark tree trunks from last night.

His eyes seemed to capture her attention, she couldn't get enough of them. Alert and on guard wherever they looked. Smokey and slightly soft when not filled with wariness. She shivered remembering they could be as cold as steel. She didn't want to imagine, when coupled with that powerful carriage, how the whole would look in anger.

With that fawn coloring and those striking eyes he was undeniably handsome. Oh the hearts he must have shattered over the years. Shaking off her thoughts she didn't want to let them wander in that direction.

"Before I go..." How she might take his next words clouded his gaze.

Tensing over the instant change in him, she braced herself.

"Your unexpected presence left me in a quandary, my lady."

Biting her bottom lip she tried to hold back any reaction.

"Until I can escort you back to the safety of your home I felt it necessary not to alert anyone to the circumstances of your...shall we say predicament."

Her eyes opened a little wider, remembering exactly where he found her.

“I have told the innkeeper you are my wife.”

Her small gasp heightened the space between them, but Nick didn’t falter. “Mrs. Nick Travis. No one will bother you.” He moved to the door. “I will lock it. Will an hour be long enough, my lady?”

Nodding, her shock over his announcement made it impossible to speak.

“While I am gone, try and recall where exactly I need to take you.”

Again her head acknowledged his words over the growing uneasiness ringing inside. She kept staring long after the door closed and the lock tumbled in place.

Without thought she walked to the steaming tub. Unsteady hands slowly pushed the gown down over her shoulders and breast, letting it slide into a careless heap about her feet. Stepping into the tub she sank down in the hot water until it covered her like a protective shield. Her eyes closed against the sudden pain in her temples.

One unobtainable feeling kept hounding her as if she were running a race and must finish! Then his request for her answers would intrude. The answers were as elusive as the urgency she felt. A numbness seemed to exist in her mind. The harder she tried to recall anything, anything at all about herself, the more frightened she became over the emptiness.

“Nothing! I can’t remember anything at all! My God, I don’t even know my name.” Angrily brushing at the tears she couldn’t control, she didn’t want self-pity.

Hearing footsteps in the hall, she held her breath until they past. He, Mr. Travis, would be returning soon and he wanted answers she couldn’t give.

Using all her control she pushed back her fears. She groped until she found the soap and hurriedly completed her bath. She decided she would crumble into a miserable heap if he returned to catch her bathing.

The nightgown swished about her feet with each turn she made in her pacing. She desperately tried to clear the fog she found herself existing in. Claspng her arms about her it seemed the only thing she did remember was...Mr. Travis!

There was something just beyond her reach, but it frightened her more than the nothingness. It wasn't anything she could identify. A fear, only a terrible fear of something, some force that she felt could destroy her.

"My God what happened to me?"

For the last hour she took in everything about her and all she could see through the window. She searched for just one familiar thing, an object, anything that could take away this feeling of displacement. She couldn't shake the sensation she didn't belong here.

That was how he found her, staring out the window hugging herself against the pain.

Instant awareness shot through him, halting his steps. Something was wrong he could feel the distress about her. Nick stood still letting he senses fill with her essence.

She turned taking him in with those violet blue eyes that were now overly large and intense. Years of dealing with people, having to know what to expect at any given moment told him she was ready to bolt. There was something wild and exotic about her. A frightened child-like innocence floated around her, almost hiding the beautiful woman like a cloak.

Nick admired the strength she exerted to remain in control. He saw beneath the surface to the fear that held her. Again, his thoughts over what she may have suffered flooded him. Did she remember the terror he heard in her dreams last night? God, he hoped not. He didn't want to see that kind of pain inflicted on her.

The knock at the door broke the trance existing between them.

"It is your breakfast."

Her lack of response bothered him. Nick took the tray at the door from the maid. Setting in on the table he turned back to her. "You better eat."

"Alright."

"I had coffee sent up. I hope you don't mind?"

"No I like coffee." Did she? Yes, she must, she did, and she held on to that bit of information like a lifeline.

When would he ask her? What would she say? Would he leave her? Could she fend for herself? Nothing but questions filled her head.

His eyes never left her. She ate, but he didn't think she realized what passed her lips. Those eyes were far away in thoughts forbidding his intrusion. Nick fought the urge to reach over and comfort her.

He was watching her and she sensed his discomfort. God, he wanted to be rid of her. She could feel it. Whatever would she do? Would he help her? Her mind raced with all the possibilities she would face.

She couldn't blame him, but she didn't want to be alone. Strange how she felt she should be afraid of a man like Mr. Travis. She wasn't, nor the threat he posed to her. No, she did fear what her existence might consist of without him. She would rather chance this man, than another or worse...countless others. One thought was exceptionally clear. She was a helpless woman and nothing appeared more dangerous to her well being than that at the present.

Convincing Mr. Travis she should remain with him posed another problem. How do you ask a total stranger to care and protect you? Answers failed her, she knew his patience were ending.

"Feel better?"

"Yes, thank you." Her voice sounded shaky. She must get control of herself. Being a blubbering female wouldn't help anything.

"Do you feel up to talking about it?"

"I...yes." *Liar!* She couldn't even lie, having nothing to pull on to create one. The only choice left to her was to be truthful. Chancing a look at him, hoping to glimmer something...compassion...anything?

"Where do you live?"

"I don't know." There she said it. His eyes were clouding. Was it anger?

"Alright my lady. What is your name?"

Swallowing, she answered. "I...don't know."

"Age?"

"No."

"Birth date?"

Shaking her head, she held his incredulous gaze.

He didn't know whether to yell at her, shake her and let the fear he felt inside play havoc! He didn't want what he thought her lack of answers meant. "Do you remember anything?"

Her lips quivered. "No, nothing."

She watched for his reaction and he wished he could avoid those eyes. He wanted time to sort this out and decide what it meant.

“What about the woods?”

“No, I am sorry.”

Shock, he’d seen it happen to men in battle. Amnesia? What the hell happened to her? It must have been something terrible.

Should she plead with him? No she couldn’t do that. Pride? Was it? She didn’t know. Something undefinable flared to life in her. She was being weak. She wasn’t weak! She didn’t need this man.

Pushing away from the table her feet refused to remain still.

Concerned, Nick’s eyes followed the flurry of gold and white, and watched in amazement as the pride driven anger flare to life in her. His chest expanded in admiration knowing the strength of character she must possess.

Spinning she advanced on him. “Mr. Travis, I am most sorry for putting you out like this. I realize what an inconvenience I must be.”

She was, but he wouldn’t admit it. He suddenly didn’t care; just watching her was worth it.

“I wouldn’t ask, but if you could find your way clear to obtain some clothes for me I will be out of your hair. If you give me an address I will reimburse you any expense.”

“Really?”

“Why yes, of course.”

*Glorious and proud. A beautiful combination. Stubborn as well. My! My! And fire. What wonderful spirit.* “No. I am afraid not.”

She hid her shock over his announcement well.

“I see, well, thank you for what you have done. I am sorry, I have inconvenienced you.” Turning from him she bit back the threat of tears. Seeing the door, she moved towards it not knowing what waited outside. She would face it...somehow.

A large hand came from behind her head closing the door before she barely got it open.

Anger consumed her, tugging, she tried to open it again. And just as effortlessly he slammed it shut. “My lady, if you will allow me to continue?”

He was directly behind her. He could bend ever so slightly and bury his face in her silky tresses. The flower of her scent was like a heady wine to his senses. The temptation was great. Her anger felt like a fire igniting his desire to possess the strength of it and feel the passion in her exquisite form.

Turning she came up against his broad chest blocking her retreat. His arm extended beside her head to refuse her exit. Her anger clouded her common sense from seeing the precarious position she existed in.

“Mr. Travis I...”

“It is Nick and I think we need to talk. If you will please sit down?”

He moved, extending his arm in invitation to the table.

Taking a deep breath and eyeing him, she pushed past him and flounced into the chair, crossing her arms to hold herself in check.

If she knew what an enticing picture she made in that gown, he doubted she would move like that again. He surely wouldn't tell her and hoped his eyes behaved.

“Your clothes will be here shortly. I took the liberty to order them when I was out.”

Blue eyes flashed at him, their regret obvious, but she refused to humble herself. He was glad she didn't.

“Thank you.”

“You are quite welcome.”

Dropping her eyes she didn't want him to see the flash of hope his thoughtfulness raised.

“As far as you leaving, I am afraid that isn't possible.”

“It isn't?” Damn she shouldn't have been so obvious. Seeing the humor lighting his eyes she knew he heard the hope in her voice.

“No it isn't.” God he wanted to hold her, tell her she was safe and take away the worry marring her pretty features. “As I have already told you, everyone thinks you are my wife. Having you walk out on me wouldn't set well with these people.”

“Oh?”

Nor him, but he couldn't tell her.

“Do you know what's wrong with you?”

“No.”

Nothing ever torn at his heart as effectively as those sad, confused eyes shining up at him.

“It is called amnesia. A severe and violent shock causes it. I have seen it in battle.”

“Shock? Violence, but what could have...” She didn't want to know, thinking on it frightened her.

Nick saw it. "Don't try. Memory comes when it's ready. Sometimes all at once or in bits and pieces."

"But it does come?"

"Yes, it will come." He couldn't give her any other answer. Hope was a small replacement for a life of memories.

"Listen, why don't you rest awhile. I have some business to conclude."

"I am tired."

"Will you be alright alone?"

She wanted to say no. He would stay, but she saw the need in him to be away from her. Time to think over what he would do with the memoryless waif? Oh God, she felt so helpless and hated it.

"Yes, I will be fine, Nick."

Before he reached the door she stopped him. "Nick, thank you."

"You are welcome, my lady. Would you mind terribly if I name you?"

Smiling over his clumsiness, she thought it right somehow. It could be the worst name possible and she would quietly accept it. "Please, my lady is so formal."

The warmth of sunshine came from the smile gave him. "I have always liked Carolyn, it suits you."

"Carolyn, I like it."

"I won't be too long, get some sleep. Lock the door, Carolyn."

"Yes Nick."

Leaning her head against the door. "Carolyn, hmm such a pretty name." She listened as his footsteps retreated. "Thank you Nick Travis. Thank you."

For now some of the tension eased.

She would pretend to be Nick Travis' wife, let his presence protect her. She would be grateful to him for this sanctuary.

Troubled eyes stared off and she wondered how far the pretense would go? How much did she control? Biting her lip, she didn't like the answers, knowing how little choice or say she held in anything anymore.

Moving to the large chair she curled up in it and hugged her knees protectively against her chest. Raising her left hand, she slowly let it go back down. "Not even a ring line." Yet, the strongest feeling came over her that there was someone in her life. Someone who cared about her.

## DREAM LOVER

Resting her head on her knees, the girl's silent sobs filled with the longing for the unidentifiable image just out of reach.

"Please find me. I am so very lost."



## CHAPTER 12

### *Missed, Still Lost*

Light pierced the fading darkness, sending shafts of pink and maroon waves across the horizon. Sullen blue eyes barely noticed the enchanting dawn over the dark thoughts crowding out the beauty.

Again, her attention drifted to the broad shoulders riding before her mount. The strong expanse of Nick's back was clearly defined against the lightening horizon. She didn't need the dawn light to recall every powerful detail of this man.

Pulling her gaze away she let her thoughts return to her present situation. Closing her eyes she tried, but as before nothing came. Biting her lip she fought the growing doubt that her memory would ever return. Oh, little things came, like the coffee, but she felt them to be insignificant. She couldn't shake the sickening feelings that persisted over not knowing common everyday items and their uses. Even Nick noticed her clumsiness.

In the past week they both realized how out of place she truly was. The unnerving feeling there could be more wrong than her amnesia grew stronger and with it a deep-rooted fear took hold. This undeniable fear preyed on her mind.

She was quiet, too quiet. More than likely she was thinking again. Nick's coppery brows came together in worry. These last few days she'd been a bundle of nerves, she couldn't go on like this.

They left long before dawn to begin their journey to Boston. He almost wished for another excuse to delay their departure, but then he'd run out of them. At first he wanted to give her some time, hoping her memory would return. When it was obvious it wouldn't, he still couldn't make himself leave. *God, she was an enchantress.*

Denying his fascination for her proved useless. Everyday it grew stronger and he became more the fool to allow it. He seemed

incapable of doing anything normal since setting eyes on her. The fact she belonged to another should have him running in the opposite direction. Facing that he could never really have what he wanted didn't end it.

Damn, they both knew it! Knew she belonged to another! He heard her heart broken cries during the nights. She even spoke the man's name. A heated curse bellowed up inside Nick. He hadn't told her what he heard that next morning and he still held his knowledge silent. Why? He asked himself that question so many times he ached from it.

She didn't remember any of her dreams. If anything she seemed to fear the recall and what they might make her see. Nick justified not telling her because Aaron Masters might be the one that hurt her. Truth be told, he believed this man to be the one she mourned rather than feared. Nick didn't like his thoughts and was pretty damn disgusted with himself.

The plan rooting itself so firmly in his mind didn't help. Turning her over the Cohen, or anyone else, was no longer an option. He admitted he had no intention of letting her go anywhere. He would protect her, but he also faced his decision honestly...he wanted to keep her.

Nearly laughing in self-disgust, *Now that, that was precious*. If she, Carolyn, knew, she would light into him with every ounce of beautiful fury she possessed. It amazed him how quickly he came to know her, almost better than she knew herself. She was spirited, quick to temper, and fiercely independent. It galled the lady to be dependent on him. Her pride was as magnificent as she was special.

Since he stopped deluding himself over his feelings towards her, he turned his thoughts to the future...their future.

Never in his wildest imagination did he contemplate taking back his father's estate. Rightfully his or not, it disgusted Nick to have to wrench it back from his uncle. Clayborn Whitman would certainly be in for a surprise. For five years his mother's brother raped the estate, but things were going to change. Lord Nicholas Travis Chamberlain would soon be claiming his birthright.

How Carolyn would take his decision still plagued him. He needed to tell her and soon. Would she fight him? Smiling, Nick held little doubt over her reaction. But she possessed little if no choice in the matter; she was intelligent enough to realize that. Nick refused to

think about the fact she belonged to another. Time healed many things, even lost love.

What was he planning? She felt her gaze clouding over the possibilities. Oh yes, Nick was planning something. Instinctively she knew it would effect her. The man was an enigma. She wondered if he ever relaxed his guard. He acted as if danger lurked behind each bush.

Finding little relief from her own worries, she diverted her thoughts to her companion. A silent giggle bubbled up inside her. Companion? Hardly, Nick Travis was much more. Protector, guardian...self proclaimed husband? No, never that.

The rebellious feelings surfaced again. Everything inside her screamed that there was another. A man so powerful he demanded she feel his presence. Not even the lack of memory could steal away the love she held for the image that hounded her. There were times when she could almost feel him as if he too were searching. Oh how she prayed he would find her. She focused her thoughts on him so often she felt sure they were communicating. She willed it to be so.

The change in Nick over the last few days acted like a trigger exploding her conviction for the man she longed to find. Nick's treatment of her had been strictly that of a gentleman, in all respects. She thanked her good fortune a man like Nick found her. But she wasn't blind to the passion now lighting his eyes. She liked Nick and owed him her undying gratitude, but she would never feel anything more. She needed to be sure he understood her position on their relationship. Deep in thought over how to accomplish the feat without offending the man, she failed to notice when he pulled up his horse to ride beside her.

"A penny, my lady."

"What? Oh Nick...I am sorry."

"Want to talk about it. Carolyn?"

What could she say? *Don't think what your eyes are speaking. Don't harbor false hope. He would probably think I am terribly conceited.* "When will we be in Boston?"

His laughter vibrated over the crisp winter morning. "Late tonight. We can stop and find an Inn if you are not up to the ride."

"I am fine."

Yes, she looked fine. He felt confident in her ability to handle the distance. Sitting astride that horse, she appeared capable of out riding

most men. His shock over her insistence against a sidesaddle was mild compared to her request for pants.

Seeing her in them, once he relented, Nick wondered why he had ever been against them. They'd engaged in one hell of a row over those pants. Every patron at the Inn probably heard them arguing. Her refusal not to budge an inch, without force, finally made him give in. At least she promised to wear the cloak about her when necessary.

"Still upset over my outfit, Nick?"

"No, I will probably suggest the garment from now on." His smile sent a blush up her cheeks that he wished he could capture on canvas. "Who taught you to ride?"

"My father, he loved horses. He use to take me out every Sunday."

"OH! Nick did you hear me! I...My father...I remember him!" Her hand unconsciously reached over and gripped his forearm in her excitement.

Cautiously Nick asked her. "What do you remember Carolyn?"

Those pretty blue eyes gazed off with such longing he barely held back from pulling her off her horse and over onto his. Disappointment slowly clouded the brilliance in her eyes.

"I can't...Oh Nick, it won't come."

"Forcing it won't help. The memories will come in bits and pieces."

"I hope you are right."

"I am, why we already know you thrive on black coffee, you have one hell of a temper and my dear, you don't take orders at all well."

Carolyn's laughter drew out his, easing away the tension between them.

"I could sure use some coffee right now."

"There is an inn up the road, we will stop for breakfast."

His eyes cautiously scanned the darkening sky.

"Is it going to snow?"

Damn, she was sharp. "Let's hope it holds off."

A thought suddenly struck her. "Nick, is today Thanksgiving?"

Why did the tone of her voice send shivers through him? "I am not sure, Carolyn."

"Oh..."

"Carolyn?"

"It's nothing. I just feel so funny. As if I have missed something. Baking, yes that's it. I didn't make the pies or breads I planned for the holiday." Realizing how closely he watched her left her feeling self-conscious.

Nick wondered about the holiday she spoke of but none of the settler groups he knew of held such a feast. Visions of her doing domestic things like baking sent an irrational anger off inside him. He refused to listen to the warnings over what he might be taking from her.

He would tell her of his plan when they reached Boston and he booked their passage on the first ship out. Once away from here she would face her new future much easier. Distance would help. He would deal with her arguments, even the anger he expected from her, but the decision was final, she would accompany him to England.

The violent shiver seizing her breath had little to do with the cold day as she watched his gray stormy eyes clouded over in steeled determination. Biting her lip, she warily stole another glance at the sudden hardness toughening his features. Fear for what she might discover silenced her questions. Nothing she told herself swayed her uneasiness concerning Nick. Looking at him, remembering the physical strength and stamina of this man, she asked herself if she could possibly expect to win the battle she felt coming.

\* \* \* \*

Nothing! Not one bit of evidence to even suspect Mackenzie reached New York. Full of dark anger, Aaron scowled at the threatening sky. Just what they needed, a snowstorm!

"Looks like a bad one, Mister Masters."

"I'm afraid you are right Charles. Blake's Inn is just up the road, we better wait it out there." Furious that his search would be delayed Aaron moved the gelding out.

They'd scoured New York, even the dock areas. To think of Mackenzie being dropped in that squalor revolted him, but Aaron needed to eliminate all possibilities. Charles' inquiries with the authorities and in the better neighborhoods proved just as disappointing. After a better part of a week Aaron finally admitted she wasn't in the town. They'd been too thorough to miss her.

And yet, Aaron couldn't shake the feeling she was close. During the little rest Charles forced upon him she was always there...in his

dreams. Like the first dreams when she haunted him. Her calls filled his being. "I swear I will find you. Hold on my love, hold on."

The one letter he received from David did little to ease his anxiety. Mackenzie hadn't contacted them. Aaron refused to hear his thoughts concerning why she wouldn't or couldn't, find a way of reaching him.

Aaron tried to bring his thoughts to the present as they entered the Inn's yard.

"Why Mister Masters what a pleasant surprise. Come in out of the cold. Henry will take care of your mounts."

The gentleman Blake remembered looked a stranger now. Something shattering appeared to have touched the man since his last visit. Hurrying to accommodate his guest Blake brought two steins of ale to the table. Sensing the man's anger Blake didn't interrupt the darkly handsome man, whose haunted eyes were drawn to the hearth. No, many a troubled thought marred that strong face, casting a dangerous shadow over his proud features.

As if suddenly awakening to his surroundings, Aaron turned his troubled black eyes to the two men watching him. Maybe...? "Mr. Blake will you join Charles and I? I need to ask you about someone."

In quiet, loving tones Aaron described her. The look of disbelief and questioning filling the innkeeper's eyes nearly drove Aaron mad. Blake must have seen her! Only the sudden presence of Charles' hand on his arm held him back from demanding an explanation of the man.

"Maybe you better tell me what you know, Mr. Blake."

"But it can't be the same lady sire."

"Please Mr. Blake, my wife may be in grave danger."

Blake felt compelled to help in anyway possible. "Your description fits the lady perfectly."

"When did she come here?"

"They came last Friday."

"They?"

"Yes, sire, Mr. and Mrs. Travis. Nicholas Travis, he be a trapper from the frontier. Carried her in, he did. I was afraid for the lady's welfare, she looked very ill."

"Sick?"

"Well, she wasn't. Mr. Travis said she just be a bit exhausted from their journey and he must have known. When they came down to dinner the next evening she appeared fully recovered. Although..."

“What man?”

“I really can’t say for sure. She seemed lost and acted different.”

“In what way?”

“Well, they were a nice couple. Stayed to themselves, except yesterday. They had a good size argument, that be the truth of it. It’s a small Inn.”

Aaron wanted to shake the man, but held back, knowing it could cost him valuable information.

“It was the strangest argument I have ever heard. The lady kept insisting on wearing britches on their journey.”

Aaron’s thunderous gaze lit in amusement. He knew only too well how the lady could insist on such a thing.

“And she did. Floored me when I seen her sitting astride that horse too. Mr. Travis, he didn’t look too pleased ‘bout it neither. I got to admit the lady could ride well enough.”

Aaron could barely contain the happiness filling him. She was here! She was really here. “When did she leave Blake?”

“Why this very morning. Left before dawn. Heading for Boston from what I heard.”

“Boston! Charles get...” The man was already out the door.

“You won’t be staying then?”

“No, I must reach her.”

Blake only hesitated a moment. “Mr. Masters that Mr. Travis, he is one to be careful about. No ordinary trapper, no sir. When he left here you would never of known he just stepped out of the frontier. He was every bit the British gentleman, but a dangerous one.”

Aaron’s spine stiffened. “The lady, did she seem frightened of him?”

“No, not frightened, but not like they’d been together long either. But Travis, he was fiercely protective of her, seemed even more so before they left.”

Blake never knew how deep his remark cut the man before him.

The two riders raced down the road following the same instructions Blake said he gave the other two travelers. They had a good half-day lead, but Aaron didn’t think they would be traveling hard. He hoped it would give them the time they needed to catch up.

Aaron tried to remember his words to David about Mackenzie finding someone that would help her. But the anger he felt rising

couldn't be controlled. Every word Blake spoke on this Nick Travis told Aaron he had little time to locate them.

Mackenzie's willingness to remain with the man puzzled Aaron even more. If he was forcing her, Aaron knew she never would have stayed quiet. Something was terribly wrong.

Could she have lost all knowledge of him? No! Never would he believe that. Her calls were too strong. Their love reached across time to bring them together. She defied the force to stay with him. Whatever held her from him he could fight it and he would, to get her back.

The insistent ringing in his head for urgency drove him on, heedless of the heavy snowfall obscuring the road. She was very close he could feel her. Nothing would stop him! "I'm coming for you, my love!"



## CHAPTER 13

### *Spies Afoot*

Heavy flakes drifted past the street lantern, joining the thick white blanket below.

“Carolyn, you better come and eat something while it is still warm.”

“I am not hungry, you go ahead.”

She never took her eyes away from the illuminated street. Something strange stirred inside her since their arrival in Boston. Nothing seemed to shake off the great feeling of apprehension she carried.

“What are you looking at?”

Nick’s hands came up to rest on her shoulders. They were strong, confident hands that should have made her feel safe. Closing her eyes she tried to brush away her thoughts. How could she explain the turmoil inside? Should she tell him there was someone out there, that she felt him?

Nick drew her away from the window. “You are tired. Why don’t you go on to bed.”

Wanting to be alone with her thoughts she didn’t argue when he led her over to the bed. Climbing in she paid little heed to the way he pulled the blankets up and tucked them in around her.

His smoldering gaze captured her distant pools. More than the ride seemed to be draining her vitality. Nick lowered his lips to her brow, softly brushing the softness there. “You will feel better in the morning.”

As if just realizing his presence, her small hand came to rest on his retreating arm. “Nick, where will you be?”

The trace of concern he heard almost made him tell her he would stay beside her. But no, it was too soon.

“I will be in the sitting area if you need me.”

“Goodnight Nick, thank you.”

“Hush, just get some sleep.”

Moving away from her Nick went back to the window. Unseeing eyes followed the two riders’ progress through the deep snow in the road below.

Looking back at her he was relieved to see her eyes finally closed. She needed the sleep. “Another night of dreams my lady?”

Something happened to her this evening. Those alert blue eyes jumped from one street to the next, taking in everything about her. Especially when they came close to the harbor. He knew changing his mind over staying at an inn near the harbor and coming to Cohen’s resulted from her strange behavior. Something about Boston appeared to be familiar to her. Nick wondered if the city would bring back her memory?

She seemed withdraw from him on arriving, not even questioning his introduction of her as his wife to Charles. His friend’s shocked statement over the news didn’t so much as raise one lovely eyebrow. Explaining her tired state to Charles proved relatively easy considering how far they rode. Excusing her lack of response to himself wasn’t as comforting. Something told him to get her away from here as quickly as possible.

The rap on the door instantly snapped him out of his dark thoughts.

Nick wasn’t surprised to find Charles standing there and looking none too pleased. “Is she asleep?”

“Yes.”

“We need to talk Nick. You have some explaining to do about her and over the tardiness in delivering your report. I suppose she is the reason.”

“My reason is not your affair, sir.”

“Damn it to hell, Nick. I’m sorry! But what kind of reaction did you expect? Why didn’t you tell me about your wife? It’s a shock let me tell you.”

“Then the rest of my news won’t be anything less. Shall we go to your room?”

She felt his eyes on her before the door closed. Something was going on and what she suspected sent chills up her spine. Why didn't Nick tell her he worked for the British government? She didn't like her thoughts over the reason for his secrecy. She remembered how cautious he behaved all the time, as if danger lurked around the corner...maybe for Nick it did!

Without stopping to think she slipped out of bed to follow Nick and the British officer. Tip toeing and not sure why, she moved out into the hall. She couldn't stop herself from moving towards the voices. God, if Nick found her here what would he think? Even the sudden fear chilling her didn't make her go back to their room. She wanted to know what they were up to.

Cautiously she pressed herself against the wall by the door. To her left were the back stairs, if it came to it she would take them and pray a lot.

"My report is clear, their defenses are basically weak but so are ours. A few, well placed stockades will need to be eliminated if you want to break their communication lines. It's all spelled out."

"Then I am sure the ministry can follow it."

"Charles don't underestimate these people, what they lack in armament they give back in stamina and conviction."

"You sound as though you sympathize with these rebels, Nick?"

The breathless silence that fell between the men almost made her loose her resolve to remain.

"I am honest enough to admit that their reasons for revolting are well founded. Are you?"

"That is the crown's affair."

"What? To bleed these people dry so the king can finance another war?"

"I'll ignore that remark, Lord Chamberlain."

Watching them through the door crack, she saw Nick stiffened over Cohen's use of the title and unfamiliar name.

"Well I can't."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"I am through Charles. I'm handing in my commission."

"Over these rag tailed Colonist! It's not your fight!"

"No, I have other reasons. I'm going home to claim my inheritance."

"Why, Lord Chamberlain, I am surprised."

"Don't make light of it Charles, I am serious. My uncle has had his fun. Now he will pay."

"He's got it coming of course, but he may not be so easy to unseat."

"I have no intention of asking him."

"Good, I am glad you have come to your senses. I have never understood your reluctance to take your proper place. I know your mother interfered at first, but she has been gone for two years now."

So Nick was a British spy. Well that answered a considerable amount of questions for her. A lord no less. No wonder the transformation from trapper to gentleman came so naturally. Odd how she believed the rugged frontier man could surface at the first sign if warranted. Nick Travis, spy and trapper, or Lord Chamberlain, gentleman of the court. Which man was he? Shivering, she decided she didn't want to know.

Pressing her lips together she fought to concentrate on their words.

"...she is very beautiful, Nick. Is she the reason for your change of heart? If not, you do have a year's leave coming to reconsider?"

"No I won't change my mind."

"And the reason."

"That is my affair."

"Alright Nick. I will draw up the papers. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow if there is a ship sailing."

"A little sudden."

"With winter weather, it wouldn't do to wait."

"And your lovely wife, how does she feel about the voyage?"

"She doesn't know yet and I would prefer to keep it that way. She's been ill, I don't want to upset her."

"Far be it that I should. You are both welcome here until you gain passage."

"Thank you, Charles."

"I am sorry to loose you Nick."

"When you get back to England we will make up for lost time, as friends."

"I would like that."

She started to move away, but Nick's next words froze her in place.

"Charles do you know of an Aaron Masters?"

Not realizing she was holding her breath it came out in a rush over the answer.

“Why yes. He is a prominent shipper here in Boston. A very competent fellow, one I wouldn’t want for an enemy.”

“Is he married?”

“I believe I heard he just took an English wife. From the rumors she is an extraordinary lady, quite beautiful. I haven’t had the pleasure and I am afraid I won’t.”

“Why?”

“Seems she went back to England.”

“After just coming here and marrying?”

“My thoughts exactly. I have heard things weren’t going well. Maybe the girl ran home to her mother. Masters hasn’t been around, so no one really knows.”

“Where is he?”

“Off on a business venture I suppose. Why all the questions Nick?”

“Nothing really, the family is friends of my wife’s family.”

Her knees buckled, the sudden silence said they heard her fumbling. Without thinking she headed down the dark stairs.

At the final step she fought her panic to get her bearings. Moving quickly to her right and through the small hallway she nearly burst out with thanks at entering the kitchen.

The light from outside was enough for her to move about the kitchen. Ignoring the racing steps above her, she frantically struggled to light the candle. She worked at the stove, the coals immediately caught the kindling she tossed in and she moved the kettle over it. Going to the cupboard she tried to reach the pot and cups to bring them down.

The hand that grasped the teapot and cup nearly drove the scream from her constricted throat. Turning, she spun into the arms now about her.

“Nick! Heavens you scared the pants off me!”

Her remark nearly drove him to laughter. Remembering why he raced through the house to find her here killed his humor.

Fighting the shaking in her legs, she asked. “Is something wrong? Nick?”

“Where have you been?”

“Right here. I needed some tea. I had a dream and couldn’t get back to sleep. I hope it’s alright?”

Nick set the pot down behind her, but didn’t move away. Instead his arm closed around her slim waist and drew her to him.

Trapped? Yes, that’s exactly how she felt. Willing her self not to show her nervous state she held her eyes to his in question. All the things they might do to her came down like a hammer. The hard look and touch from Nick told her this was no trifling game. “Nick please stop staring at me like that. If I have been rude to your host by evading his kitchen I am sorry. But it was too late to call the maid and you weren’t around. I didn’t think anyone would mind.”

“I thought you hated tea?”

“I do, but coffee keeps me awake. Would you like some?” It was a lame diversion.

Studying her he took a minute to answer. “Yes, I will join you.”

His arms didn’t release her. “Nick the kettle is ready.”

The fright she barely kept under control took on new proportions. Nick’s arms were pulling her closer. Anger surged, causing her to raise her head up to protest. Her mistake was met by the hard possession of her mouth smothering her words. At first stunned by his action, she failed to respond, but as the kiss deepened and demanded her participation her hands pressed against his muscled chest for release.

No quarter was given. Nick refused her pitiful attempt, causing her fist to clench in angry denial. His large hand captured her head preventing her continued attempts at escape. The other pressed her into his hard solid frame; expertly molding her soft curves to his, leaving little question as to where this would lead.

His lips were insistent, savage in their assault to break her barriers. As they fell, he grew gentler more persuasive. Any fight on her part instantly brought his strength back, quelling her futile attempts.

Fighting passion’s heat and the power of his hold weakened her. Short of beating on him she knew she was losing. That he could overpower her at his will was an insult she couldn’t tolerate. When his lips left her gasping for air and trailed down her neck, she renewed her struggles, praying he wasn’t beyond reason.

She moaned, his large hand cupped her breast and his thumb rolled over the nipple. “Nick please don’t do this.” He wasn’t

listening. "Nick stop it!" Shoving him away and shouting finally earned his attention. Something she desperately wished to escape.

Bringing her hand to her mouth she bit her knuckles to stop her cry. God, she didn't want this! Not his hurt, nor the anger now coming at her. She couldn't stand it any longer. Turning she fled from him, racing up the dark stairs hoping he wouldn't stop her.

Gaining their room she went to the bed pulling the covers over her. Fighting back the sobs she realized where she was. Groaning over what he might think or do, she struggled out of the bed. Taking the heavy quilt with her, she found the settee and scooted up onto the cushions.

"Damn you Nick! Why did you have to do that?"

Oh, she'd seen it coming, but how she wished her instincts could have been wrong. Their silent truce was broken and she didn't know how to salvage the shattered pieces. She was such a fool! Recalling his words tonight she should have known, especially when he brought her here and lied to his friend concerning her status as his wife. The inn was one thing, but she failed to see the significance of his continuing the lie.

That name! Aaron Master! *Oh please God, please I have to remember, help me. Aaron? Is he the one?*

Closing her eyes she battled the new terror, to face the fears she sensed blocked her memory. "Please I want to remember him. I must, I know I love him, please let me see him...find him."

"No Carolyn!"

"Nick!" His name passed breathlessly through her shocked gasp.

Running was impossible. She felt miserable over what happened in the kitchen and her feelings glared up at him. His powerful presence dominated the room, blocking out the image she desperately needed to see.

"Don't Carolyn, let it be. I am sorry if I frightened you."

"Stop it Nick!"

His steps halted, he looked as if he were trying to control himself. Was it anger or passion he didn't want to win? "I am not afraid of you, Nick. I just can't feel what you want from me! I'm sorry."

"Carolyn I know that. It doesn't change how I feel."

"But Nick, you'll only be hurt. I don't want that, I never did. I never meant to let you think that I would..."

"You didn't."

"Then please don't ask for what I can not freely give."

"Why shouldn't I!"

His vehemence shocked her. "Nick!"

"No, you love a what, Carolyn? An image without substance, without memory!"

"Don't do this Nick. Please, I don't want to hear this!" Covering her ears, she shook her head to deny the truth in his angry words.

He couldn't stand this from her. Moving faster than she expected, his hands tore hers away and held them, refusing to release her. "You will hear it. What kind of life do you think you can have like this? What if you never remember him? What then?"

"He'll find me."

"Really? How?" Nick was brutal. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears as she fought his cruel declaration.

"No answers Carolyn?"

If she had been listening to his talk with Cohen he believed she would use her information concerning Masters. Only that part of her eavesdropping concerned him. If the man's name jarred her memory he would lose her.

The quiver of her lips nearly stopped him. "There aren't any answers Carolyn. If there were you would have found them by now."

"But you said they would come!"

"Yes, but by now something should have surfaced."

"I remembered my father." Her chin rose in pathetic defiance. Still the fighter even if the odds were stacked against her.

"One incident out of how many years? Where is your father?"

He knew his words crushed her, stole her hopes.

"Please Nick, don't do this to me. Stop it!"

"I can't Carolyn. You must see reason. I can't stay here waiting until you might remember. I must go home, back to England and your are going with me."

"No! I can't!" He still held her hands and tightened his grip against her struggles to break free.

"You can and you will. I am sorry if this seems harsh to you, but I must insist. I can't leave you here alone to face heaven knows what just to survive. My God, don't you know what could happen to you?"

She tried again to pull her hands away. "Let me go Nick."

He realized her request went further than his physical hold. "No, I'm afraid that is impossible."



"You can't do this!" She was shaking. "You can't force me to go!"

"I can. It would be easier for you if you agreed, but if not I will force you. As my wife you have no choice."

"I am not your wife!"

"You are as far as anyone in the Colonies is concerned. A week together at that Inn insured it. You, my lady, are compromised, whether you knew it or not!"

"That's absurd!"

"Is it?"

The cold threat silenced her. Was she? Did he really control her so thoroughly? "But..."

"No buts Carolyn. You are my wife for all intents and I will not deny it. Your recent illness will excuse any strange behavior you feel you must exhibit by denials. And I will be the poor husband who must tolerate your intricacies. Only a beloved husband would go that far for any lady, no matter how lovely she might be."

The fire in her eyes scalded him. "You can't prove our marriage. What if I'm already married? You would be taking another's wife!"

His words came in hard conviction. "I already believe I am."

"How could you? It's a mortal sin. You would make me an adulteress. My God, Nick that's too cruel to imagine."

"I don't consider bedding my wife a sin. And Carolyn, you will be my wife. One I fully intend on claiming as my possession...above all others."

He let his declaration take its effect, knowing the devastation he just dealt her. "When we are at sea I will have the captain perform the ceremony, if it will ease your mind?"

The numbness making its way through her stole her ability to answer. It became impossible to draw on her anger.

Picking her up, Nick cradled her against him. Silently hating what he just did to her. *I'm truly sorry little one, but it is the only way.*

## CHAPTER 14

### *Dangerous Encounters*

“I want every inn checked.”

“It’s already being done. I have pulled one whole crew, they are spreading out through the city.” David held back his concern; Aaron probably hadn’t slept in days.

“The ships and coaches, all passengers must be checked on every line, even the cargo ships.”

“It will take another crew out of commission?” David didn’t wait for a reply seeing how Aaron’s gaze ignited.

Dark and smoldering, his eyes strained to see if everything he’d written down was being done. Every bone in his body protested. Sinking into the chair Aaron couldn’t give in to the exhaustion. The urgency he felt since arriving in Boston hammered at him. God, he could actually feel her despair. “Mackenzie, don’t give up. Please fight him.”

Her situation must be desperate. If he didn’t locate them soon he sensed he would lose her. Only his fury at this Travis kept him going. Rage gave him strength.

David returned, “It’s done Aaron. It’s nearly dawn, what next?” The man was driven by a violent urgency.

“Has the snow stopped?”

“Yes.”

“Damn! Everything will be moving again and so will he. Somehow I have got to stop him. I want a ship made ready, the Wanderer. She is fully armed and not loaded, so she’ll be fast at sea. Tell Baker to stand ready with a full crew. Send a message to Charles that I want the gelding brought here and a carriage.”

David turned to leave.

“David...thank you.”

Smiling back at Aaron he didn't stop, there would be time once she was found.

Moving to the window, Aaron wondered how long it would be before the men started returning with reports from about the city? At least she was in Boston, anywhere else he wouldn't have stood a chance at finding her.

An hour passed before David returned, behind him Charles followed and then Mary.

“What's going on?”

Mary strode past him without batting an eyelash over his angry stance. “Now sire, you can't continue without the food Emily sent up. You sit and eat.”

“I don't have time!” The ominous black eyes would have halted a weathered sailor, but that small girl just glared back at him.

“Then go on with ye! You collapse and I lose a mistress. So be a fool, if you like!”

Aaron closed his eyes for a second, absorbing the girl's tirade. “What did you do Mary? Take lessons from her?”

The girl at least had the decency to blush. She set the platters before him, pouring the steaming black coffee.

“Coffee?”

“Oh yes, sire. It will wake you up, the mistress said so.”

“Then keep it coming Mary.”

David just stared at the two of them, too flabbergasted by the little spitfire to interrupt. He found a new admiration sparking to life for the spunky little Mary.

“You too Master David, you must eat and keep up your strength.” Winking at her he took his seat. Once they were seated and fed, Mary seemed to disappear, making David curious. But every time the coffee got low she magically appeared.

Aaron paced like a caged animal. David nearly sighed with relief when the men started returning with their reports. The office slowly turned into a terminal.

“Well that's the last of the inns and boarding houses. They aren't in any of them.”

“Then he has contacts in the city.”

Even Aaron couldn't conduct a house to house search.

“Blake made a point of telling me Travis changed from a trapper to British gentleman. So why was the man in the frontier?

“Profit? Adventure?”

“No, it doesn’t fit what Blake said about him.”

“David the men that have come back from the inns, send them out to cover all the British Authorities’ houses and headquarters, and any other prominent British citizens. Especially any connected to the military.”

“You think he is a spy?” David blew the words out.

“Why else would a British gentleman be trapping in the wilderness?”

“Damn if you aren’t right! I’ll get right on it.”

“David, tell them I want to know any comings and goings that seem unusual. And David, send for Adams I may need his and possibly his brother’s support on this.”

“Right.”

Aaron had an army out in those streets. The men had both their descriptions. Mackenzie couldn’t be missed. Travis might be, but if he were planning on moving her, like Aaron suspected, she would soon appear.

Once the coaches started their runs, if they weren’t on them, it would narrow it down to the ships. Aaron would almost bet they would be booking passage out of the harbor. The tide would turn tonight, in more ways than one.

Why hasn’t she contacted him? How he feared the answer to that haunting question.

\* \* \* \*

“Georgette, I will ask you one more time! What the hell have you learned?”

“Damn it Jacque, I told you, nothing!”

“Masters men are turning this city inside out. There has to be a reason. His ship is even ready to sail!”

Georgette’s angry gaze clashed with her enraged brothers’. She’d never seen him so out of control.

“If you are hiding anything from me...”

“Oh stop it! If there is something going on those stupid women know nothing about it.”

When the door slammed against his exit, Georgette’s breath released.

Anger carried the man out to the waiting coach. "Take me to Major Cohen's residence."

"Yes sir."

Cohen would have some answers on all this activity of Masters. Brown eyes darken in thought over what Masters might be up to. First his unexplained absence and Mackenzie's disappearance, now this! Somehow they were connected.

Maybe the information he learned from Brown was all wrong or a set up. Could they be shipping the gold out? Was that what all the commotion was about? That didn't explain his men and the activity at the shipping office. If it had anything connection with the gold shipment Jacque could be sailing into a trap.

He was almost at Cohen's. Damn how was he going to get information from that bastard without letting on about the gold? Sharing any of the wealth with that pop'n jay rubbed Jacque the wrong way. The man already fared too well from Jacque's labors.

The carriage came to a halt. Dubois' impatience drove him up to the door. It barely opened before he pushed his way in demanding the master be summoned at once.

By damn, he would get some answers now!

\* \* \* \*

Waking late and finding Nick gone left her at wits end. Somehow she must make him see reason. Pacing the room only heightened her nervous state.

Regardless of what Nick thought she refused to leave Boston. The conviction all her answers could be found here wouldn't be dismissed. And neither would she!

"To hell with you, Nick Travis!" She was furious. The shock he gave her last night steadily wore off. An explosive rage now stood in its place. The audacity of that man to think he could dictate to her...possession my ass! "I am no man's property!"

Fuming, she stared at the door again. If he walked in she would more than tell him what he could do with his threats!

If only she could get out here. Whatever Nick told his friend Cohen certainly had its effect. When she asked for a carriage, he flatly refused to accommodate her. It was all she could do not to scream at him. Thoughts of storming out the door were quickly dismissed by the obvious look of warning Cohen gave her. The manservant he called

into the room insured her presence and ended her short burst of defiance. God, the nerve of these men!

Common sense told her acting like a raving lunatic wouldn't work. Snapping to attention over the thought, she suddenly smiled. Maybe the way out of here and away from what Nick put into motion was to let them think she had come to her senses. Yes, it could work. Only then would Nick let his guard down. And Cohen, too. Of the two, Cohen would be the easiest to fool.

"Well I might as well start now."

Playing the nice docile wife couldn't be that difficult. Could it? Maybe it would be best to try it out on Cohen? After her display this morning, it might not be as easy as she hoped.

Before her nerve vanished she raced down the stairs. The voices behind the study door almost made her turn back. There wasn't time for indecision, if Nick were with Cohen she would face them both.

Knocking lightly on the door she didn't wait to be asked in. The forced smile hid her nervousness, but it nearly faltered when both gentlemen turned at her unexpected entrance.

An instant chill seized her as her eyes came to Cohen's guest. Thankfully her mind snapped to attention. "Oh, Mr. Cohen, I am sorry. I didn't know you had company." She wanted to run so badly, her knees shook. This stranger's presence sent warnings firing off in her head.

Before she could flee. "Please Carolyn do come in. You could never be an intrusion." Whatever Cohen's thoughts were over the strangeness in Nick's sudden marriage, his wife's beauty outweighed them. After this morning he was relieved to see her. He wished he never promised Nick she wouldn't go out. His treatment of her had been terrible. The poor thing couldn't know how worried Nick was about her health. Seeing her paleness now, maybe Nick's orders were justified. He never pictured Nick as an overprotective husband, but he could certainly understand the reason.

Dubois quickly hid his surprise over staring at Masters' wife. The instant realization that Mackenzie didn't know him or refused to acknowledge him immediately put him on guard. To actually see her walk in that door sent his spirits soaring. Every fiber in his body came alive. Something told him he just found his answers.

"Carolyn I would like to introduce Mr. Dubois. Mr. Dubois, Mrs. Carolyn Chamberlain, the wife of the gentleman we were just discussing."

When Dubois' hand took hers she couldn't bring herself to raise her eyes. Why was he affecting her like this? His touch revolted and frightened her in the same breath. Never a coward she forced herself to look at him, maybe...

When his eyes locked on hers, her shock nearly escaped. Clenching her teeth together she pushed down her panic and scolded herself to act normal.

"Mr. Dubois, it's a pleasure." Pulling her hand from his she tore her eyes away from the devouring glare.

"The pleasure is mine, sweet lady."

Turning to Charles, she forced a smile and tried to ignore the man and the horror his nearness delivered. "I do apologize for interrupting. I only wanted to inquire when Nick might return? I did want to acquire some things before we sailed."

"Are you leaving Boston, madam?"

Hesitating, she couldn't bring forth an answer.

"The Chamberlains are leaving for England as soon as it can be arranged."

"What a shame. Our social activities during the winter may be infrequent, but it would be a pity if you and your...husband could not enjoy them."

She couldn't ignore him any longer. "I am afraid my husband has obligations that can't be postponed." Smiling at the man added to the strain she exerted not to run from the room. His eyes were forbidding. She must leave his presence. "I will let you continue your meeting."

"Alright my dear, I will..."

But before she could escape.

"Please Mrs. Chamberlain, I am sure our business can wait. Won't you join us?"

His rudeness in interrupting Mr. Cohen made her back away in warning. Charles' eyes were simmering and at that moment she wished he wasn't such a gentleman.

"Carolyn, here you are."

She never expected to be thankful to hear Nick's voice, but at that moment she could have hugged him.

Turning in relief, she accepted the hand he offered and the light kiss he gave her. The confusion in Nick's eyes turned to amusement. His grip tightened on her hand and they both knew she was trapped into accepting his touch. Taking his advantage his arm came possessively around her waist. Her anger quickly subsided when she saw Dubois' disquiet over Nick's action.

"Nick I am so glad you are back."

"I believe you are, my lady."

He didn't doubt her for a moment. Nick decided Dubois had more to do with Carolyn's change of attitude than his return. The slight quiver beneath his hand confirmed what he felt from her while listening to their conversation. It was the unmistakable fear in her voice that caused him to remain outside the door and evaluate the situation.

Watchful grey eyes took in the cause of his lady's distress. The man's attention rested so fully on Carolyn that he didn't notice Nick's own concentrated appraisal. Dubois knew her. Nick sensed the warnings strangling his spine.

"Charles I am afraid I haven't had the pleasure."

Cohen knew Nick too many years not to see the wary alertness coming over his friend. That idiot Dubois was practically drooling over Nick's wife. He never should have developed an association with the likes of him.

"Nick Chamberlain, Jacque Dubois."

Meeting that deadly stare, Dubois shrugged off his mistake. Instead he let his anger over the man's hold on Mackenzie show. She certainly attracted formidable men. Masters and Chamberlain were from the same mold. Only this one wasn't held by convention. There was something untamed and deadly about the man. *Closer to my kind.*

Dubois smiled over the discovery. The challenge of taking her from Chamberlain would equal the thrill he would have had with Masters' demise. And once he had her he would still have Masters.

Stealing Masters wife away from the thief. How he loved the irony of this turn of events! "Mr. Chamberlain, I hope you were successful?"

The man's gray eyes darkened in warning.

"Success Mr. Dubois?"

"Yes, in booking passage for you and your lovely wife."



Carolyn's sudden tensing brought his arm tighter. Smiling down at her fixed gaze upon him to avoid Dubois seemed to be easing her fear. "I am afraid Mr. Dubois, I must excuse ourselves, my wife and I have matters that require our immediate attention." Nick didn't wait nor care what Dubois' reaction would be to Nick's dismissal.

"Charles when you finished here, I will rejoin you. Carolyn, shall we?"

Smiling up at him, she let Nick escort her out. Never once did she look back at the eyes burning into her back.

Nick halted his strides at the bottom of the stairs, drawing her beside him.

"Carolyn do you know him?"

Tensing, "I don't know Nick."

"But?"

Refusing his strength seemed foolish. Damn it she needed him and he knew it. "He frightened me, something about the way he looked at me."

"Will you be alright alone for awhile?"

"Yes, I will wait in the room."

"I won't be long...Carolyn, don't worry."

Her lips came up in a small smile.

Each step away from Nick's powerful presence brought her anger closer to the surface. How could she have done that? Depending on Nick at the first sign of trouble was exactly what he expected.

Logically there had to be a reason for her reaction to Dubois. He knew her, if only she could remember. Their association couldn't have been pleasant, not when she felt so threatened.

But to seek Nick's protection! Was Nick right? Was she being foolish to think she could survive without him? Until what, her memory returned? Would it ever come back?

She could walk right past the man she thought she loved and never realize it was him!

"Please let me remember! Help me to remember, I need you."

\* \* \* \*

"Mackenzie! Don't give up! We're real...our love is real...not a dream!"

"Aaron, Aaron wake up!"

Knowing how desperately Aaron needed sleep David couldn't stand the pain and anguish he heard in his ravings. "Please Aaron, you're dreaming."

Aaron's iron fist gripped David's arm. "No! No David, I'm not. Oh God. David she is afraid. So filled with doubt, something is very wrong with her."

David knew, now, Aaron was hearing her calls like he had in the beginning. Shaken by what Aaron said. "What's wrong Aaron! What did she say?"

"I'm losing her, she's fading. Why? What has happened to her? I've got to reach her, before it's too late."

David couldn't help his friend and it tore at him. He could only watch as Aaron fought to regain his control.

"How long have I slept?"

"Only an hour."

"Any reports?"

"Nothing from any of the coach lines or hires. Aaron there are two ships sailing tonight. Gibson's Dolphin is strictly cargo, he is bound for the Carolina's."

"And the other?"

"Margray's Crescent. She's carrying cargo, no passengers as yet. She is booked for England."

Both men turned as the office door flew open.

"Excuse me Captain."

"What is it Jacob?"

"I was standing outside Major Cohen's digs and at first I didn't think anything of it. But then seeing the other gent enter, well, I said to meself, that's him alright."

"Jacob, who man? Who?"

"Oh right sir. The bloke you described, big one he is and that sleazy Dubois there too. He left right after the big fellow entered."

"Dubois?"

"Yes sir. He came first, looked right upset too. But when he left he had a look like he held the world by the tail. If'n you know what I mean. The man leaves one with a bad taste, so I liked it better when he looked all flustered and sore like."

"Jacob is anyone watching it now?"

"Yes sir, I left Hally to guard it."

“Take five men and keep it covered. If the big man, Travis, leaves again, have him followed.”

“Right Captain. Ye want we should decommission him?”

“No, just keep him in sight.”

“What about Dubois?”

“Don’t let that bastard enter that place again.”

“You can count on it sir.”

When Jacob left, David turned on Aaron. “What are you going to do? You think she is there?”

“From what Adam’s said, Cohen could very well be the man Travis would report to.”

“If they are spies...My God Aaron, Mackenzie could...”

“Be in danger? If she knows anything, they won’t exactly hand her over.”

“Do you think Dubois knows she is there?”

“You heard Jacob, I am sure he does.”

The conversation ended abruptly when Mary burst into the room.

“Sire, the British soldiers are coming here!”

David grabbed the girl’s arm. “Mary are you sure?”

“Yes Master Brown, and they don’t look none to friendly.”

Aaron didn’t have time to chance finding out as the loud voices carried into the office. “David I will try and contact you at your mothers.” Pointing at Mary, “Take her home, David.”

Both watched as Aaron climbed quietly out of the window. David quickly shut it and moved away, pulling Mary with him.

“Well girl shall we give the gentlemen something to take their minds off your master?”

Before Mary could think, the man’s arms pulled her into his embrace. His lips gently covered her shocked gasp. The noise of the door bursting open was lost on the girl. A bouquet of sweet sensations lifted her above the danger. Mary knew if there was a heaven, she just found it in Master David’s arms.

## CHAPTER 15

*Traitors One & All*

“Easy fella.” The gelding held still as Aaron eased himself up into the saddle, they moved slowly away from the building. Aaron didn’t want to make a run unless forced into it. A large group of soldiers were stationed in front of his office. Scowling, he tried to think of the reason for all this.

David and Mary were on the front stoop now, with the British captain. David’s voice carried and Aaron knew it was in warning.

“This is absurd. Aaron Masters is not a traitor!”

*Traitor, damn, how the hell did this happen?* If they caught him, even if he talked his way out of the charges, he would most certainly lose her.

A movement across the street caught his attention. The figure hugging the shadows was all too familiar, hardening his jaw. “Dubois!”

Aaron’s large, strong hands clenched against the urge to go after the man obviously gloating over the destruction he instigated. The commander ordered his men to mount; Aaron needed to get away. “Before this is finished, I will settle our debts Dubois, you can be sure of it.”

\* \* \* \*

“Do you really believe that man. Charles?”

“I can’t take any chances. If Masters does have Adam’s gold for the Colonist’s armament I must stop him.”

“I suppose you are right.”

“Nick what of you and Carolyn? Did you get passage?”

“Yes, we’re leaving tonight.” We’re they? Nick couldn’t help but wonder after what he discovered today. Maybe he should thank

Dubois for eliminating Masters. Nick casually moved to the window again. Yes, they were still there, no doubt more of Masters' men. The man had a virtual army out there hunting for her.

Convincing the Captain of the Crescent to hold his tongue over the passage Nick booked took some fast-talking, not to mention the expense. Dubois' treachery against Masters would help alleviate the problems Nick expected to face in order to get Carolyn on board the ship undetected. Nick decided Dubois could still be a problem. Giving up that much gold didn't seem like the man's style, unless there was a greater prize to be had? The warmth fled Nick over the obvious prize Dubois now set his sights on.

Realizing Charles was talking he moved back to his friend, anxious to return to Carolyn. Night couldn't come soon enough. For now she was safe, but he would feel a hell of a lot better once they were at sea.

\* \* \* \*

Tugging on the pants she patted herself on the back over her insistence about them. "And thank you Nick for giving in."

Hurrying to get dressed, what she just overheard sent her mind spinning into action. Waiting in passive submission to be hustled off to England was the last thing she could allow. Her answers were out there...with Aaron Masters.

Dubois' act against the man convinced her. Anything that creep hated, she could only feel the opposite. Masters' office would naturally be at the harbor. She might be too late to warn the man about the threat Dubois and Cohen posed to him, but maybe she could get some answers. She shivered at the thought of Masters already being arrested. Something told her he wouldn't let it happen. Why was she so sure of the man?

Shoving the last of her hair under Nick's fur cap, she pulled on his heavy deerskin jacket. Standing in front of the mirror she thought she looked like some street urchin. No one would recognize her female figure in the loose folds. The only thing wrong was her face. Going over to the lamp, she ran her fingers around the globe top. Grimacing, she rubbed the soot over her face smudging it in thoroughly. "Much better."

Stopping at the door she turned and raced back to the bed. Hesitating a second, her shaking hand finally reach under the mattress. The large hunting knife came slowly into sight as she drew

her hand back out. Nick thought she was asleep when he put it there. Repeating the process she located his pistol as well. Tucking them into her waistband she pulled the jacket together. Lastly she took the bag of coins and stuffed it into the coat pocket.

First an eavesdropper, now a thief, she didn't want to think what she may have to do next.

She prayed Nick would forgive her. She looked again at the note she left for him; it wasn't enough. Even after what she felt was his betrayal, he did rescue and protect her. Right now it made her feel pretty low to be stealing his things. She could only hope he would understand.

Moving with the urgency and fear over being caught, she reached the back stairs. Stifling a scream at the sound of footsteps coming up the main stairwell she silently raced down the stairs. Each step she prayed he wouldn't discover her flight. The kitchen was alive with activity. There was no way to avoid it. As innocently as possible she walked right in hoping she looked like it was an everyday occurrence.

"Hey boy what you doing in here?"

Swallowing, she forced calmness to prevail.

"Ah, the governor, he sent me this way. Had a message and delivered it right and proper, I did. To the front door as told, but its the back for the likes of me now. Ain't that a crock?"

Where in the world did she come up with that accent? It sounded like something out of the slums of London. How did she know that? There was no time to dwell on it.

"You best get your backside out of here. Mind ye use the back door next time!"

"Aye, that I will."

Her legs were shaking so bad she almost started running once she gained the alleyway between the houses. She managed to slow down just before she burst out onto the street. *Damn it girl get a hold on yourself. Walk slow and normal.*

Daring a look about, she was relieved to see the street filled with people. Crossing her fingers she slipped out and tried to blend in. Failing miserably when she collided with a man that seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Hey lad where ye be off to in such a hurry? Commander Cohen after ye?"

“What?” Nearly groaning, she forgot to disguise her voice. “What ye want?”

“What’s scruff like you doing in such a fine house?”

The man’s eyes raked over her shabby appearance. Oh Lordy, maybe he thought her a thief or something. “What’s it to ye?” She raised her voice and arms at him. It was working. *When in doubt attack*. “I’s deliver’n, want to make something on it?”

“Nay lad, be gone with ye!”

Good he was turning away. Did she dare ask him? “Hey mister, which way to the harbor?”

The man seemed suddenly nervous at the attention he was creating. “Get lost boy!”

“Which way mister?”

“Follow this here lane, then bare left and keep go’n, use your nose damn it. Now get!”

Scurrying off she did just that. Laughing softly over the fact she fared so well. “Ah Nick, I don’t need you and I will find him.”

Feeling more confident than she did a few minutes ago, she followed the man’s directions. A few curious looks from the rough looking men about made her bring the coat collar up higher. The dark thoughts of being discovered and what it meant constantly plagued her. As she drew closer to the harbor, the element grew harsher. Catching her first glimpse of the ship masts, her spine stiffened in caution. It would soon be dark, she needed to hurry, the risks increased with nightfall.

Realizing how much time could be wasted in futile searching, she decided to chance asking for directions. Eyeing a few of the men, she settled on one that seemed more decent than his cohorts did.

Schooling her voice she approached him. “Aye mister? Could ye tell me where Masters shipping might be?”

The glare in the man’s eyes tightened her hold around the knife concealed beneath the coat.

“What would a lad like ye want there?”

“A job, cabin boy on a ship.”

She tried not to flinch when his big hand came up and fingered the buckskin, “Ye ever been on a ship boy?”

“Nay, but I will.”

His friends’ laughter brought her anger forward and the man didn’t miss it. “Ye just might at that lad.”

Steadying her breath after leaving them, she decided she wouldn't approach anyone again, it was too risky. If they discovered she was a woman, well she wouldn't think any further on the ugly possibilities.

As she rounded the corner her feet refused to move. Vivid blue eyes stared in frozen awareness at the building across the street. "I know this place."

With her words came images and feelings that sent excitement shooting through her. Overcome by the rush, she leaned back against the wall and struggled for control. Closing her eyes the scenes play themselves out. Disjointed and vague, they swam before her eyes. Her soft lips parted in a smile over each new scene and for the reality finally starting to return. When the images began to fade a sad groan came from deep inside. Her sorrow quickly died over the little knowledge she gained. "It's coming back, the memories are mine."

Pushing off the wall she started anxiously towards the office. The loud shouts halted her steps.

"Damn!" Quickly moving back into a doorway, her eyes watched the commotion taking place in front of the building. The two people arguing with the British commander looked so familiar. She desperately needed to reach them, but didn't dare expose herself.

Regretfully she hadn't beaten Cohen's men here. Straining to see, she almost cried out when the horses started speeding past her. Searching the passing men some of the tension left her. "He got away."

She didn't have time to question her knowledge over whom escaped, because of what she saw as the soldiers cleared away. The danger made her back further into the shadows. Across the street stood Dubois. He was watching the office, preventing her from going there. The danger his presence posed became too great a risk for her to chance being seen.

The man and woman were entering the carriage, she wanted to rush after them, but Dubois started to cross the street and was heading directly for her. An inner alarm warned her of another's presence. Silently she cowered in her hiding place, hating the man for ruining her chance to reach those two.

A terrified scream froze in her throat when Dubois stopped before the doorway and was joined by another man. Her heart beat so wildly she swore they could hear it.

"He got a way?"



"Yes, but any freedom he had available to reach her has been stopped."

"But the gold, Dubois?"

"If there was any gold. Masters wife is more valuable. Don't you agree Jenkins?"

The men's laughter left her cold. Knowing she was learning the answers she sought didn't stop her fevered wish they would leave.

"When do we take her?"

"Cohen's is to risky. We will wait until Chamberlain leaves tonight for the ship."

Feeling like she'd just been hit, biting her knuckles she swallowed her cry of alarm. My God, they meant her. She was Aaron Masters wife! Fighting her joy over the discovery in light of her present danger almost killed her.

"You sure he is sailing?"

"The Crescent is leaving for England, they will be on it. Meet me back at the ship. Chamberlain is no fool, but at sea he won't be much of a threat."

"What about Masters?"

"He's a traitor now, on the run. Cohen's men will keep him away from Mackenzie."

They moved off, but she couldn't make her legs work. Moaning and sliding down the wall her head leaned back against the cold bricks. "Oh Aaron...what have I done to you?"

So many things came flooding down upon her. She couldn't take it all in. Like a storm the memories lashed out with their torrent. And like a storm, when the clouds dissipated warmth akin to basking in the sun eased through her. Clear and bright, what and who she was became a part of her. She felt whole. More importantly she felt loved and loving in return. "Aaron, I remember you, our love, our battles, but always the love. I'm not afraid anymore, Aaron. Time can't destroy what we share. I belong with you."

Slowly Mac pulled herself together. Finding Aaron before they did became imperative. Dubois' treachery labeled him a traitor...because of her. Regretfully, her memories of Dubois were quite vivid. Thankfully her instincts hadn't failed her.

Mac made her way down the dimly lit streets. Hugging the shadows she avoided any contact. She knew exactly where she was going.

The last few blocks, her apprehension increased. Mounted British soldiers were everywhere. Turning onto Chestnut Street her fears were confirmed. Guards stood at the entrance to their house. Cursing them she forced herself to walk past. Cohen had sent them, if they caught her she had little reservations they would use her to get to Aaron. She couldn't dismiss the feeling Nick knew exactly who she was and she almost hated him for his deceit.

Nick was also a British spy. What she learned that night could help the Colonist and possibly Aaron. If only she had Nick's report. She'd heard enough to spoil their plans, but the report would be more valuable. No doubt it was still in Cohen's bedroom. Aaron could use it to bargain with. Sadly she knew there was no way to get it. Damn that Dubois!

Where was Aaron? Of course! Why hadn't she realized? David's!

Crossing the street Mackenzie started for Agnes'. Hearing the horse approaching she faded into the shadows, waiting until it passed. Moving quickly she prayed she could make it without being stopped.

*Oh, David please be home.* Surely he would know where to find Aaron. Mackenzie became so wrapped up in thoughts over Aaron she failed to notice the dark figure dogging her movements.

\* \* \* \*

Nick's patience was finally rewarded. Regretfully, the fact she came here meant the return of her memory.

Smiling as he followed her, Nick realized that if he hadn't been aware of what to look for, in that outfit she could have walked right pass him. Remembering she had his knife and pistol renewed his caution.

His anger when he found her gone finally subsided during his long wait. But not in time to prevent Cohen from seeing her note. If only she hadn't named Masters in it. Now Nick had more than Masters and Dubois to contend with. That guard on her house was for her and she didn't even realize it. Thankfully Cohen didn't know he should be looking for a boy, not the "beautiful blonde spy" as he now called her. Charles grew so furious he decided she deceived them both and discovered every secret he kept in the house.

He would love to get his hands on the Dubois. By labeling Masters a spy his wife was twice over a traitor and nothing Nick could say would change Charles' opinion. Telling Charles of his own

duplicity against her would have thrown suspicion his way, preventing any help he might be to her.

Seeing another rider Nick cursed his friend. She was walking right into a trap. Nick knew now that she was headed for Brown's. Cohen already staked the place out just waiting for one of them to show.

Damn that woman proved to be nothing but trouble. What had he thought her...an enchantress? By heavens she was that and more. He couldn't walk away and he knew it. This wouldn't have happened to her, if he hadn't...wanted her!

Any coloring of the truth faded this night. Worse yet, Nick still wanted her. She fell under his protection the first night in forest and nothing changed in that quarter whether she wanted it or not. She would probably hate him before this night ended, the outcome was unavoidable.

If only Cohen's men weren't all over the place. Nick almost laughed realizing he could be in the same boat as Masters if he wasn't careful. From spy to traitor, he didn't have many options. Once Charles discovered his absence it wouldn't take him long, in his present state, to add him to the search. Before that happened Nick must stop her. Deciding it wasn't going to be any easier the closer they came to Brown's, it might as well happen now.

\* \* \* \*

At first the strange sensations Aaron felt when he rode pass the small figure walking down the street baffled him. He couldn't shake it off and found himself turning and following the boy. For a block he followed, heading back towards the trap he just avoided at David's.

What the hell was wrong with him?

When a larger figure suddenly appeared behind the boy Aaron's body stiffened in warning. Looking again at the smaller figure he nearly moaned.

Seeing the man closing the distance Aaron urged the gelding up. Digging in his heels he headed for the smaller of the two, blocking the larger man's approach. Before the smaller one could react, Aaron's arm came around and lifted the fighting bundle up before him. "Mackenzie if its really you stop fighting me!"

The small fist halted in mid air and with it the deadly light shining off the object it held. "Aaron?" Blue eyes searched for her answer. "Oh Aaron!"

The knife hit the snow, as her arms flew around his neck. "I'm glad you recognized me, love. That knife looked pretty deadly."

"Oh God, I almost..."

"Hush, it's alright. I would love to kiss you but we better get the hell out of here."

Mackenzie saw the figure stoop and retrieve the knife before Aaron did. "Nick!"

Aaron reached for his pistol, but the click of the man's own froze Aaron's hand.

"Mackenzie give me your pistol and your husband's."

"Nick please..."

"Do it Mackenzie." Aaron didn't like what he felt coming from the man. His eyes were cold and filled with fury when they rested on Mackenzie. Aaron's concern about this Travis turned out to be well founded.

Mackenzie's hands shook as she threw the guns down into the snow where Nick pointed. She knew Nick well enough to see how desperate their positions were. The hate she saw in his eyes for Aaron chilled her. Aaron's grip about her waist tightened. *Oh please, she couldn't loose him now.*

"Get down Mackenzie." Nick's eyes never left Masters. The tightening of his jaw and the fire in those black depths told Nick what Masters wanted to do to him. They both knew neither of them would risk hurting her.

Mac refused to move, afraid of what it meant. "No."

"Do as he says, love."

Mac became desperate to stop Nick. "Nick, please don't do this. I love him, I can't love you. I will only end up hating you!"

The truth of her words stabbed him with the force of the blow, but Nick's features didn't change. "I can't let you stay with him."

"Why?"

"He is a traitor and unfortunately so are you. Cohen knows who you are and right now he wants you more than him."

Aaron's heart stopped beating over Nick's news. "And the good loyal spy is taking her in. Is that it, Travis?"

"I am afraid to disappoint you Masters, but I have no intention of taking her anywhere but with me and away from the threat you pose to her."

Trying to understand what Nick was telling them almost escaped her. "Oh no! It was my note."

"I am glad to see your memory has fully recovered, Mrs. Masters."

Anger spurred to life in her. "You knew who I was. Didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"It does! If Dubois hadn't seen me, none of this would have happened."

"Stop it Mackenzie, I know exactly where the fault lies and I intend on correcting it. Now get down before Cohen's men get curious."

"And if I refuse?"

"I will kill him." She paled under the cold conviction of Nick's threat.

"Alright Nick, I will go with you, but you have to let him go."

"You are in no position to bargain."

"Maybe, but the first chance I get I will kill you."

"I have no doubts you will try. Now get down!"

Aaron's hands lifted her down as she fought to dislodge them. "No...!"

She clung to him. A rush of tears blinded her. "Aaron..."

His fingers stroked her cheek, wiping away the dampness. "I will find you, just keep calling me. I will come, I promise."

The pistol shot filled the air just before Nick pulled her away. "Traitor! Traitor!" Nick's shouts stirred Cohen's men into action leaving Aaron no choice but to flee.

Mackenzie turned and beat on Nick until he overtook her and pulled her with him into the shadows. Holding his hand over her mouth he stopped her heated ranting as they watched the men ride after Aaron.

All the fight seemed to go out of her as Aaron disappeared. She slumped wearily against Nick. She'd lost him and she knew it was worse than before. Now she possessed all the memories and love to feel the pain.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Rescue*

The fog she existed in left her oblivious to what was happening around her. As if from a distance she felt Nick's arms about her and knew they were out of the night. But the fierce cold that invaded her didn't go away. She thought she would never be warm again. The blessed darkness reclaimed her, dulling the pain reality held.

Covering her, the soft moan that passed her quivering lips made his stomach turn over. Turning away from her, Nick faced his livid friend. "Like I told you Charles, she has been ill."

"But my God Nick, she is Masters' wife!"

"But she is no damn spy!"

"Alright! I will admit I was rash on that, but correcting it won't be easy."

"I don't want you to."

"What?"

Cohen was their last chance after learning about the ambush Dubois planned for them at the ship. Charles had the power to get them out of Boston and away to England. Only the British ships were armed well enough to withstand an attack.

Thankfully Mackenzie's present condition helped convince Charles not to arrest her.

"Masters' wife can remain a traitor, mine can not."

"Yours, but Nick she is..."

"She is my wife Charles, whether she wants to be or not. Her amnesia may be gone, but I am not and Masters is in no position to protest."

"Do you realize what you're saying? You said she regained her memory."

"She has and she hates me, but I can't leave her to fall prey to Dubois. Look at the damage he has already caused. We both know Masters isn't a traitor at least not because of any gold. Dubois wants her."

Charles couldn't argue, "Alright Nick how can I help?"

"I need passage on a British gunner, one Dubois won't tangle with."

"There is one in Boston now, she can sail in a few days. Nick are you sure you want to do this? She will never forgive you."

"Masters has failed to protect her."

"He will follow you. You realize that don't you?"

"By the time he locates Lady Chamberlain, she will be my wife in every sense of the word."

Charles didn't doubt his friend's vow, but he couldn't help but wonder if he would regret his action against the beauty.

\* \* \* \*

Time passed, but Mackenzie barely noticed. She floated somewhere between dreams and reality. When her eyes did focus hope quickly fled when the image cleared and the man she yearned to see didn't exist. Always it was Nick beside her. Nick, not Aaron that held her head coaxing her to drink, soothing her with soft words that she tried not to hear. Then the blackness would pull her back into nothingness.

Once she tried to fight off the weariness and clear her thoughts. Mackenzie thought she could somehow find Aaron, but the darkness won. He'd been there to prove her struggles were useless against his large hands. Nick's presence suffocated Mackenzie's spirit.

\* \* \* \*

Carrying her into the cabin Nick settled her gently into the bunk. Pulling the hood back he removed the concealing cloak. Mackenzie barely acknowledged his handling through the drugged induced stated she existed in.

Sighing, thankfully Nick would no longer have to give her the laudanum. Three days was long enough, if they didn't sail tonight he would have found another way.

"The cabin is not bad Nick."

"No, it's very nice Charles, I will have to thank the Captain for giving up his quarters."

"Yes, well, I better get to shore."

“Thank you Charles, for everything.”

“I just wished we had captured Masters. I don’t like not knowing where the man has gone. Well, goodbye Nick. I hope it works out for you and the lady.”

“I will see you in England, Charles. I know you don’t approve of what I am doing, but it is the only way.”

“They say love makes fools of us all. I hope they are wrong.”

“I doubt it.”

“Take care Nick.”

Nick didn’t return to the cabin until they cleared the harbor and were in the open sea. He watched the mainland fade with the dawn and spied no other ships in their wake. Dubois’ ship put out of port the night his ambush failed. It wasn’t Dubois Nick scanned the horizon for. Masters hadn’t been seen since that night, either. Although he knew Charles’ house was still being watched, Nick made sure their departure would not be noticed.

He closed his conscience over what he was doing. Masters wasn’t a traitor. Charles wouldn’t pull the charges. Without him, Mackenzie would be in too much danger for Nick to walk away from.

Stealing the man’s wife and taking her as his own wasn’t something any man would forgive. Nothing would stop him from doing it now. Not even Mackenzie’s hate. Looking at her, his hand brushed back a stray lock of hair, the softness felt like a caress against his rough hand.

He remembered her struggles against his kiss that night in the kitchen. Her shock and feelings for him tempered her protest then. When next he touched her there would be nothing to hold back her fight to prevent what he ultimately would take. Crush her will to his? Demand she give her body to him, without love and in hate? Squeezing the silken lock in his fist Nick knew he would do this to her and more. Before Masters reached them to reclaim her she would be tied to him in an unbreakable bound. His child would be swelling with life inside that lovely body. He would make sure she could never walk away from him!

Easing away from the bed Nick’s gaze lingered over her beauty. The drug would soon wear off he would give her the decency of fighting him. He wanted her full awareness when she lost this battle to him.



Leaving before his resolve weakened Nick gained the deck. Thoughts of the evening and how he would win without harming her stole his attention.

Black pools glassed over in fiery rage never left the man's movements across the deck. A surge of hate locked Aaron's hands on the wheel in a deadly grip. *Soon Travis.*

Watchful eyes scanned the deck, receiving silent nods of confirmation from his men. One by one the British commander's crew had been taken below to join him in the hold. All was ready. Aaron's men moved into position at the nod of his head.

The wheel spun in his competent hands, swinging the vessel about their course was now set due south. Always Aaron's awareness remained on Travis. For the first time Aaron's body eased its iron hold. Travis failed to notice the shift in course. Disgust filled Aaron over what he imagined claimed the man's attention. If he hadn't come back on deck when he did, nothing, not even the lives it might have cost would have held him on deck!

Stealing on board during the night with his men, Aaron's patience was drawn to its limit. Once securing the captain, they had methodically been replacing the crew with his own and without the loss of a single life. Seeing Nick carry her on board nearly sent him into a rage. Curbing his emotions and concern for Mackenzie nearly became impossible. If that bastard hurt her, nothing would stop Aaron from killing him.

So far luck rested on his side. After he lost Cohen's men that night he headed for the docks, positive Travis would be boarding Murphy's ship. He'd been surprised when Travis didn't board after talking to the Captain. It wasn't until the next morning Aaron learned of Dubois' departure.

Travis wasn't taking any chances. Alerting some soldiers to his presence and demanding to be taken back to Cohen's, under escort, effectively stopped Aaron from reaching Mackenzie. Following him with the guards about hadn't been easy. Fear for Mackenzie kept his dagger in its sheath that night.

Thankfully with the help of his men Aaron was able to reach David. Staking out Cohen's Aaron knew Mackenzie was a prisoner. When the capture didn't become public knowledge it was obvious Travis had other plans. They weren't difficult to figure it out once Cohen contacted the British navel officer.

The next two days Aaron waited like a caged lion. Taking her from Cohen with the militia in attendance would have been too dangerous for Mackenzie. Out here on the open waters no one could stop him. Baker would be bringing the Wanderer out to meet him. Once his ship was in sight Aaron would move on Travis.

Pulling his eyes away from the man, his hands tightened on the wheel. Cursing, Aaron knew what his future held and it held no place for Mackenzie. Pirating wasn't in his plans, but being hung wasn't either. He could do a lot of damage to the British. Adams gave him enough contacts to get the arms and goods he captured from the British to the right people and he planned to start with this vessel.

"Captain, the last of the Brits are below, the men are ready."

"Has Baker been sighted?"

"Not yet Captain. You want we should take him out?" The man nodded in the direction of Travis.

"No, that pleasure is all mine."

"We thought as much. I will take the wheel when Mr. Baker is in sight."

"Thank you, Harper."

"Which post are we sailing into?"

"Charleston, Adams thought it best. Mr. Brown is sending a crew to take her over."

It still amazed Aaron that his men backed him, even against the charges. The fact they choose to join him filled him with pride for these men. The British were fools; they would loose one hell of a country. He stopped doubting Mackenzie's words long ago. Smiling he knew he couldn't wait to hear what she would say to that concession.

Baker had been sighted. Aaron turned the wheel over to Harper. Shedding the uniform, Aaron strapped on his cutlass and picked up the other one.

The hair on Nick's neck rose. Gripping the rail he realized what his thoughts just cost him when the coastline entered his line of vision.

"I believe its Lord Chamberlain, not Travis I am addressing. We have some unfinished business to attend to."

Nick turned in time to catch the cutlass Aaron tossed to him.

"I'm sure a British lord knows its use."

"Quite well to be exact." Nick worked his jacket off, while flicking the scabbard off the cutlass.

"Good. Then for once we will meet on even ground."

The two large men circled cautiously around each other.

"Do I see a look of regret my lord?"

"Only that our meeting came too soon."

The instant flash of anger in Masters eyes drew Nick's smile. "I am afraid my plans called for a few months for the lady and I to get acquainted.

Bringing the cutlass up to his brow Aaron saluted the man. "Sorry if I spoiled anything, but I can assure you the lady won't mind. In fact I happen to know she prefers my company to yours. Shall we begin?"

Nick's anger sent Aaron's eyes dancing in threatening amusement. "As you wish."

The clash of swords instantly penetrated Mackenzie's groggy state. When she reached what she now realized was the ship's deck, their words swam around her like a dream. Forcing her eyes to adjust to the bright sunlight the sword fight in progress was no illusion. It was like watching an old movie. They moved like dancers only their lunges and parleys were meant to kill!

She swallowed the scream of terror that mesmerized her. If Aaron's concentration faltered she knew what could happen. Both men were equal in skill and strength. Gripping the rail Mackenzie remained motionless against the desperate desire to run to Aaron and somehow end this.

Aaron advanced and plunged, but Nick moved quickly and parried Aaron's attack with his own. The spreading red stain on Aaron's sleeve drew a slight moan from her. Her sagging spirits rose, for Aaron didn't appear to notice the wound. In fact he appeared to gather strength, pushing Nick back across the open deck. His aggression grew so fierce it made her think he had been playing with Nick. The surprised look on Nick's face said as much. Aaron's blade rose and fell so swiftly she couldn't follow it. But the result soon appeared across Nick's arms and chest.

Mackenzie suddenly realized she didn't want to see Nick killed, not by Aaron. She hated Nick for what he'd done, but not enough to want this. Her fears for Aaron kept her silent, she prayed Aaron would stop in time. It was obvious Nick was out matched. She couldn't interfere, more than ever before Mackenzie realized just how

different this time could be. Men settled their differences face to face, not in some suited courtroom. Her intervention was unwanted. Not even Aaron would allow it.

Suddenly she felt the tightness around her heart dissolve. She loved and trusted this man, everything told her he would handle the situation as he must and fairly. But as an opponent he was awesome. His intense confidence and power, frightening. She wondered where she ever found the nerve to stand up to Aaron.

Straining against her hold, she watched in terrified fascination as Nick rallied and attacked Aaron. Some of the other men noticed her presence. She sensed their casual move towards her to prevent any intrusion she might foolishly make. She almost thanked them, for she was barely in control of herself.

Suddenly there was a deafening silence. Her heart stopped. Aaron's blade was pointed at Nick's throat and no one breathed.

"I believe Lord Chamberlain the matter is settled."

Seeing the look in Aaron's eyes she knew it was meant as a challenge, one that he wouldn't hesitate to carry out. Silently she begged him to end this. *Oh please Nick don't be a fool!*

"I misjudged you, you are more than capable sir." The blade lowered and she breathed once more.

"Take him to join the others."

The men lead Nick off. Aaron's back was to her. Dare she approach? She sensed he was unaware of her presence. The stance he held was still prone for battle.

"Aaron?"

He spun so fast it shocked her.

"Mackenzie. How long have you been up here?"

"Long enough to know I will always hate pirate movies."

His questioning eyes slowly filled with laughter. His arms gathered her to him swinging her about. "Oh love, no more dreams."

Her hands were in his thick wild hair, touching and stroking. Blue eyes smiled down, drinking in the love he held her in. "No Aaron, no more, only this reality, I promise."

Slowly he lowered her down against him, never releasing her from his gaze. "I believe we never had the chance last time."

His lips sealed their words taking away the last of her fears. A fire sprang to life drawing them to passion's flame.

A small moan of protest came when he eased away placing reluctant kisses across her face. His voice came in short breathless spaces, warming her flushed skin. "I'd love to finish this my love, but I'm afraid we have company."

"Not below deck Aaron." She was wanton, refusing his retreat. Her hungry lips so long denied fanned fiery kisses up his neck.

"You are a witch my lady."

"Shall we burn together then?"

His arms scooped her up, her victorious laughter floated across the deck as she buried her face into his strong shoulder.

With confident strides he took them down the companionway. Her hands pulled at his shirt, glorying in his submission as her tongue teased and explored his salt spiced skin. Her playful exploration quickly stilled when he devoured her sweetness, taking all she offered and more. Lost in the pleasure of his kiss, pressed against the door she never felt the rending of her gown until his hands covered her breast in knowing possession.

The gently kneading drove her crazy, leaving her weak and wonderfully wanting. The need to feel and confirm his existence drove her hands boldly beneath his shirt. Pulling back she wanted to see him. Her eyes and hands needed to verify how very real he truly was.

Aaron let Mackenzie calm her fears. Slowly the slight tremors eased into gentle showers of excitement.

"We're real Mackenzie."

Bringing her eyes back to his she smiled, wanting to take away the concern he held her in. "I know, I have dreamed so long it's hard to realize you are really here touching me." Her hand moved sensuously over his chest as did his over her breast. "Loving you, feeling the wild fire inside me that's burning so hot I think it will consume me..."

His hands moved down her hips, caressing the curves roaming in such possessive firmness she moaned, lying her head back against the door in weakening submission.

Slowly he raised her, bringing her legs up around his powerful thighs. "Hold me Mackenzie. I need to feel your sweet spice surround my cock."

She had no will to disobey his husky order.

Positioning her, his plunge was savage and fierce, too long denied. She arched to receive him, meeting his force with equal fervor.

They came together in wild abandon, each taking, refusing to release their hold, they rode each other rising with the wave of passion, each crest higher than the last until the storm captured and whirled about them in a fury unmatched by earthly bounds. Higher, still higher the fury increased as Aaron captured her cries, smothering her lips in his fierce possession. Claiming what he feared he'd lost. She came in willing surrender, never wanting to be released from his hold.

"Touch me Aaron, I want to feel you fill me, I want to explode around that fierce and thrilling cock of yours!"

"Oh my sweet wonderful wife, I am at your command!" And with each word Aaron drove into her, letting her heat caress his wild shaft in pleasurable contractions as if she could capture and tame the beast inside of her.

Together they reached the pinnacle, wave upon wave of pleasure shot out of Aaron's cockhead, bathing the deepest part of her womanhood, one that she kept pressed against him.

"Oh Aaron, my love, I want more, don't ever let go of me." And her moans of ecstasy cried out as her sheath contracted in fierce abandonment about his cock, so tight and so damn hard and she wanted it to stay in her forever!

Aaron held her against his chest stroking her soft tresses molded against the exquisite line of her back, marveling at the strength and beauty he held.

He lifted her, cradling her in his arms. Her eyes were like glittering star sapphires. The fine sheen of sexual heat covered her ivory skin, glowing under the tempting aftermath of their heated lovemaking. So beautiful, absently his eyes roamed in open admiration over her. "I was wrong you know."

Not really caring, too lost in his open look of ownership, one she never wanted to escape. "About what?"

"You're no witch."

Smiling, Mackenzie let her finger trace the strong line of his jaw. "No? I thought I just burned you pretty good."

His eyes laughed down at her. "Ah, but only an angel could have taken me to heaven as you did."

Remembering her abandonment just moments ago sent a fiery blush across her cheeks.

Rubbing his nose over hers, "Aye, a very wanton angel my lady."

His kiss made the warmth spread through her so fast she could feel her toes curl as her body moved sensually against his. Drowning in the heated passion he could so easily stir to life, she never realized she was now on the bed. The sudden loss of his presence sent her eyes flashing in alertness. His own raked over her stretched out form with such longing she couldn't understand what held him back.

"Aaron?"

Groaning he forced his eyes back to her. Battling what the mere sight of her could do to him. "As much as I regret leaving you I am afraid we do have company."

"Company? But how could..." The shouts and sounds above them demanded both their attention. The running feet drew her eyes to the cabin's ceiling. Shamefully she wondered how long the commotion had been going on?

Laughing at her embarrassed awareness Aaron knew exactly how she felt. "I am sure my men understand, but I dare say Mr. Baker's patience is failing."

"Mr. Baker? Oh Aaron, not thee Mr. Baker?"

"None other love. Now, you better get dressed." Looking at the tangled mass of what remained of her dress her eyes came accusingly back at his with a smirking smile. Moving quickly to the trunks, he finally found one containing her clothes.

"Mackenzie, I think you will find what you need here."

Scooting off the bed in all her lovely nakedness she moved seductively over to Aaron. Meeting his knowing, yet controlled gaze, she sighed in resignation. Getting the articles she needed he watched as she carelessly threw the corset aside. She knew exactly what she was doing with that beautiful body of hers. If she knew how close he was to answering her beguiling call, he knew she would never have relented so easily.

"That bastard!"

His warm thoughts vanished over the vehemence in her voice.

Kneeling down beside her he saw the bottle clutched in her hand. "What is it Mackenzie?"

"Laudanum! He drugged me. Do you believe that? No wonder I was so out of it."

Aaron wondered if she wished he had take Travis' life? He hadn't realized she was watching, but killing the man would have hurt her,

the knowledge stilled his own desire for revenge. Taking the bottle from her. "Mackenzie it's over, he knows it too."

Pulling her into his arm he held her until she calmed.

"Why did he do it Aaron? He knew all along and never told me. I must have spoken your name in my dreams at the inn. He changed there, I felt it. He never stopped being a gentleman to me, but something was different."

Aaron didn't like the answers he thought of. "When did your memory come back?"

Looking up at him she smiled. "You never left me Aaron. I knew I loved you even when I didn't know who you were. I kept calling, trying to reach you, help you to find me."

"That first night back in Boston I could feel your presence pulling at me. You were so close. When I escaped that night and you found me, it all came back. I found the office, but the soldiers were already there. I saw David and Mary and tried to reach them, but Dubois was there. His words about taking me off the ship finally made it all clear. Dubois is the one that sent Cohen after you. He used the fake gold shipment to accuse you of treason, to get you out of the way."

"I know, I saw him there." His thoughts clouded, he didn't like what was going to come between them and soon. He couldn't tell her, not now. They still had a few days before they reached Charleston.

Damn! It wasn't fair to have just found her again only to give her up. Right now he would do nothing to spoil her happiness. Afraid he couldn't lock away the anger from her scrutiny he needed to leave her for a while. "Mackenzie we will have time to talk it over when we board the Wanderer. I really have to go on deck."

No, she didn't mistake the change in Aaron's eyes, but seeing how he tried not to show her she held the questions back.

"I'll get ready."

Worried blue eyes studied the closed door. Aaron was hiding something from her. Did he fear she would be afraid to stay with him because he was labeled a traitor? That was absurd! They could hide together.

Of course! She should have realized. He was going into that protective thing again. "When will you learn the only place for me to be safe is at your side. Oh, no, Mr. Masters, you won't shut me away this time!"



## CHAPTER 17

### *Paradise*

Beautiful, yes these last three days had been that and more. Hearing Aaron's deep peaceful breathing Mackenzie's soft lips, still warm and swollen from his ardent kisses, smiled lovingly upon his sprawled out naked form.

Snuggling closer into his shoulder her movement caused his arm to automatically tighten about her. Warmed blue eyes shining in love saw the concern ease from his proud brow as she stilled. She could never get enough of seeing him; even now her eyes drank in his dark moonlit features. "I'll not stray love."

Her silent vow brought a marring frown to her smooth brow. Biting her lip she wished they could remain locked away in their cabin. Their marriage trip as Aaron called it had been heavenly. Only they existed here, in secluded discovery of each other.

They talked of so many things. Even the future. Aaron couldn't get enough of the wonders she told him about. Never had she talked so much about her self. His curiosity seemed to be centered on her life and everything it entailed, down to her daily routine. He pleased her more than he would ever know over his interest concerning her business. She'd seen his surprise, laughing at his glaring disbelief that a woman ran such a business. But the more he questioned her the more his opinions faltered. For she promised herself, it seemed like ages ago, that if Aaron ever asked she would answer in all honesty. Whatever else their lives held, Aaron must know her as herself.

Lightly kissing his shoulder, she knew she made the right decision. Not only had he accepted what she told him he also respected her abilities.

Giggling softly she admitted he would probably never willing admit or allow her to exhibit her talents, but she could live with that.

All that mattered was Aaron and that he now believed in her. She couldn't change a lifetime of opinions, nor did she want to. She loved Aaron for what he was and being an authoritative male of his time was part of it.

Oh, she would have her say and he knew it, but for convention sake, and yes his, she promised him she would do it in private. She loved her time with Aaron. Her easy agreement to his terms drew a look of disbelief from him. He tickled her then, until she was gasping for breath swearing she meant it. How she loved this playful side of him. The gentle Aaron held so much love for her.

Shutting her eyes, Mackenzie didn't want the reality to encroach on their haven. She didn't want to face the truth that this perfection couldn't last. Opening them she studied his face, softened in sleep like a small boy. Thick dark lashes crested against his dark coppery skin. A fine straight nose, she watched in fascination at the slight flare of his nostrils. Those smooth full lips were relaxed now, but how they could wield their magic over her. And they had for three memorable days.

Without thought her leg moved up his and she gently probed her knee against his balls. She loved touching him with parts of her body and she pressed up with her knee until it came against that hard line that ran the length of his dick. He liked it when she ran her fingers over him there, she smiled and watched him as she slid her knee just a bit higher, then down again over the corded strength of his penis.

When he moaned in pleasure she pressed a little harder, glorying in the life racing up his cock. Her hand covered it to still its excitement not wanting him to wake up, no she wanted to touch and excite him...in dream. The power in his cock pulsed against her palm as she caressed him in infinite slowness.

Careful not to wake him, she moved her head across his chest until she reached the palpitating cock. Her hand held him still against its will so she could play. Mac's tongue licked the opening of his cockhead, one that gave her so much pleasure. She could taste their combined sex from their last joining and savored the heady mix. She took the formidable head into her mouth and her tongue played over it, savoring the excited response. Working the shaft with her hand she repeatedly press her tongue over the opening as if quelling the urge it wanted to give into.

Mac's body moved over his and she replaced her mouth with the warm folds of her vagina. She let herself snuggle over the top of him and tucked her head up under his chin before she started to roll over his cock. For a few strokes she rode his cock, loving how its size increased with each level of excitement she took them to.

His hands started to caress her back, but Aaron didn't try to control her actions. Mac wanted the feel of him to burn into her memory as his cock found her and slid in welcome ease into the moist cavern of her vagina. For a second she stopped and just let herself meld with every glorious inch of pulsing power inside her; so much power and strength.

Aaron's hands rested on her buttocks, kneading them in gentle persuasion to move some more, satisfy his mounting hunger.

Mac scooted down his chest a bit lower and took hold of his sensitive nipple. The nub grew hard as her tongue moved back and forth over it. Her hips began to dance, matching each sweep of her tongue over his nipple with a dip down, and she took him deep inside. The dance went faster until Mac sucked harder and harder on his nipple and her hands buried themselves beneath his hips to hold on. Harder, and another dip!

Ah, she felt his cockhead touch her, such a marvelously sensitive place to be caressed and she ground down harder until her folds spread and her clit buried itself against the erotic touch of his pubic hair. The tickling caress summoned her to roll over him, mesh that part of her to him and seal her passion. But Mac wanted to savor his cock, keep it hard and feel the wild beat of his lust against the wall of her uterus. He was the invader, the conqueror and she got off on the battle. So much man!

She pushed up with her hands on his chest to right herself. His eyes were closed but the grip of his hands on her hips said he was awake and enjoying her lovemaking. Mac trailed her finger over the firm area just above the line of his pubic hair. She watched the way his muscles jumped and knew he was holding back his groan of pleasure, she raised slightly off him and jerked down hard over his cock!

If he'd kept his eyes closed then she'd be taking his pulse and she giggled over the way he glared at her.

"You are a temptress! And a tease, Mrs. Masters."

"Oh, I do like the sound of that name."

She didn't give him time answer...

All playing stopped and Mac moved as one possessed to feel. In wild abandon she drove over him as a woman with one goal. She pulled his hands from her hips and entwined her fingers with his, using his strength to push against as she rode him!

Aaron's cry of astonishment faded into moans of pure sexual consciousness and Mac revealed in the control she wielded over this powerful man. "Through time Aaron, I found you through the barriers of time, you are mine!" Their eyes locked over her declaration and they never let go of each other threw the violent throes of their mutual release! Her climatic growls of finding release in their sexual abyss joined her husbands as they road the crest into exhausted bliss.

She closed her eyes as his hands moved down the length of her back. He touched her with such care, her nails actually dug into his ribs to deny any doubt that she was lying on top of him. "No more dreams my dear Aaron."

His answer came in a tight embrace about her, keeping her where neither one of them wanted her to leave. Yet, Mackenzie felt a tear slide down her cheek.

Today they reached Charleston. Lying in the safe warmth of his hold it was hard to believe her happiness could ever fade. But reality was cruel. Aaron hadn't spoken of it and neither did she. It was as if they each wanted the other to have this time, unspoiled by any sadness.

And yet thoughts of their future rarely left her. Although he hadn't told her she sensed he planned to leave her in Charleston. Tonight she started to feel his withdrawal, knowing the pain his decision brought him.

Maybe she should have forced the issue. If she could have told him how she felt? But she dreaded what he might say. She wouldn't accept this from him and she realized what his reaction to her refusal would be. So Mackenzie remained silent.

The longer he waited the worse she feared what he would tell her. Even tonight their lovemaking had been so different. She'd given everything of herself to satisfy his thirst and still he demanded more. His desperation became her own. The force of his possession frightened and thrilled her in passionate throes. Not an inch of her body had been spared from his heated arousal, building her passion

into an exotic frenzy that he controlled. A master, he coaxed and raised her desire above all limits.

She begged him to take her, let her wrap her warmth around him and shelter his throbbing life with her own. Relentless in his objective, he drove them further, depriving them the oasis of their pleasure. A triumph to be found only in each other's arms. He gave beautiful and longing sensations until she thought she's turned into pure feeling. He ruled with gentle caresses and heated kisses, and she surrendered all to his loving control.

Then and only then did he give her all she sought and more. No longer did he command, together they found their paradise, filled with such exotic excitement and private sensations governed by love. It left her feeling special and warmly seductive, and yes, safe. A fierce wall wrapped around her like a protective cocoon that only he could enter, only he held the silken thread that entwined her world together.

Soon, to very soon, she felt he would let go of that thread and sever the life cord that was her existence. If he left her, she truly feared for her sanity. Without Aaron she wouldn't be whole.

Would he listen to her? What would she do if he shut himself off from her again? He was capable of a fierce control over his emotion and to protect her she knew he would exert it. How could she fight what he made so unreachable? It would mean evoking his anger with her own. Only an anger so powerful and terrible it frightened her to think on it could shatter his control. If she failed, how could she let him leave, knowing what she might bring between them?

"Mackenzie? Are you awake?"

"Yes love."

"Come closer my lady."

Later...she would find a way. Now she only had thoughts for loving Aaron.

\* \* \* \*

"It's beautiful, is it not Mackenzie!"

"Yes, oh yes Aaron it is everything you said and more." She shouted to him over the brisk breeze coming off the Carolina coast as they sailed nearer the lush green rose to meet them and it was breathtaking.

"Soon you will be able to see Charleston."

Blue eyes filled with laughter met his. *Oh my husband the view I see before me is more charming than a thousand ports.*

Aaron's gaze lingered on the beauty beside him. The winter wind lifted and played with her long lush, blonde strands, whipping them about her like a golden cloak. Eyes as blue as the ocean's depths glittered with life, watching him so intently. He wondered if she would ever glance at the approaching land.

Mackenzie made it difficult to concentrate on his task. Maybe he should turn the wheel over to Baker to guide her into the cove. Laughing at the excuse, she was glorious. He thought he was more in awe of his wife now than ever before. His wife! He still found it difficult to believe, but how he loved her!

What he learned these last days made it more so.

A sudden chill came off the water. Shaking it away Aaron refused to think about his decision, not now, they still had time before then. "You will like it here, the country is beautiful."

"Really? Aaron are there really plantations?"

Smiling thoughtfully down at her upturned questioning eyes, he knew now what rested behind those exquisite jewels.

"Yes, many large and prosperous ones. We ship their goods out all over the colonies."

Both ignored the sudden change in Aaron's tone.

It was so difficult for him. And unfair! He worked so hard to build the line. She knew David would handle it fine, but it wasn't the same for Aaron. She wondered if Aaron could wait three years for the war to end. Somehow the charges had to be dropped.

He was looking too hard and seeing more than she wanted him to. "Aaron are there really slaves? I mean I know there are, but what of the cruelty?"

So that was what dulled the light in her eyes. "I'm afraid that part of life here is very real. I don't condone it."

"I know Aaron, I'm sorry I brought it up."

Pulling her against him, "Try and remember Mackenzie that we are growing and learning. Time will correct our mistake, until then we must deal with what exist, the best we can."

"I will Aaron."

"Of course you will." Hugging her, he knew how difficult it must be for her. She would never accept many of the things in this time, but she would deal with them.

"Did I mention that I have a house here?"

"No! Is it in Charleston?" Mackenzie hoped the ill feeling his announcement gave her wasn't noticeable.

"No, it's on the coast, about an hours ride out of town."

"It's not a plantation?"

Laughing, Aaron met her disbelieving and condemning stare. "If it was I would hardly admit it to you. No Mackenzie, you can take that incredulous look away. In fact the house isn't much of anything."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"I purchased it because of the deep cove, not the house. Actually it's quite secluded."

"A get away cabin! How marvelous!"

"Its a little more than a cabin, Mackenzie."

Hearing the censor in his voice at first confused her. "Oh Aaron of course it is, I meant it is like a second home, a vacation home." His pride was so fierce she had to remind herself.

Not sure if they really understood each other Aaron thought it best not to dwell on it. "Mackenzie, no one except David and my crew know about the house."

Thinking Aaron used it as a get away she didn't immediately grasp what he was implying.

"Are we sailing to the cove Aaron?"

"I thought you would enjoy seeing it the first time that way."

"I will, tell me when we get close."

Damn! It was going to be harder than he realized. He dreaded what was coming. And that he would loose her laughter and joy with it. Schooling himself, he would let her have this happiness, but when the time came he wasn't going to like it.

\* \* \* \*

Aaron hadn't wasted any words, the house was certainly more than a cabin. Mackenzie fell in love with it at first sight. The two story house was set back on a rise under huge oaks, overlooking the cove. It was virtually invisible from the water and surrounded completely by dense woods. The open veranda faced the ocean. Balconies off each bedroom stood above it. A large living area with a huge fireplace dominated the house with French doors leading onto the veranda. A beautiful staircase ascended the wall to the second floor. There was a small dining room and a library off the hall to the back kitchen and another larger room. It was empty, but Mackenzie

thought it would be marvelous as a garden room or day room. The tall windows infused the room with brilliant sunlight.

Upstairs there were four bedrooms and a huge master bedroom that looked out over the sparkling blue waters.

She adored it, even the large kitchen at the back. As she stood in its expanse her gaze grew wary over the large open hearth that two men could stand in with its wall ovens. Sighing, if she had one request it would be for a modern kitchen. But then nothing would work without electricity. Laughing and clapping her hand in front of her, she wondered if it would happen in her lifetime. For the life of her she couldn't remember. "Oh Ben Franklin I wish you would speed things up."

Knowing what would come didn't help her in the slightest. She should have studied electricity and plumbing instead of business management.

Pensively she took a more realistic look about her. Her initial joy over the house dampened somewhat. It appeared that Aaron meant what he said about being here only a few times. Running her finger across the dusty table it was obvious no one had touched the place since his last visit. It made her wonder how long ago that had been. More to the point how long did he stay out at sea? "Damn!"

She made her way back to the living room, her steps halted upon seeing the large crates stacked beside her trunks. Shivering, Mackenzie rushed out onto the porch. Anxious eyes scanned the empty cove. No. He wouldn't just leave her! "Aaron!" Running out onto the sloping lawn she headed for the white sandy beach. "Aaron!"

Dropping the wood Aaron caught her just as she threw herself at him. Her arms held him with such shocking strength it stunned him. He felt the shaking in her body and buried his face into her hair. Neither knew how long they held each other.

"Mackenzie?"

Embarrassed over what she had thought, she forced herself to meet his questioning eyes. "I thought..." Pulling her back, Aaron realized what had happened.

"Baker took the ship out to escort the gunner to the drop off. He should be back by tomorrow evening."

Tomorrow. They had another day. Her mind raced, she had too little time to make him listen. Acting like this wouldn't get her anywhere. Aaron didn't need a helpless ninny on his hands.



Remembering the house there was so much to accomplish before dinner.

Moving out of his arms she didn't notice his surprise at the sudden action. Aaron's hardening gaze followed her up the hill.

Stammering with the sudden rush of nervousness, "I better see to the house...the rooms and dinner."

She reached the house and forced herself to check the crates, willing her hands to stop shaking. Why was it so difficult to control herself around him?

"Because he can read her like a book!" and she was scared senseless that she wouldn't be able to talk him to taking her with him.

Hearing his footsteps behind her, she continued to rummage through the crates taking out the bedding items. Her mind refused to panic over the food stores she discovered. The crates held far too much for one day, a week or even a month!

"Need some help?"

Not wanting him to see how flustered she was, "no, I found...everything, thank you." Picking up the linens she rose to walk past him. She heard the curtness in her reply, hoping it wasn't as bad as it sounded.

Cold anger overtook the tall forbidding form blocking her way. Ignoring him she tried to move around him, gasping as his hand snaked out and captured her arm. Stiffening at the hardness in his hold. She silently pleaded, *Not yet, please Aaron don't say it. I can't handle this. I will fall apart.*

His stern cold look made her cringe. She must escape before she turned into some spineless idiot in front of him.

Aaron's fingers tightened. "Mackenzie...?"

"No! I...I don't need your help. Please let me go to make the bed."

The suddenness of her release sent her stumbling towards the stairs.

Staring black eyes followed her unsteady rush up the stairs. Pressing his lips in a tight line, he held back from calling out to her. One word might crush the fragile control he'd just witnessed. He had never seen Mackenzie like this!

What the hell was wrong? Worried, Aaron looked about him. His eyes stopped on the open crates before going back to the top of the stairs. "You know."

Sadly, Aaron realized she was too intelligent not to have guessed. Cursing himself he remembered how frightened she just appeared thinking he left her. God, did she think him that heartless! Didn't she know that leaving her was tearing him apart?

Maybe she was afraid to stay here alone? Mary's arrival would take away any fear Mackenzie harbored in that area. When that spunky girl insisted on coming Aaron wanted to hug her. Mackenzie needed Mary here. The house was isolated which would help insure her safety. No one here knew her as Mrs. Masters. In fact no one knew the house belonged to him. His barrister handled the purchase and the former owners were no longer in the area to connect him to it. Here she could live as Miss Richardson, a recuperating invalid needing the peace and quiet of the country. He'd thought it all out, David's mother, Agnes, should be arriving within the month. Having the two of them here with Mackenzie would stand up to any curiosity of the town or distant neighbors.

Baker would make arrangements for a wagon and horse to be brought out from Charleston. There was also Andrew; he would be here for anything she might need from town, keeping her out of the public eye. Another volunteer, one that Aaron trusted with his life and now his wife's.

Aaron could well imagine her reaction to Andrew. Mackenzie only met him during their brief wedding in the harbor. Knowing how she felt about slavery filled him with concern. Andrew was imposing as it was. Well over six feet and as broad and strong as a horse, the man's gentle nature rarely got past his forbidding looks. She hadn't seem to be bothered by his looks at the time, but then she was probably too wrapped up in becoming his wife to have noticed Andrew.

Mackenzie wasn't going to like this at all. Leaving her here unprotected was impossible. She would have to understand, at least Andrew was a free Negro. Being back in this area, no one but Mackenzie and Andrew could know this. There was no one he trusted more than that gentle giant to protect her. He also knew the danger his friend placed himself in by coming south.

Convincing Mackenzie how desperate the situation could be for Andrew wouldn't be easy. She had little idea what the feelings towards a free black were, nor the threat it would pose to her if Andrew's status became known.

Going over his plans again Aaron felt comfortable with it. So why did he have this nagging feeling he missed something?

Looking again at the empty stairs he growled, refusing to give in and go to her. Storming outside he went about righting the place. "Damn woman! You're too stubborn and for all your sensibility you are going to fight me on this. Aren't you love?"

Never could he allow her to be exposed to the dangers at sea. Natural disasters were bad enough, but now. A traitor turned pirate wouldn't be ignored. He was a hunted man.

Remembering his last encounter with Travis before the ships parted, he knew there would be no chance in clearing the charges. Even catching Dubois and forcing his confession wouldn't change anything. Taking the gunner insured his fate and regretfully Mackenzie's as well. Travis left him no choice.

Aaron thought hard about the man since the day Travis insisted they meet and talk.

"You are a fool Masters. Those charges were as false as Dubois and Cohen would have eventually dropped them."

"I am sure they would have stayed enforce long enough for your purpose. Wouldn't they Travis?"

"You know damn well they would." The fierce glare in the man's eyes battled with Aaron's own hate. "But your action now has condemned her. Nothing will make Cohen drop the charges against her or you, not now."

"Mackenzie's welfare has never been your concern!" Aaron would never admit any gratitude to this man. Like two raging bulls they faced each other in the confines of the small cabin.

"My concern for your wife is my affair and my right. One you lost when you failed to protect her, not once, but twice!"

Every muscle in Aaron's body tightened with the need to strike the audacity off his face. "Your part in my wife's life is finished."

"There Masters you are wrong, you should have killed me. As long as she is in any form of danger I will not stop being involved."

"You needn't worry Travis nothing will harm Mackenzie, including you."

Aaron saw the man's obsession for Mackenzie. He could have respected, maybe liked this man under different circumstances. He was a capable and formidable opponent. But right now he regretted not killing him and hoped he didn't have cause to correct his mistake.

Before he lost control Aaron called the guards to take him back to the hold.

The man's solemn, parting words still hounded him.

"Prison won't hold me Masters, guard her well."

Staring out at the open sea Aaron wondered if Travis' vow would come to pass. Thinking of the man, Aaron could well imagine how inadequate prison could be.

Unexpectedly Aaron's deep resounding laughter came. Shaking his head he turned and stared back at the room he above the veranda. "Oh my lady, it certainly hasn't been dull since you arrived!"

Taking a guess over what was coming this evening, his humor quickly fled over what he knew they both must face.

\* \* \* \*

"The devil you say!" The bushy gray brows came together in worried concentration.

"You checked everywhere?"

"Aye sir. He is too big to hide. Nay Mr. Baker, he's gone right enough. Must have jumped over during the exercise on deck for the prisoners."

"How did he get out of the chains man?"

"Went over with them, at least we haven't found any."

Both men stared at each other in disbelief.

"Thank you, Jimmy. I want extra men put on the others until they are turned over."

Turning away from the nervous man, Baker went to the rail. Staring out over the dark water, "Damn fool!"

Since meeting up with the gunner, after dropping the captain and his lady off at the cove, nothing had gone right. Mr. Brown's crew hadn't arrived and those men hadn't come for the Brit prisoners.

Now there would be one less to hand over. But Baker's scowl had little to do with what they would think. No, there would be hell fire to pay whence they met up with the captain.

Studying the distance to the shoreline, Baker wondered if the man had it in him to swim that far. He was big and strong, but to fight the current in heavy manacles it was a foolhardy attempt.

Sadly Baker regretted any man's death, but if that Lord Chamberlain made it to shore, he knew he didn't like what it could mean. There was little to be done now. Baker shouted out his orders and signaled the other ship. Moving to their backup position was the

only thing to do now. Sitting here was too chancy. No doubt if he did survive, the man would have the authorities on them in no time.

Angry eyes watched the departure of the two ships. Smiling in reservation Nick knew why they moved. Too bad they didn't realize he couldn't turn them in.

Shrugging them off, he hadn't expected his escape to be easy. In fact a couple of times he doubted the wisdom of his rash act. Rubbing his swollen wrist where the chains no longer bit into his flesh, Nick knew he'd barely won the battle to reach the shore.

Only his anger over almost drowning kept him going. Beating the chains off once he'd reach shore, he had no time to waste on anger. She was close by, somewhere south of this shore. The return of Masters' ship said it was within a day's sail. Once he verified Masters wasn't on board he knew the man had taken his wife someplace to hide her out. Putting the escape he'd contemplated into action was his only alternative.

Masters' crew were too loyal and well trained to gain any information. Loyal? Damn it, he'd seen that right off. Even labeled a traitor the man retained their respect. And they followed their captain right into piracy. Gaining shore was Nick's only chance to find out where Masters was hiding her.

Masters wouldn't subject her to the dangers of living on a pirate ship. From what Nick could see during the wait for the ship's return, they were very close to Charleston. Making his way to the road he decided would take him into Charleston, Nick started putting his thoughts together.

Masters would know Nick couldn't give away their location. Putting her pretty neck into a rope, other then pearls, was the last thing Nick wanted.

How long would it take him to find her? Not for a moment did Nick think she would gracefully accept Masters decision to leave her behind. Her anger and impatience might help him. Smiling, Nick didn't think he would have to wait too long before she showed herself in Charleston, if he didn't find her first.

"I can hardly wait Mackenzie, and this time I won't delay taking what I should have already claimed."

## CHAPTER 18

### *Recipes Of Love*

Mackenzie cursed between her clenched teeth before dropping the cast iron lid loudly over the top of the pot. Bending over, she gingerly pulled open the oven door. The ham looked fine, turning a golden honey color. “At least you are cooperating.”

Looking about her she felt little confidence over her latest effort to prepare a pleasing and edible meal. She stared back at the fire and groaned, wondering if she would ever conquer the hearth’s intricacies.

Mackenzie never thought she would say it, but she missed Emily. Right now she would even take her scolding tongue over the disaster she saw about her in the kitchen.

“If he had any idea how dangerous I am in here, he’d never allow me to stay!” The sudden image of burning the place down over dinner nearly sent her into hysterical laughter.

At least the bedroom looked nice. She hadn’t bothered with any of the other rooms except for the dining room and kitchen, and then only to get through the evening. She prayed there would be no need to tackle the massive cleaning job this place needed. Her thoughts went back to Salem and what Aaron wanted in a wife, her chin rose in stubborn defiance. Muttering under her breath, “Meek, mild little housewife. Like hell I am!”

Spinning about she found Aaron standing in the doorway watching her. By the humorous warmth he held her in, she guessed he’d heard. She chose to ignore him and went about finishing the preparations.

Hiding his humor over her scathing remarks wasn’t possible. After all the slamming she’d been doing this last hour he wasn’t

prepared for the mess she created in the kitchen and on herself. The riotous blonde spirals had long since broken free of the meticulous bun at the top of her glorious head. Flour graced the ivory creaminess of her cheeks, now rose tipped in anger. Seeing the battle she waged with the batter Aaron wondered where the gentleness in that feminine body went. She looked positively brutal, yet so very desirable. He wanted nothing more than to ravish her right here in the midst of the chaos.

*He would ruin all her hard work. She would be wonderfully livid at him. Passion would reign...*

Mackenzie watched him out of the corner of her eye. The slow rebirth of seductive embers in his gaze made her breath catch. *Not yet my darling captain, you will not rule me that way. No sir!*

Picking up the wooden spoon she slapped it on the table to stop her body's traitorous responses.

"Mackenzie! My God, what was that for?"

"A bug, a damn unwelcomed bug!"

"Really?"

"Yes! Don't you have anything to do? Is the fire ready? Did you bring in the wood?"

He started walking towards her. She backed away, moving around the table. Ah! His eyes were so beautifully dark and inviting, she felt her resistance slipping away. The confident smile he gave her inflamed her senses. "Aaron..."

"Yes love?" He kept moving, slowly stalking her like he would a frightened doe. His smile deepened, knowing there would be no escape.

"The dinner...it's cooking." Sucking in her breath she couldn't seem to think, his eyes were so bold, so devastatingly seductive.

"Umm, cooking..." The rapid rise of her breast against the dress' bodice captured his gaze.

"It will burn."

"I think it is love...burning."

Her legs pressed against the counter ending her retreat. He was so close, she moved to evade him, but his arms pinned her between them, pressing his body ever so slowly into her own.

The spoon she held stood clasped in her hand between them like a white surrender flag. He didn't move, didn't do anything, leaving her to whirl in flustered confusion. "I..."

“Yes love?”

“...dinner...”

His lips touch her forehead. “Yes what about the dinner, love?”

Oh, God what he could do to her, his mere closeness undid her every thought. Gentle feathery kisses moved in agonizing slowness over her flushed face. “Flour...”

“What?” Moaning she felt herself lean closer.

“You taste like flour.” His warm tongue licked across her cheek. “And sugar. So sweet, so very tasty.”

She couldn’t stand it any longer her lips moved to find his, needing more than the agony of his teasing caresses, but he moved away.

“Your dinner love?”

“Dinner? Oh, it’s cooking.” Unable to bear it another minute her hands reached up capturing his face, guiding him determinedly to her waiting lips. They both ignored the spoon clattering to the floor.

Somewhere between heaven and earth she floated in a fiery bliss of passion. His hungry lips devoured her willing surrender. Strong capable hands pulled her to him, melting, she arched in abandon against his throbbing cock. Power dominated her actions. She wanted to leave him unable to forget her, never able to leave her, desperation carried her actions.

Seductive moves, teasing over and around, again and again, until she heard his deep male groan of longing. His lust triggered her own and she felt her feminine fluids flow. She seemed to swell with the sexual energy only Aaron could bring to life inside her. Only with Aaron did she openly give of the passion he created and demanded from her.

The warnings sounded. *He will leave you.* But the thunderous storm of sensations flooded out everything but him. She never felt her dress fall away. When his thumb rolled in torturous slowness over her naked breast her head fell back, giving him the freedom to take her. Pure ecstasy shimmered over her when his mouth closed possessively over the hard, swollen nub of her nipple. Sucking deeply he took his fill, first of one then shared pleasure with the other, in blessed tender loving.

Her fingers dug into the thick richness of his hair, holding him, never wanting to release this man she loved. His lips were just as



greedy. Passion rose, rapid and wild with the force and depth of his tender assault.

“Love me Aaron. Don’t ever stop loving me!”

The hot trail of his tongue moved up her neck taking of her pulsing life. “I will never stop Mackenzie, never, not even through the abyss of time could I stop loving you.”

He raised her up, bracing her against the counter. Her legs captured him, arching to receive him she rose before him like an ivory angel. Bracing her hands on his shoulder she met his lunge, plunging down to take him inside. Capturing him she held his bold shaft within the strong walls of her spice. He watched as she smiled, savoring the bonding of man to woman as her moist softness turned into an undulating blanket surrounding his cock.

Slowly he guided her hips, setting the tempo, her need to hold him to her...forever allowed him to dictate. The force of her control over his passion pulsed beneath her fingers as muscles on his arms turned to stone. She grew selfish wanting their journey to last a lifetime. Silent tears fell down her hot cheeks.

“Ah Mackenzie I want you so badly that I fear the strength of it.”

“Now Aaron, take me now, take me with you Aaron!” She pleaded with him.

The force of his possession became fierce, driving into her with a commanding urgency he never dared to use before. She drove him beyond his endurance and she gloried in the power, and the love. Meeting him within the depth of her longing she equaled his fire. Her teeth teased the sensitive lobe of his ear before she captured his lips. Their tongues battled until Mac drove into his mouth imitating the lunge of his cock into her heated vagina. Mac’s tongue went deep telling Aaron what she wanted him to do and he responded with such vigor that her head fell against his shoulder as she gasped for breath. Yet to feel the full length of his penis filling her and the size...how she loved to feel how big he could get! “Oh Aaron, don’t stop...don’t ever stop loving me like this!”

Like an explosion they came together, her body arched and went stiff in his hold, all tenderness lost in the violent storm that obsessed them. Driving them beyond all boundaries they climbed, as one they reached the freedom of euphoric climax. She cried out as his seed filled her until she felt sated and full of him, though she kept his cock

in a vise and her hold jerked and closed about him with each shooting pulse from his cock!

Feeling and touching the force, their love sealed in a union neither could ever deny and gloried in the defeat of sensual bliss.

Clinging to him he held her quivering body, refusing to relinquish her back to earthly bonds. Heaven was keeping her forever and denying reality. His hands moved slowly, carefully over her beauty, easing the tremors of passion abating in her small frame. The strength she possessed was greater than he ever imagined. That she could give so totally and freely of her passionate abandonment swelled his male pride for the woman in his life. He never believed he could feel such depth of love as he did for her and knew it was only for her. Only Mackenzie showed him and let him touch the beauty of loving.

Shifting her in his arms Aaron cradled her against his chest. His desire stirred again. Would he ever get enough? Deciding it would be wonderful to try and find out, Aaron headed for the stairs.

Feeling the air cooling her skin the movement brought her alert with a start. "Aaron, I must finish cooking dinner."

"Oh, my love, I am starving, simple famished."

Her laughter filled the room, while his dark sultry eyes warmed her to a brilliant flush.

\* \* \* \*

Waking lazily beside Aaron, she instantly remembered her now ruined dinner. Seeing the sound sleep he'd fallen into, Mackenzie decided to hold her teasing tirade over the ruined dinner until he could fully appreciate her ribbing. She gave a soft smile over Aaron's ardent loving after coming to the bedroom. Amazingly every time they made love it was a new and wondrous trip of discovery. He was so gentle in his loving, almost reserved this last time. She glowed over the sensual memory.

The shafts of moonlight came through the windows, allowing her bare feet to easily find their way in the darkened room. Trying not to wake him she groped around until finally latching onto something with which to cover herself. Slipping it on, she inhaled the scent from his shirt as it floated over her nakedness. It made her feel close to him, even if she would have preferred something longer against the chill that penetrated the house.

Making her way downstairs it pleased Mackenzie to see coals still glowing in the fireplace. Realizing she was hugging herself to ward

off the cold, she hurriedly threw some kindling on the coals. Once it caught she placed a good size log over the flames, tending it until satisfied it caught hold.

Moving to the kitchen she lit a candle casting the room into a soft glow. Taking a deep breath she forced herself to face the charred remains of her dinner. Surprisingly the ham was fine and still warm. Taking it out she placed it on the marble cooling slab. She would be able to use it for breakfast. Reviving the stove's fire she soon had a pot of tea ready. She wished now she'd taken the time to search for the coffee beans. Taking it into the living room Mackenzie settled down in front of the warm fire.

Gazing at the flames and sipping the hot liquid she didn't try and fight the thoughts. Aaron planned on leaving her here. Thoughts of fighting his decision no longer seemed important. When or why the revelation came to her she couldn't say, but for Aaron's sake she would stay here. Yes, his welfare not hers! Instinctively she knew if she insisted he would relent and take her. Oh he would be furious at first, but he wouldn't leave her. The problem was she couldn't go, as much as she never wanted to be separated from him again, to go would endanger the one person she loved. She should have realized it sooner, right now she was just thankful she had not made a very grave error. Accompanying Aaron could cost him his life!

Worry and concern for her would steal his concentration, possibly in the heat of battle or another sword fight like the one with Nick. Only the next time it would be to the death. No one would stop from plunging his sword into Aaron. Because of her he was a traitor and now a pirate. Oh she knew perfectly well he wasn't a real pirate, but the label would be there. Aaron intended to play havoc across the Atlantic against the British. He told her very little, but she caught enough conversations between the crew to figure out exactly what was happening.

Having her on board would cloud his judgment and she was honest enough to admit the truth. Aaron would need every bit of his mental and physical strength to stay alive. The least she could do was help him, not fight him.

Brushing at the tears she seemed incapable of controlling Mackenzie firmed her decision. After he left she would need the seclusion of this place to hide the tirade of self-pity she would inevitable fall into.

The beauty of the woman basked in the firelight held him in a trance. No, he would never tire of seeing her or wanting her. The need to touch and hold her, love her beyond thought would always entrap him.

Now, he wanted only to see the vision she made, looking like a lost child. The sadness reflecting in those deep violet eyes squeezed at his heart. Soft creamy skin, ah heaven to touch, passion's fires were still warm. Her lips were like fresh lady slippers on the damp forest floor. Parted like that they could make him lose his control. His hands clenched over the way they quivered against the tears she fought. Leaving her like this was the cruelest of fates. But to take her could be her death and nothing would let Aaron chance that, not even the pain he would cause her.

He must tell her. It remained an unspoken fear between them far too long. Aaron never played a coward, but seeing her like this crippled him. His lips came up in a sad smile. If she knew the power she held over him no doubt she would wield it like a mighty sword. The slightest blow would send him flaying at her feet. Oh yes, even his pride couldn't withstand the beating that hurting her would inflict.

His presence was like a warm winter cloak, covering her in its protective bounty. His silence held her own, using the time Mackenzie hoped she could stand firm against the weakness inside. Scolding herself one last time over what she could cause to happen, she firmly locked away desire for her love.

Sensing her awareness he didn't announce himself, but sat down beside her and gently moved her into the cradle of his arms. Tucking her back against him he wrapped her tight within his powerful thighs.

"I love you Mackenzie."

Smiling, she rested her head back against his broad chest. When his chin settled on her head, sighing. "And I you Aaron." Schooling her thoughts, she waited for what was coming.

"When I leave you, I think my heart will stay right here, warm and close to yours."

"And I will guard it with my love, until you return home to me, Aaron."

If her lack of resistance shocked him Aaron didn't so much as flinch. Only a slight relaxing in his chest gave her any indication he understood.

"I will be leaving Andrew to watch over you. I trust Andrew with my life and have on several occasions."

"Then I am sure I too will trust Andrew."

Nuzzling her hair, "Andrew is different."

Mackenzie tried not to break what they shared. Her thoughts went back to her first glimpse of Andrew, but she wasn't sure what Aaron meant other than his awesome size. "How is he different?"

Smiling into her hair, Aaron knew her curiosity would win. "Andrew is a giant."

"Really Aaron, I wouldn't call him a giant."

"A gentle giant, at least until the occasion deems otherwise."

"Alright Aaron a gentle giant. Anything else I should know about this marvel?"

"Yes. There is one small detail. Andrew is a slave, that is..."

Spinning around in his arms she couldn't believe what he just said. "Aaron, a slave! But...how could you?"

Pulling her back and locking his large legs around her squirming body, Aaron held fast. "Would you listen before attacking me. Andrew is a free man."

"Free?"

"Yes, he has his papers. In fact I secured them for him after getting the bastard to sell him to me. Of course if he knew I planned on freeing Andrew he never would have sold him."

Realizing how foolish she acted, Mackenzie felt miserable. "I'm sorry, really I should have listened, its just I hate this whole thing."

Aaron knew his next words weren't going to go over well. Instinctively his legs tightened about her.

"Well there is a problem. Andrew offered to come and help by guarding you and helping out here so you wouldn't be alone."

"I will be sure and thank him."

"I know love, but you see down here, well Andrew is putting himself in a very dangerous situation."

"How? Because of me and that spy charge?"

"Well, that is a problem, but for Andrew there is considerably more danger."

The room suddenly grew chilly.

Feeling her shiver he took the opportunity to think of how to tell her she was going to be doing the one thing she was dead set against. Rising, he went over and placed another log on the fire.

"Aaron why don't you just spit it out. I can't stand the suspense."

Chuckling he wondered why he was so worried, she could certainly handle this. "Andrew may be a free man Mackenzie, but here in the southern colonies there are very few if any that would recognize his status." Ignoring her obvious shock, "If they knew they could very well take steps to insure he wasn't."

"You mean they would make him a slave again."

"Yes, I'm afraid it could happen."

"Then don't let him come down here, you must stop him." She came to her feet, pacing heatedly before him. Seeing her in his shirt, another time and place came upon him. Glorious as ever and more delectable than he dared recall in that getup, through the open vee at the neck her breast moved freely like two beautiful ripe peaches, succulent and full, just asking to be taken and devoured. He nearly moaned because of the desire coming over him.

"Aaron did you hear me, you have to stop him."

*Stop Andrew? Oh no my lovely, not even I could stop that man.* "I am afraid Andrew won't listen, he is determined to be here in my absence. Andrew is the one that decided on the solution."

"What solution could stop something that terrible from happening?"

"Only one thing, Mackenzie."

"Tell me."

"I am afraid he needs your help to insure his freedom remains just that."

"You know I will do all I can to help."

Smiling at her declaration, "I told him you would."

"Fine, so what is this solution?"

"You have to be Andrew's mistress while you both are here."

"Mistress..." Mackenzie visibly paled before Aaron, causing him to rush to her side and gather her to him. He expected anger, ranting, but this!

"Mackenzie, my God, its not that bad!"

Aaron's words drew such venom in her eyes for him he nearly groaned.

Pushing away from him she steadied herself. "Not bad? How could you Aaron? I thought you loved me?"

"I do." Anger flared through him over what she implied. Never had he expected her to react in such an outlandish manner.

“You love me and yet you want me to be another man’s mistress? My God Aaron, I can’t do that, why it’s immoral!”

Staring at him in disbelief, betrayal and utter confusion, Mackenzie didn’t know whether to cry or scratch his eyes out. The emotions she saw cross his face didn’t help. The sudden eruption of laughter escaping from Aaron stunned her. The harder he laughed the madder she became. When he bent over in unrestrained giggles Mackenzie wanted to thrash him and her fury let her do just that.

Her fist beat in rapid fire on his crouched back driving him to the floor in a stronger fit of laughter. “Oh love, please stop it.” Aaron choked the words out through his uncontrollable roar. “I’m sorry, you’ve misunderstood.”

“I misunderstood! I misunderstood! Why you insufferable pig! Stop laughing damn you!”

Aaron finally regained his control and moved so swiftly that she never felt a thing until he was above her, pinning her arms to the floor and straddling her hips. Furious he would use his superior strength against her and ignoring her own display of physical anger, she growled up at his smiling face, wishing she could reach it.

Exerting more force than he wanted, Aaron held her still until only her breast heaved from her anger. “Ah my little tiger, you will listen.”

“Like hell I will.”

“Mackenzie! I said listen!”

Never had he yelled at her and the shock froze her words in her throat.

“As I tried to tell you, you misunderstood.” Her eyes glittered with the rage he felt rippling through her. “Mistress is the word used for the owner, master of a slave. A lady is addressed by her slaves as Mistress, the man as Master or massa.”

The easing of her effort against his hold told him she finally understood. “Mackenzie, Andrew wants you to pretend, act like you are his owner, his mistress.”

Closing her eyes in shame, she couldn’t bare to look at him. Feeling like an utter imbecile, the threatening tears started to escape. How could she have thought...? And she hit him. Struck him repeatedly and if he knew her ugly thoughts? She would deserve his anger and more. She wouldn’t blame him if he left and never came

back. The thought distressed her so much she couldn't control the sobbing that took over.

When Aaron pulled her gently in his arms, stroking and soothing her with his tender touch. She moaned. Why didn't he yell at her, anything, she didn't deserve his love.

"Mackenzie don't, please, I should have explained. You didn't know. How could you know? I simple forgot, I'm sorry."

"Oh Aaron!" Her sobs became stronger, confusing him even more.

"Please stop my love."

Hearing his distress she gulped back the wrenching sobs, giving way to small hiccups. "I am sorry Aaron. So very sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you? Oh Mackenzie I love you, I'm not angry."

"You're not? But..."

"But what love?"

"I...I struck you. Did I hurt you? I don't know what came over me."

Aaron had a very good idea of exactly what came over her. Just seeing her distress told him how deeply she loved him. Tucking his finger under her chin, "I pray I never give you cause to ever doubt me again. I don't think I could stand another such attack."

Seeing his eyes laughing at her, Mackenzie threw her arms about him showering his face with kisses. Sitting back she snuggled up against him. "I am to be a slave owner. You know Aaron you really are a devil."

"How's that?"

"Well, I am too tired to argue over what I should be livid about. If it means protecting Andrew I will do my best."

"It really is necessary, I'm sorry. Hopefully you won't have call to act the part."

Sitting up she suddenly realized. "Aaron I don't have any idea how I should act. I mean they will know. What if I mess up?"

"Andrew will help you, don't worry. Besides you are an invalid, so you will have a good excuse."

"Invalid? Oh Aaron couldn't you have thought of something else?"

"No, it will explain why you prefer the country to Charleston. Especially as Miss Richardson."



“So I am single again.”

“Only for them.” The slight warning in his tone made her warm all over.

“I will be good, I promise. Besides I am sick remember.”

“Good, stay that way.”

They had three glorious days after that evening. Every day Mackenzie said a short prayer that Baker wouldn’t come.

When the ship entered the cove the enthusiasm she expected from Aaron never came. Together they stood on the porch, his arm possessively about her waist, tightening as the long boat rowed to shore.

Not wanting him to see her tears, she found an excuse to hide in the kitchen and make coffee for the men. It was going to be harder to let him go than she realized.

Mackenzie was so caught up in thought she didn’t hear the soft rustle entering the kitchen.

Mary always alert to the lady before her immediately decided her mistress was barely in control. It would be a long day when he left. The girl’s heart went out to the lady, her own barely healed since leaving Salem and...David.

“Madam, may I help you?”

Dropping the cup Mackenzie spun around. Seeing the last person she expected and dearly needed. “Oh Mary!”

Running to the girl, Mackenzie hugged and made over her like a lost sister. Mary kept her enthusiasm up deciding propriety was useless. Together they prepared a small feast for the men.

Aaron watched their reunion with interest. Relief filled him knowing how much store Mackenzie set by Mary and the company the girl would be for her.

When the last of the supplies and trunks were unloaded and taken up to the house, all was ready for sailing. Aaron searched for Mackenzie, who seemed to have vanished. Fighting his anger he refused to leave until he located her and knew she was all right.

“She is upstairs in the room, sire.”

“Thank you Mary.” Turning, Aaron stopped and faced the girl. “I am glad you came, she needs you Mary.”

“I will be here for her, you just be sure and get back.”

Nodding at her meaning Aaron took the stairs two at a time. Stopping at the door his eyes filled with her image.

Standing before the French doors with her back to him, that golden mass of wild sun kissed hair nearly covered her. The gentle waves clung enticingly to every lovely exciting curve, making Aaron silently moan over the loss he already felt.

"I am sorry Aaron, when it comes down to it I am a coward. I couldn't watch you go. I didn't want you to see me like this." That she was crying, he heard, that she loved him filled his heart.

"I won't go without holding you. I can't."

Unable to stop herself she turned and ran into his arms, clinging to him with all the pain and hurt she couldn't hide. "Aaron I love you so. Please, oh please be careful."

"I will. I will send messages through my barrister in Charleston, Mr. Johnson. He's a good man, trust him."

Nodding her head, she couldn't seem to make her voice work.

The call from the beach sent shivers through her. Aaron's lips claimed hers in such longing she couldn't stop the fresh tears from flowing. Reaching up she touched his face, her eyes focused, memorizing his handsome features.

"Take care Mackenzie, you know I love you."

"Yes Aaron, I'll be waiting."

When he turned, she forced herself not to reach or cry out for him, but instead ran to the window. Her eyes followed every step, every cherished movement of the man she loved.

Aaron turned at the base of the hill, raising his hand as she pressed hers against the windowpane. Never in his life did he dread a sailing and he vowed he would never leave her again.

Mackenzie stood silently at the window, her tears dried long past the time she last saw the fading sails. They looked so tiny and frail, she had to remind herself just how large the *Wanderer* was. "Keep him safe."

\* \* \* \*

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this before we sailed?"

"Never had the chance." That wasn't exactly the truth of it. Not one to lie Baker silently prayed he wouldn't regret it. Seeing the man's distress over leaving the lady did a strange thing to him. Expecting this kind of reaction Baker decided the news of Chamberlain's escape would fare better at sea.

"You want we should turn back Captain?"

Yes damn it, he wanted to go back. Wanted her here with him regardless of what it meant. "No mister Baker, take her north to the trades, we've ships to find."

Smiling after he turned away from the captain, Baker knew he'd done right. Yes, his captain would be all right.

The idiot! Why did Chamberlain pull such a fool stunt? He probably drowned. "Like hell he did!" Maybe he should go back, the bastard wouldn't stop till he found her. But damn it, out here would be worse and Aaron couldn't make himself believe otherwise. No matter how hard he tried.

"A ship coming our way Captain."

"What colors?"

"British sir. A gunner, riding high she is."

"Bring us about Mister Baker!"

"Aye Captain!"

No, he could never let her live like this. He'd have to hope Andrew's strength and Mackenzie's own intelligence would keep her safe.

"Man the guns, we fight for our freedom men!"

"Aye!" The roar echoed across the deck and Aaron gave his thoughts to the battle at hand. "Take care my love."

## CHAPTER 19

### *Discovery*

*A scream?* Yes there it was again. Pushing off the bed Mackenzie listened harder, wondering if maybe the exhausted sleep that finally claimed her was playing tricks with her groggy mind.

“That’s Mary!” Mackenzie didn’t even stop to get her robe before racing down the stairs. All kinds of terrible thoughts came to her over what could be the cause of Mary’s distress. Flinging the kitchen door open, Mackenzie stopped dead in her tracks at the sight she just burst in to find. There, standing on the table was little Mary with a large cooking skillet held high in her hands. Before her, just out of reach, stood... “Andrew!”

Both turned at her exclamation. *Aaron’s gentle giant.*

Realizing they were both staring at her, she had to do something. “Mary get down from there!”

“But Mistress?”

“Mistress? Mary I will not tell you again, call me Mackenzie and Mary, I mean it!”

“Yes, Mackenzie, but lordy! Who is he?”

Walking up to him Mackenzie forced a smile hoping her nervousness wouldn’t show. Extending her hand she looked up at him.

“Hello, Andrew. It’s been too long since seeing you last.”

Both stood there looking at each other until Andrew’s larger than large hand swallowed hers up in a surprisingly gently hold. “Mrs. Masters, it’s a pleasure.”

“I am pleased you are here Andrew. Andrew this is my friend Mary, Mary, Andrew, Aaron’s dear and trusted friend and I hope ours.”

Andrew smile finally made her relax. Nudging Mary, the girl shoved her hand out and Mackenzie nearly giggled over the shaking in her hand.

"Sorry Mr. Andrew, I didn't know who you were."

"You defended yourself very well, Miss Mary."

Curtsying Mary was blushing under the man's praise. Coming from him Mackenzie could see why. The man was extraordinary. Not only in height but in pure existence. There was an air about him, she decided it was almost regal in statue, and unless one took the time or had the time, they only saw the fierce overwhelming strength. But thanks to Aaron's warning Mackenzie could see the warmth emanating from those brown eyes so much darker than the creamy copper of his tightly muscled body.

Remembering Aaron called him a gentle giant Mackenzie knew how much it relieved her. This man could strike fear or at least a wary respect in any man.

Not sure what she expected Mackenzie knew she felt better having him here. Andrew may be formidable but he was an educated giant, if his speech indicated anything.

"Andrew won't you join us for breakfast?"

"Yes, but we must set some ground rules today."

"I see Aaron told you what to expect. I must say I am not very fond of my part in this and I will need your help more than you know."

Nodding, Andrew took the seat Mary offered, but before Mackenzie started to sit down Mary's sharp and agitated voice came from beside her.

"Mackenzie, I think you better go upstairs first."

Mary's pointed glare at her nightgown drew Mackenzie's instant realization. "Oh my!"

Running from the room, neither lady saw Andrew's hidden mirth over the blush on his friend's wife. *Aaron you certainly married one very special lady.* Andrew sat back more than pleased with his decision.

Breakfast was very enlightening. Mackenzie did not hide her agitation over Andrew's insistence of exactly how she should behave in front of strangers. Mackenzie maintained serious doubts over her expected performance. "Andrew what you are asking me to do, well I'd feel terrible talking to you like that."

"I don't believe you'll mind if you remember it means my life."

Embarrassed she forgot something that important. "Put like that you can be sure I will give an awarding performance."

“What Andrew says go for me too.”

“In what way Mary?”

“You may not like all the propriety, but ‘tis necessary. I will address you as Miss Mackenzie in the presence of others.”

Seeing Andrew’s smile of approval for Mary, she knew she was outnumbered.

“I am afraid Mrs. Masters, that you must also use another name. Before I left Boston Mackenzie Masters’ name and present occupation was the current topic of the colonies.”

“You mean traitor?”

Nodding to her, Mackenzie’s eyes blazed in indignation over what had happened. “That damn Dubois. I hope he gets blown right out of the water!”

Their days fell into a hectic routine. The house needed a complete cleaning and Mackenzie was determined to give it one. Her nights may be tormented with visions of Aaron, but she was going to fill her days with work. Aaron never left her thoughts, but at least the physical labor left her so utterly exhausted she would collapse at night.

Mary soon gave up her tirades at her for pushing so hard, but her sharp eyes didn’t miss much. The dark circles under Mackenzie’s eyes were evidence of her teary nights and nothing she did seemed to stop it. Each day she hoped it would get easier, yet she felt more longing for him as the time past.

“There isn’t a spec of dust left inside or out. Now maybe you can rest a bit?”

“I want to turn the empty room into a green house, a garden room.”

“What ever for?”

Ignoring Mary’s outburst Mackenzie decided she would do it. “I’m going outside and see what kind of plants I want to pot. Then I will be able to tell Andrew what I need built for shelves and a worktable, he can pick up the supplies during the next trip to Charleston.” Andrew’s errand trips were a sore subject, one the giant and she locked heads on. Fighting him was useless and rather she would admit it or not his arguments against her being seen were probably valid. If she hadn’t realized the danger Andrew’s explicit words left a very clear picture. Even thinking on it made her throat tighten in fear.

Mary's angry voice quickly dispersed the ugly thoughts. "You are impossible! I am making some tea and coffee to serve on the porch, be there in half an hour and no arguments."

"Yes madam!" Throwing it back at the girl sent her face livid in anger and Mackenzie left out the back door before Mary could catch her.

In three weeks Mary watched Mackenzie's health deteriorate. Trying to block the loneliness by working sorely taxed her mistress' strength. Mary didn't like the new frailness and light pallor. If that man could see her now he would have all their heads. If she didn't start resting and gaining back her vibrancy Mary would have to elicit Andrew's help. She hadn't won an argument with him yet. Swallowing hard Mary knew she lacked the courage to stand up to Andrew, no matter how gentle he appeared. She pushed the back door open and yelled. "You'd best be on that porch!"

Spring was beautiful here everything was starting to come up and was infusing the grounds with lush shades of green. Halting her steps Mackenzie just realized she missed all the holidays. Frowning, she hoped it never happened again. Brushing off the thoughts, she set about her task.

Joining Mary on the porch, Mackenzie was relieved to find her in better spirits. Mackenzie was just about to tell Mary about the perfect spot she found for a vegetable garden when both girls froze at the sound of approaching hoof beats.

"Oh Mary where's Andrew?"

"Here I is Mistress."

Turning at the strange words and manner coming from Andrew, she never got a chance to think on them as the rider appeared beside the veranda. Mackenzie watched in stunned confusion as Andrew ran, head down, and took hold of the horse's head and waited hand outstretched for the man to pass him the reins.

If Mary hadn't nudged her out of her stupor she would still be standing there dumbstruck.

Walking to the rail Mackenzie prayed she remembered everything. "Andrew, take the gentleman's horse and make sure to feed and water him good, you hear?"

"Yes Missy Susan, right away, Missy." Mackenzie sucked in her breath over hearing him use Susan for her name. It seemed to make all this real in a scary way.

She nearly lost her composure at the wink Andrew through her behind the man's back.

"This is a pleasure sir, won't you join me in taking tea?"

Mackenzie didn't notice the stunned look on the man's face. "Yes, I would be pleased. Jeffery Delacross at your service."

Holding out her hand she nearly giggled when he raised it formally to his lips. "Miss Susan Richardson, please sit down Mr. Delacross. Tea?"

"Yes please."

"Mary." At least she remembered not to look at the girl or serve them herself. This was harder than she imagined.

His blue eyes seemed to be trying to take her in all at once, giving her the time to actually see the man now that her initial nervousness was under control. Mr. Delacross appeared to be every bit a southern gentleman, just like she always pictured one to be. Very elegantly dressed in a light blue suit and brocade vest, ruffled shirt and dark blue silk cavort. Yes very well dressed. That sandy blonde hair and those sharp blue eyes went well with his tanned good looks. She thought he looked like a plantation owner. Remembering the large steed he rode in on she could picture him riding through his fields. Unconsciously her eyes went to the coiled whip he set over the rail.

Mackenzie took a steadying breath over the images that vile thing brought with it. She realized he was still staring at her and decided it was time to break his concentration. Playing the frail lady of the house she nervously ran her hand around the lace of her bodice. "Is there anything wrong, Mr. Delacross?"

Bringing his eyes back to hers he smiled too deeply, filling her with dread. Cunning? Regretfully, he reeked of it. Fooling him wasn't going to be easy.

"Why no Miss Susan, nothing is wrong. In fact, I'd say *all* is perfect."

She tried not to let him know how effective his words were. "We rarely have visitors Mr. Delacross. What brought you out this far?"

"Actually, I am surprised to find anyone in residence here. The place has been vacant for quite some time."

"Yes, I am afraid my cousin hasn't had much time to enjoy his lovely home. But I am actually pleased he hasn't or I would never have been able to take advantage of his kind offer to recuperate here."



Aaron didn't know how close his little story was to the truth. She felt those blue eyes take in the dark circles she couldn't hide beneath her own. She wondered if her loss of weight was also evident. At least the man couldn't doubt her words.

"Your cousin, Miss Susan, is he about?"

"No, I am afraid he was called away on business. Quite urgent and sudden, but he will be returning shortly. Did you need to reach him Mr. Delacross?"

He ignored her diversion. "May I inquire as to who else stays here with you?"

Andrew's heavy strides across the porch drew a thankful smile from Mackenzie. The man's curiosity was all too forward for her liking. "You may inquire Mr. Delacross, but I may also decline to answer."

Seeing his shock at her answer, Mackenzie gave him a sweet smile that eased the tenseness about his lips. "On the other hand, you do appear to be a gentleman. By the way if I may inquire, are you riding from Charleston or a plantation close by?"

"My plantation, White Cross, adjoins your property Miss Susan."

His smile accompanied by that knowing look told her he knew she had avoided his own question.

"Oh, at which border?"

"The southern and western."

"Why, however did you forget the Northern?"

"I didn't, my brother owns it." Delacross' eyes drifted over to Andrew. The way he looked at him made Mackenzie's fingers dig into the folds of her white eyelet dress. Her voice raced in nervousness and succeeded in diverting his attention away from Andrew. All the horrible warnings of the dangers for being here forced her composure, "Surrounded by the family, I feel much safer now that we have met." So why didn't she feel that safe? Her uneasiness grew the longer he stayed. If only he would stop looking over at Andrew. His next question sent her heart ringing in her ears.

"The black? He the only one you have on the place?"

"Why yes." Say something Mackenzie he's watching you too close. "Andrew can handle anything that might come up, my cousin felt confident in leaving him here."

"Where did your cousin get him from, he reminds me of a nigga my bother had once."

Forcing herself not to seek Andrew's help she kept her eyes leveled on Delacross, hating what she was about to say. "You can actually remember one from the other?" It was a horrible, awful thing to say, but the man seemed to relax and she would say whatever was necessary to protect her friend.

"Your black is an exceptional breed. Did you say your cousin obtained him from around here?"

"I wouldn't have asked my cousin a question like that, but I do remember him saying something about getting him from a ship owner or something."

The man's fingers finally stopped running over the whip as if he accepted her remark.

"I would be pleased to bring my carriage around. White Cross is beautiful this time of year, my family would be very pleased to meet their new neighbor."

"Well I don't know, I am not really...strong enough."

"Nonsense, the ride and company will do wonders for you. I will be here tomorrow morning, be ready. Bring a change, naturally you will have to stay over at White Cross. Your servants can manage in your absence?"

Did all men move so fast? If Aaron were here she would give him a piece of her mind for leaving her in this position. She needed him so much. Delacross was dangerous, she could sense it. If she refused, what might he think, would he start checking on her? God if he discovered Aaron owned this place, Andrew told her news of the Colonies' beautiful spy had already surfaced in Charleston. Mackenzie felt trapped, go or refuse either course could spell disaster.

"I do appreciated your offer, but I must decline for now. You see I have just started to venture outside. We have only been here a short while, but already I am feeling better. If you could see your way, might you extend the invitation in the future?"

"Have no fear, the invitation and your presence in my home, is something I look forward to. May I ask what has afflicted you?"

Images of Aaron came flooding over her and she had no idea the picture she made at that moment to Jeffery Delacross. Missing Aaron hurt so much she suddenly paled and grew strangely weak from the affect.

Mary seeing her mistress' state immediately stepped in. "Miss Susan, you must come in and rest."

What was wrong with her? Was she too good an actor? Yes, he flustered her. Weakly Mackenzie answered her friend's concerned voice.

"Yes, I think you are right Mary. I am sorry Mr. Delacross, but I seem to have over extended myself. I did so enjoy your company, I almost forgot myself."

When Mary moved to help Mackenzie the man's arm came immediately up and under hers. "I will escort your lady."

Mary had no choice, but to back off. Mackenzie saw Andrew tense, hoping he wouldn't do anything foolish. "Andrew fetch Mr. Delacross' horse."

"Yes madam."

The man's eyes followed Andrew's exit and Mackenzie didn't like the stilling cold they held. She swayed slightly to draw his attention. The way she felt she wondered if it wasn't an act.

His hold tightened almost forcefully on her arm and then his hand came possessively about her waist making her wish she hadn't shown this man any weakness. "Really Mr. Delacross, I will be fine."

"Get the door girl!"

Stiffening over the harsh order he directed at Mary, Mackenzie let him help her, deciding it was the only way to get rid of him.

Again she felt his eyes take in everything to the smallest detail about the house. Knowing how clean it was, she was relieved they worked so hard to get it this way.

"If you would assist me to the settee I will be fine."

"No, I think it best if you lie down."

Before she could protest the man scooped her up in his arms and headed up the stairs. Afraid her anger would show she kept her eyes fastened on his chest.

"Is this your room?"

"Yes..." the nervous whisper in her voice nearly drew a moan from her lips. Even knowing Mary was nervously following didn't help.

With as much authority as he picked her up with he gently set her into the bed against the pillows.

She watched as he quickly scanned the room and she wondered if there was anything that would increase his suspicions. When his inspection fell on the vanity, blessedly filled with only her bottles and cream jars, she knew what he had been searching for.

"Are you sure you will be alright Miss Susan?"

"Yes of course, thank you, I just need to rest awhile."

"I will leave you then." Turning from her he spun on poor Mary.  
"Take care of your mistress."

"Yes sir, I always do."

"Be sure of it!"

With that he left and neither of them moved until they heard the thundering beat of his departing mount.

"My God Mary, what was he?"

"A very suspicious and dangerous man."

"I am afraid you are right."

The ill feelings Delacross gave her solidified. "Oh Mary, what of Andrew?" Trying to rise a rush of dizziness came over her.

"I am here Mrs. Masters. The man is gone, but I fear he will be back."

Mary's small hands pushed her back into the bed. "Mary stop it, I must get up."

Mackenzie's head was swimming so she failed to see Mary's pleading stare at Andrew.

"You better rest, he may be back to check."

"I wouldn't put it past him Mackenzie."

Looking at both of them, their determination defeated her. Sinking back into the pillows, her eyes wanted to close over the weakness she couldn't shake.

"Andrew he knew you...oh God, I am sorry I had to say what I did."

The large smile he gave her took away her shame. "You did very well for a northerner. The Delacross and I go back many years."

"Then I was right, was it his brother Aaron freed you from?"

"Yes, the devil himself. Rest now, we will talk of this later."

She was tired and too drained to go against them on this. But after today she would put her foot down.

\* \* \* \*

After Delacross' visit Mackenzie hadn't felt well enough to venture downstairs. Three days too many spent in the bed, she refused to be down another day. At her insistence Andrew carried the settee out onto the sloping, expansive lawn. She did feel so very strange of late, sadly Mackenzie knew it was because of Aaron. Mary was right she pushed too hard. The last thing she needed was to get sick. Her

head slowly drooped, until the soft breeze off the ocean lulled her into sleep.

The thick blanket of lush grass smothered his approaching steps. She was a true vision of golden beauty. Jeff's eyes took in every lovely inch of the girl. The breeze teased the satiny white gold lengths of her thick hair, moving it across her full breast, evidence of the womanly curves beneath that innocent air she possessed.

Was she innocent? For some reason he didn't think so. Maybe it was the sadness in her eyes that first day. Mourning a lost love pretty lady? Yes, it fit his picture of her and the spirit she possessed inside that curvaceous form. A body built to give and receive passion.

Jeff's eyes burned with the heat of desire he felt for this woman. Deciding her condition was due to another man didn't dampen the flame. In fact it excited him more. She was vulnerable in so many ways. She'd not give herself over easily, but then there would be no challenge and Jeff loved the hunt as much as the capture. With her he itched for the last and his impatience would make quick work of the chase.

Going into Charleston he learned only enough from that Mr. Johnson to wet his appetite. Sliding his hand over the letter he'd been given to deliver, he wondered if he should. Smiling, he would gain more pleasure watching her reaction to it then keeping it from her. It would also tell him if her lover was still one to be reckoned with. Funny how much a man could feel and learn about a woman just by watching. So many men were fools, wanting unspoiled goods. Jeffery would take beauty and passion any day, he wanted a woman not some snipping little snit. And by God she was everything he ever desired and she was free for the taking.

Only that black giant and that little handmaid guarded her, he did learn that much. Johnson emphasized the fact that the woman's aunt would be arriving shortly, but Jeff scoffed at the prospect, just another hovering hen to deal with.

The black could be dangerous and he was Andy, his brother's big black. For all his servitude toward the girl, Jeff knew full well what the nigga was capable of. The girl was nothing.

Smiling upon the sleeping girl, Jeff knew force wouldn't be necessary with Miss Susan, at least not any physical kind. Once his inquiries concerning her were completed, he would have enough

information to bring her in line to his wishes, especially if his suspicions proved true.

“Mr. Delacross, I didn’t hear you arrive, my lady is resting.”

“Any fool can see that girl. Bring out some tea, I will wait until the lady awakes.”

“But sir she needs...”

Turning on her Mary blanched at the evil look in the eyes accosting her. “I don’t take kindly to servants questioning my orders. Now fetch the tea.”

“Yes, sir.” The devil he was and glory be, Andrew went to town. Rushing into the kitchen Mary didn’t know what to do. “Oh my lady I hope you can handle this man.”

Hearing the clatter of cups made Mackenzie stir out of the deep fretful sleep. The realization she wasn’t alone brought instant awareness.

The booted cuffs sticking out before her gaze filled her with apprehension. Cautiously her eyes followed the sturdy legs and well built thighs until she saw whom she expected to find.

She owed her friends an apology. Seeing the man’s eyes boldly assessing her in such a relaxed pose drew in her breath. *My heavens, he looks like he owns the place...or me!*

“You’re quiet beautiful when you sleep Miss Susan and ever more so now.”

Anger flashed inside her. “What do you want Mr. Delacross? And how long have you been here?”

Smiling, he straightened in the chair and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees.

“Not long enough Miss Susan. As to why, I brought you a letter from your barrister.”

“Mr. Johnson?”

“Yes.”

Looking at the table Mackenzie was relieved to see it lying there and the wax seal still in tack. “Thank you, I am sorry you had to go out of your way.”

“Yes, it is quiet a distance home, in fact I will probably not make dinner.”

Could she? Did she dare ignore his sly request? Something about him told her how dangerous crossing him could become. “By all means Mr. Delacross, please join me for dinner.”

“I’d be delighted.”

Catching Andrew’s movement off to her side. “Andrew, would you take me up to my room. Lifting her arms up to Andrew she refused to acknowledge Delacross’ movement towards her. She felt like a doll when Andrew lifted her up, but never did she want Delacross to take that freedom with her again.

Before Andrew turned with her, Mary retrieved the tray and thankfully slipped the letter into her apron pocket. “Mary, Mr. Delacross will be staying for dinner, please show him to the guest room so that he might freshen up.”

“Fine, Miss Susan.” Seeing the girl’s stiff retreat she could well imagine what transpired while she slept.

Jeffrey’s eyes burned into the black carrying the small woman. He knew perfectly well what she’d just done and it infuriated and thrilled him all at once. Sitting back into the chair his eyes took in the lovely view, yes he looked forward to the evening. “I can assure you...Susan, you will not be so sure of yourself by the end of the night.”

Within the safety of her room Mackenzie squirmed to be let down. “Please Andrew, I am sorry I had to do that, but that creep would have and I can’t stand to have him touch me.”

“I can understand that, but do you think you will be alright at dinner?”

“Oh, he left me no choice and he knew it! How am I going to get rid of him?”

Andrew could see how upset she was, but in this he lacked advice. “I will stay close, you need only call.”

The sudden hardness in Andrew’s features left her stunned. “No Andrew, I will handle him.”

Nodding, Andrew started to leave. “Andrew please ask Mary to come up after Mr. Delacross is taken care of.”

Pacing the room Mackenzie struggled with her dilemma. Going to the wardrobe she scanned the gowns Mary brought with her. “Oh Madam Oulette you leave too little to the imagination.” Pulling out a rose silk, it had a high neck. Looking at it she frowned, her lips pressing in thought.

Putting it back she choose the blue satin with layers of silk in the full skirt. The low neckline criss-crossed in soft feminine pleats across the bodice. Tiny pearls were sewn into the folds. “Yes this will do fine.”

Laying it out on the bed she ran to meet Mary at the door.

"That one is in the far bedroom. Oh Mackenzie! Not that dress, it's so..."

"Revealing?"

"Yes, that and more."

"Mary if I wear anything other than that, that man will know exactly why I wore it. He will sense my fear of him and that is more dangerous than what he is right now."

"I hope you are right."

"So do I. Mary where is the letter."

Reaching in her pocket, Mackenzie snatched it from her and moved to the window. Shaking, her finger broke the seal. Inside laid a smaller envelope with her name written in Aaron's large warm endearment.

Mary moved quietly about the room getting the articles her mistress would need for dinner.

*My Love,*

*The sea is a vast lonely desert without you beside me. I have never suffered the tragedy of loss I feel now by denying your presence. Please forgive me my lovely, but I know now my decision, however painful, was right.*

*We have fought many battles and to the expertise of my crew suffered nary a scratch. The British now run from encountering the Wanderer.*

Smiling, she felt sure they ran from its notorious captain as well.

*We are hurting them my love and what goods we take, our friends distribute with much satisfaction. At least I am able to contribute. Met one of my own ships last week, it was good to see the crew. David is doing an admirable job.*

*I am afraid not all the news was good. Cohen has increased the reward for 'The Boston Lady Spy'. It seems there was a raid on his home shortly after her escape, many valuable documents were taken. Regretfully, the lady, guilty or not, has been labeled the mastermind of the deed. I feel a great sympathy for the madam's plight and bare she take extreme care.*

*Another item you may find fascinating is news of a prisoner's escape before a captured British gunner could be handed over. It seems a Lord Chamberlain jumped overboard while the ship was anchored off the Charleston coast. Maybe you have heard of his*



*daring escape and rescue, being so close to there? If the foolhardy attempt was successful I am sure the Lord will be in Charleston. I would like very much to give him "my" regards.*

The chill the news gave her was quickly replaced by a giggle. Mackenzie could well imagine what Aaron would like to do to Nick.

So Nick escaped and he was here. Damn the man. Why didn't he go home to England? Another shiver passed over her remembering the last time she'd seen him. The man's determination left her no desire to meet up with him again. It seemed she had her own battles taking place in what Aaron thought would be a safe haven. Maybe they should leave? Remembering who was here and now Nick, it would be a prudent decision.

*I hope this reaches you in time. With spring coming it might be nice to take a trip. New Orleans is beautiful this time of year, although the heat is unbearable in the summer. Think about it, there is a nice port there, we have docked there in peace many times.*

*The captain has been waiting patiently for my letter, so I must go. Take care my lovely, you guard my heart.*

*Love forever is timeless,*

*Aaron*

Mary came up beside her holding a lit candle. "It is best Mackenzie."

Tears rolled down her cheeks as her unsteady hand moved the parchment into the tiny flame. Even though he avoided using her name and implicating her in the letter he'd not taken the same precaution with himself. All his messages were clear, tonight they would make plans to leave.

Picking up Mr. Johnson's letter her heart stopped over his words.

*Miss Richardson,*

*The captain who delivered this will be sailing on the morning tide for the north. He can wait no longer for a reply.*

*J. Johnson*

"Mary go and find Andrew, tell him to get the horse ready, he must go into Charleston tonight."

"He'll not go till that man leaves."

"Oh God I forgot, hurry, I will get ready, we have to get rid of him and fast."

Moaning, Mary refused to leave when Mackenzie dismissed her to start dressing. "I can not leave until you are dressed, if that man has to wait much longer he will be storming up here."

"Oh alright, help me then."

Slipping off her day dress Mary pulled the corset about her.

"Not that thing Mary!"

"You must."

Taking a deep breath Mackenzie tried, but when Mary pulled the straps tight she nearly blacked out.

"Mackenzie!"

Holding the post for support. "Take it off...hurry Mary."

Once freed she fought for breath and slowly her head cleared. "I'm alright now."

"What happened?"

"Just dizzy, too much sun I guess."

Mary wondered, but held her thoughts. If it *was* so, they would know soon enough.

Both women worked in record time to get her ready. "There, this will do fine."

"Your hair."

"Pin it up Mary, all of it, his eyes feasted enough on it out there. If he doesn't leave soon after dinner, I will get sick or something and drive him away. I must get that letter out to Aaron, the captain is sailing at dawn."

Walking down the stairs she almost faltered. Squaring her shoulders she hoped she was right about the dress. She just felt sure he thought she feared him and it wouldn't take much for that calculating look to go into action.

Jeffrey Delacross was not an easy man to impress, but at that moment watching the lady descending the stair, he knew he'd been thoroughly captivated. *Oh yes you will do very nicely, Miss Richardson or who ever you really are.*

## CHAPTER 20

### *No Where To Run!*

“I poured you a sherry.”

Taking the glass she willed herself to stay calm before his gaze. It was difficult considering she felt him disrobe her with his heated gaze before she reached his side.

“Thank you. Tell me about your plantation, Mr. Delacross.”

“It is not much different than most.”

“Oh but I am sure you are wrong. Besides, I have never seen one and know even less about them.”

“I find that hard to believe, a lady as intelligent as yourself.”

Damn, why didn’t he just start talking about it? All men liked to brag. But this one had more in mind and controlling the conversation was part of it.

“You misunderstand Mr. Delacross, I know of them, but not the intricacies that make them work and I always try and understand everything that goes on about me.”

“An admirable quality. Where are you from, the north?”

“No, actually I come from England.”

“You must have left sometime ago, I can hardly detect any accent.”

“My father was from the Colonies, but due to family responsibilities he was forced to return to England. We lived out in the country and I’m afraid he was my only example for many years.”

“Where is he now?”

“He died sometime ago.”

“And your family?”

Stay calm Mackenzie, satisfy his curiosity, but damn it Mary had better hurry up and announce dinner.

“Only my cousin and I are close.”

She could swear he wanted to ask, how close, and he might have if Mary hadn’t finally come and interrupted them.

As they sat down Mary winked at her.

“I am sure you will understand Mr. Delacross...”

“Please, call me Jeffrey.”

“Yes, well as I was saying Mr. Delacross, our fare is simple. As it is usually only Mary and myself, we probably won’t come close to the elegant dining you are accustom to at White Cross.”

“As I invited myself Susan, you will hear no complaints, only that you allow me to repay your hospitality at White Cross.”

She didn’t miss the drop of his formality with her name.

“I am afraid I will have to decline your invitation at the moment.”

“I insist Susan, in fact I plan on sending the carriage for you tomorrow morning. You and your maid, of course, will be staying for the weekend. I have invited several guest, it should be enjoyable.” His hand gripped hers in what couldn’t be mistaken as anything but a warning.

“I realize you are not fully recovered, but I must say your rosy color right now is quite healthy and your spirit has certainly improved.”

“You assume far too much sir.” She made to pull her hand back, but his hold tightened.

“No Susan, I assume nothing. Everything I do has a purpose and right now you are it.”

Watching her so boldly, she knew he saw her shock. Forcefully jerking her hand from his, her eyes glared dangerously at him.

Mary came in to start serving, but stopped seeing her lady’s furious look at the man. *Oh Lordy, he’s got her going he has!*

“Dinner won’t be necessary Mary, take it back. Mr. Delacross is no longer a welcomed guest in my home.”

“Serve the dinner girl, I am not leaving.”

Rising, Mackenzie clenched her fist together. “You are leaving sir and you will never return.”

“Sit down, Susan!”

“Good bye, Mr. Delacross! Andrew!”

Delacross didn't move and neither did he show any sign he intended to. If he expected her to go into hysterics he was going to be disappointed. Stealing a quick glance at Mary, Mackenzie felt herself grow cold over the girl's frozen expression. Before she could see what held Mary so entranced, the unexpected voice hit her like icy water!

"I am afraid, my lady, Andrew has been detained."

She didn't have to see the man that the voice belonged to, the sudden weakness in her knees guaranteed she would fall.

Nick's arm came in intimate possession about her waist, preventing the collapse she couldn't control. His touch, his very presence weakened her further allowing him the freedom to bring her up against his large, familiar frame in a very loving hold.

"Take your hands off her!"

"I believe, Mr. Delacross isn't it? I should be the one making the demands. First, I believe the lady told you to go."

"That's none of your affair!"

"No? I believe you are mistaken as the lady happens to be my..."

"No Nick, please don't." Mackenzie's protest sounded as weak as she felt.

"Oh, but my love, your game is up and I have no intention of letting you escape this time." Nick's arm increased its pressure until she nearly blacked out. "Have I made myself clear, Carolyn?"

A hundred things went through her mind, but only one held. Nick was furious, she saw the fury in his eyes and something more, a murderous glare that said he wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone standing in his way to take what he felt was his. As if answering her thoughts she felt the sharp point of a knife press menacingly into her back. The quick increase of pressure came, "Carolyn?"

His mouth was dangerously close to her own. "Yes, yes I understand Nick."

"Good, than we will have no more games, will we?"

"No."

"I have missed you, my lady, but I can't say as much for your friends. Shall you handle them or should I?"

Quivering under a fear she never felt before, Mackenzie knew to take his veiled threat seriously. "Mary please go to the kitchen, I will see you shortly." Seeing her hesitation, "Go! I will be fine, really."

“Mr. Delacross, I would like to introduce you to my...husband, Lord Chamberlain.”

Damning her weakness, she didn't want anyone's death because of her. Fighting the dizziness she stood her ground. Nick felt her sway and held her up.

The disaster the evening still held was almost worth it to see the shocked anger emanating from that cold bastard Delacross. What she knew he had planned almost seemed worse than Nick's disturbing presence.

“I don't believe you!”

“The lady is my wife, though she tries hard enough to deny it. My patience is near depleted, I suggest you leave immediately.”

“Is this true Susan?”

“Yes...” her eyes flashed from the man to Nick, “...please go.”

“I knew you belonged to someone, but I must say you surprised me, I thought it was love you mourned.”

Neither said a word as the angry man stalked off.

The threat of Nick killing anyone but her was over. She refused to be held by him any longer. “Let me go Nick!”

“I will release you, Mackenzie, but I will never let you escape again.”

His words left her cold. The determined stance of his body scared her beyond thought. When he took his arm away, she staggered before managing to regain her footing. She wasn't sure what to do. Reasoning with him seemed impossible. “What did you do to Andrew?”

“He's not dead, but neither will he be of any assistance to you. And if you value your maid's life I suggest you cooperate.”

“Alright Nick.” Doubting his threat would be foolish. “How did you find me?”

“Actually the fine gentleman that just left lead me to you. His inquiries about you in Charleston weren't hard to connect to you. There is only one woman I know that fits your description. I'm afraid your beauty is also your downfall. Mr. Delacross' questions have also alerted the authorities. In fact they are combing the countryside right now to locate this place. You're quite a celebrity, my little spy. So you see Mackenzie we have little time to waste.”

“Mary!”

The girl pushed through the door almost before his call was finished. "Go up and pack a trunk for your mistress." The girl looked in frightened pleading from the man to Mackenzie. "Hurry up girl! When it's ready call me. Move! And bring a warm cloak down."

Stubbornly the girl didn't move, looking at her mistress for guidance. "Do as he says Mary."

Nick took hold of her arm when Mary ran up the stairs. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No."

"Then come with me."

Escorting her outside Mackenzie nearly moaned over seeing the carriage so close to the house. Two men stood beside it, the look they gave her made the bile rise in her throat.

"Get in the coach Mackenzie."

When she hung back and provoked Nick's anger. "Don't defy me! I haven't time to be nice about this."

Desperately her hands reached out and held fast to his arm. Under her breath she pleaded with him. "Nick let me stay with you, I won't cause any problems I promise."

The nervous glances between him and the men made Nick cringe. "Damn it, come on!"

When they returned to the living room, "You stay put or so help me I will harm that girl."

"I will."

When he disappeared, the urge to run was so great she could barely control it. Only Mary's safety held her back. She never thought of Nick as a violent person, but then she'd never seen him like this.

Carrying her smallest trunk he tossed her cloak to her.

"Where's Mary?" When he didn't answer she refused to move. "Nick, where is she?"

Grabbing her arm he dragged her to the door. "She's fine, I tied her up, but she will be able to get loose in no time. If she's smart she will stay put and hidden as I instructed her to, until these two brutes are gone. Now get in that coach and I don't want a peep out of you."

She did just that and watched as Nick paid the two off, then took the reins. The lurch of the horses threw her back with such force she nearly knocked herself out. The speed with which Nick took to the road told her he hadn't exaggerated about the authorities. Remembering what being caught meant to her filled her with a new

terror. One that left her numb to what was happening around her. No longer caring, Mackenzie clung to the vaulting seat as her body was thrown about inside the racing coach. One thing kept penetrating her fear; Aaron would now be much farther away from her than an ocean.

\* \* \* \*

The long boat hitting the ship broke through her dark thoughts.

“Come on love.”

Nick’s words tore at her heart, but all the fight deserted her. Before she could get her foothold on the Jacob ladder the long boat dropped from beneath her under a huge swell. Nick’s hands prevented her fall. The incessant rolling or maybe the cold fear left her feeling ill. Though she hadn’t eaten she was sure she would be sick.

“Nick, I can’t do this.”

Even in the darkness he could see how pale she’d become. Nick had been shocked at the change in her when he first saw her tonight. As gently as he could he lifted her over his shoulder. “Hold on to me!”

He realized she was beyond hearing him when he felt her go limp against his back. Nick’s movements up the ladder were sure and held the caution he felt over his burden. When he reached the rail the captain called out. “Help the Lord boys!”

Taking her back from their clumsy hands Nick followed the captain to their cabin. “All’s ready sire, we will sail immediately. Is the lady going to be alright?”

“Yes Captain Brooke she’s had a time of it.”

“Well, she can rest easy now that you found her again. That scoundrel won’t get her, no sir, not on my ship.”

“I am relieved to hear it Captain.”

“There is fresh water over there, you just stay and tend your wife Lord Chamberlain, I will get us out of here.” No doubt Nick would be the one Captain Brooke lashed to the mast if it became known he was the scoundrel.

Stumbling on those soldiers and hearing what all their excited chattered was about left Nick little time to think. Securing passage away from the Charleston docks had only been found due to Captain Brooke’s cavalier attitude over Nick’s fabricated plight.

Damn Cohen for saving his hide at her expense. Charlie knew damn well she wasn’t the one responsible for breaking into that



house. The reward he posted sent every money hungry bastard out looking for any lovely blonde they could get their hands on.

Taking that scum with him tonight hadn't been too smart, but seeing the brute that Masters left to guard her, he'd needed their muscle. He pitied anyone that was close to that man when he broke loose. And that cocky son of a bitch Delacross, if Nick hadn't shown up she would have been in his bed before the night was out.

Running a cool cloth over her face Nick saw again the unnecessary thinness that made her features more prominent. The dark smudges under her lashes infuriated him. "Mourning a lost love, Mackenzie?" Damn, that is just what she'd done to herself.

Smiling sadly, Nick didn't think that backbone of hers suffered any. Delacross might have been picking himself up off the floor in another minute. Remembering the man's cold look for Mackenzie, he was glad she didn't get the chance. That bastard could have been brutal and enjoyed it.

\* \* \* \*

Opening the cabin door he wondered how he would find her today. Moving closer to the bed Nick noted the pink color in her cheeks hoping it was a good sign. She'd given him quite a scare with the violence of her empty retching, but thankfully no fever came over her. When her stomach finally settled she fell into an exhausted sleep and had been in it for the last two days.

Nick could well imagine how she'd been these last few weeks. She probably pushed herself to the limits in order to forget Masters' desertion. Well, she had nothing but time now, to recuperate. The nagging suspicion that came to him during the worst of her illness hadn't abated. If she were pregnant, as he believed, there would be only one decision left to him on how to handle Mackenzie. He would know soon enough.

"Nick?"

"Yes love, how are you feeling?"

"Better. Where are we?"

"Crossing the Atlantic for England. The ship's a Dutch merchant so not much chance we will have any trouble."

She wondered if he meant from Aaron? Afraid he would see her thoughts she turned her head away.

"I brought you some food. Can you sit up?"

Nick didn't wait for a reply, helping her into an upright position he banked the pillows around her. Setting the tray in her lap, he sat back in the chair that had become a part of him these last few days, but not for long.

"Was the weather rough?"

Recalling the calm sea and brisk breeze that carried them out of Charleston, Nick lied. "Yes, why?"

"I have never been seasick before."

"Have you been sick Mackenzie?" Nick watched her close, knowing she was still not herself and her answers were unguarded.

"No, oh Mary would say otherwise, I guess I have just been pushing too hard." Mackenzie was hungry and brought a piece of meat up to her lips, but the odor penetrating her nostrils made her gage in revulsion.

"Mackenzie?"

"Please...take it away, I can't..."

Thoughtful eyes noted every detail of her reaction. "Here try the salt biscuits, you have to eat something."

Shaking her head she tried to avoid it. "Take it away!"

Shoving it under her nose he gave her little choice. Taking a small bite, she waited. When nothing happened, one bite led to the next.

"Feel better now?"

"Yes, thank you."

"How about some coffee?"

"No, tea please, coffee doesn't seem to agree with me lately."

Feeling more like herself she sipped the hot tea, needing time to decide what Nick was up to. To say he was being civil was putting it mildly after the other night.

What was wrong with her? Looking down at herself she just realized she was in her nightgown. Knowing Nick had seen her like this before didn't stop the firing blush. Damn! What was she doing sitting here like nothing had happened? The man abducted her and she doubted his plans included handing her over to Aaron.

"Nick...?"

"Back to your former self so fast? Well, I am glad. I don't care for pretenses."

Tensing, she set the cup down, refusing to give in to the tremors she faced him. "Alright Nick, what does all this mean?"

"It means my lady, I am doing exactly what I planned to do before your husband interrupted me."

He could feel and see her confusion.

"Why?"

"There are many reasons Mackenzie."

"But not this, not this way. I can't be what you want, I told you. You know I love Aaron!"

"I've always known. I'm not sure I understand how, he abandoned you not once, but twice."

"He never did Nick. You're wrong, you don't understand!"

"Then enlighten me. Paint your loving picture." He moved to her so fast she fell back into the pillows. "But realize Mackenzie nothing you say will change the fact that I am taking you as my wife!"

His large body shook with the anger hissing out at her. Large, frightened blue eyes glared helplessly up at the stranger above her. Seeing her cower away from him, drew a groan from his gut. Pushing himself from her he walked out of the cabin slamming the door.

Shaking fingers went to the opening at her throat. Her pulse beat in frightened jets causing her to gasp in short uncontrollable breaths. Covering her mouth with her hands Mackenzie tried to steady her breathing.

Why did he hate her so? He did, she could feel it, see it in his eyes. What happened to change him? There would be no reasoning with Nick. No more talking. Nick was controlling everything and nothing she did would change his mind.

Thoughts of running to the captain of the ship came and went just as fast. He would have given them some very believable story; anything she said would only be used against her. He hadn't even locked her in or drugged her this time. This time there would be no rescue, no mistakes.

A feeling of suffocation closed over her. "You saved me from the hanging rope, to wind your own around my neck. Didn't you Nick?"

Trembling, Mackenzie knew there would be no quick end to what Nick had in store for her.

It was nearly dusk when she heard Nick's steps coming towards the door. Bracing herself, Mackenzie stood facing the open portal. Taking a deep breath of the calming sea air, she wished it could vanquish the fear inside her.

“You’re up and dressed, I see. The captain invited us to dine in his quarters tonight.”

It was as she thought. Turning to look at him. Was he even a little afraid she might try something? Yes, she thought he might be.

“You should have come on deck, maybe tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you afraid I will jump over or do something as drastic?” Taunting him was all she had left to fight with and never would she submit to this farce quietly or willingly.

Smiling at her, Nick wondered how she would react. “If I feared that Mackenzie, I would have nailed the portal shut.”

“Actually, it was too small to get through.”

He hid his concern over her threat well but not well enough. “Why Nick, do you not think I would try it? You yourself jumped over rather than face prison. Aaron didn’t mention, did you get the chains off, before or after?”

“After.” The teasing went out of his voice.

“So what makes you think I won’t try it? I’m an excellent swimmer, even better than I ride horses.”

Remembering the anger he displayed earlier, he knew it was the cause for this taunting defiance. Nick controlled it from coming again. It was that bastard he hated not her. He hated him for burying his seed in her!

He despised the fact it was Master’s child growing inside her and not his. But he could never hate her or the child, and she would never know it was her lover’s babe.

It still surprised him when he realized she had no idea she was with child. She would soon, but it would be his child she believed was inside her and he would be sure that is exactly what she thought. Her lack of knowledge about this also told him how very inexperienced she really was.

Masters may have taken her virginity, but he would hold her passion from this night forward.

“We better join the captain, my lady.”

Fuming that she’d not drawn some reaction from him, Mackenzie pushed past him, refusing to take his hand.

When they reached the deck she could not escape his hold about her waist. Hissing angrily at him, “What lies have you told about me? Am I crazy now or has my memory lapsed again?”

"Nothing quite so drastic, only that you have been under a tremendous strain and ill, neither are lies. The good captain is very upstanding; in fact he keeps well informed of the happenings at all his ports. His last one before Charleston happened to be Boston. Should I tell you what news hailed from there?"

"No, it's not necessary."

"Than neither is it necessary to explain the consequences of any foolishness on your part."

"Maybe I'd prefer hanging?"

"It's your choice my lady."

His words rang in her ears so loudly she barely heard their introductions to the captain.

"Lady Chamberlain, it is so wonderful to see you are recovered."

"I..." Nick's eyes were on her. "Thank you sir, I am afraid I have been quite a bother."

"Nonsense, your husband has been at your side nearly every minute, worried sick over your illness. But I can see his fears and concerns were groundless."

Looking at Nick in confusion, she hadn't known. Why had he looked at her like that today? Even now it sent shivers over her.

Nick only needed to see those blue eyes to know the questions they held out to him.

Mackenzie gave little to the conversation about the table. The men took little notice of her preoccupied state, all but Nick. His attention rarely left her and the truth played havoc with her emotions.

When Nick made their excuses to leave she could feel the panic rising inside her. Returning to that cabin with Nick made her want to run.

"Captain?" She felt Nick's powerful body tighten beside her. "It was a lovely dinner, thank you."

"We thank you, Lady Chamberlain."

Why didn't she stop him? She shut her eyes against the truth. She didn't want to die! Never to see Aaron again? No she couldn't take that kind of risk.

When the door to their cabin shut she moved away from him. She hadn't realized how confining the cabin was. She tried desperately to still the wild terror overtaking her.

Nick watched her stand like a statue as far from him as she could get. He could actually feel her fear. Instinctively he sniffed the air; her sweet fragrance came to him. Was her fear so strong it laced the air?

Nothing except releasing her would end her anguish and Nick couldn't do that. He didn't want to hurt her, but it was inevitable. Hopefully her anger would salvage her pride over the humiliation he knew she would suffer. There would be no pleasure in his taking of her. No, not this night. Tonight he would be the destroyer of the love she cherished. He would pillage and rape the bond that tied her to another, shatter her dreams and destroy the haven of her love.

The cruelty he would inflict sent his body back to the frontier, seeking the instincts necessary to survive the battle he would instigate. One thought stayed with him. Never did he want to hurt her. To use his strength against her would be the worse scar he could inflict. Only if she forced him, to prevent injury to herself, would he call on it.

Mackenzie thought she'd scream just to end the silence. The waiting, her thoughts only heightened the fear of what would come. Her eyes flew open sensing his nearness, but her feet couldn't move. The touch of his hand at her shoulders made her knees go weak. Nick stepped closer, his body at her back braced her, refusing to let her collapse.

"Why didn't you tell the captain?"

The words wouldn't pass the constriction in her throat, letting only a soft moan escape.

"It was because of Masters wasn't it?" Nick's breath floated past her ear, his words touched her heart. "You think that someday he will find you, rescue you from me. Don't you Mackenzie?"

Oh God, she did. She prayed he would come. She wished he would crash through that door. It was knowing he wouldn't that destroyed her.

"He won't you know, not now or later." She stiffened under his words. "Don't you realize Mackenzie he will never come. He won't want you."

She tried to turn away and deny his words, but his arms pinned her against him, forcing her to listen. "After tonight Mackenzie, after I claim you as my woman, he will no longer desire you. You will be soiled, no longer his. Do you really think a man like Masters would want to share his possession with another man?"

"Please stop!" The words were torn from her quivering lips and held all the pain he inflicted.

"You will disgust him Mackenzie."

Breathlessly she fought his words. "No..." Aaron loved her. Their love was too strong for Nick to destroy. "He'll come!"

"Do you think he will kill me?"

Anger flared against the hurt deeper than anything he could physically do to her. "Yes!"

"He won't you know, no he won't kill me. I almost think in his hate and anger he would kill you over me."

Her struggles ceased over his words. No, Aaron would never do that. "More lies Nick?"

"No lies Mackenzie. You know him, you tell me. Do you honestly think he will take you back after I bed you? My seed filling you, invading and passing into your warm womb. Would he touch you again after that? As a man I say no, but you know him better than I."

His words were meant to be cruel, to destroy every thread of hope she clung to. Mackenzie battled what he was slowly doing to her with his hatefully soft words. The doubts were like an avalanche she couldn't escape. Shaking her head she didn't want to listen any more. "No!"

"Maybe you think because I am accepting you after he took your virginity that he will still want you. There's a difference Mackenzie, I am the conqueror. I'm taking you from him. It's something you might not understand, but the male pride is a fierce animal. You see Mackenzie, I would feel like him if you were mine and he took you from me. But as the taker I control the winnings, I possess the captured treasure, I own you!"

He spun her around bring her against his chest locking her arms at her side. His fingers pulled the pins from her hair; the long lengths fell heavily down her back. His fingers twined in the lush curls. All the while his eyes held hers, commanding her to see the victory he held.

Trapped, she sought a way to flee the inevitable by making herself an observer, an on looker taking no part in what was happening. The man towering over her looked like a barbarian or Viking calculating every move to insure his desired end. She watched as his lips descended to begin the plunder of the woman he held captive. *Feel nothing.*

The unresisting body beneath his assault at first enraged Nick until he realized what she was doing by willing herself not to be a participant. It was a challenge no man could refuse to answer. His hands eased their hold, changing to expert caresses meant to awaken her body to him. He wondered how long she could withstand his tender attack before she realized her mistake.

His lips teased and plundered her sweetness, ignoring her stillness. The quick work he made of the dress' bodice soon freed the ivory globes of her breasts, allowing his hands to knead their loveliness, he stroked and held the swollen buds hardening in betrayal. His lips covered them, sucking and nipping, drawing on their passionate nature until they grew heavy in his hold. Conquering her breasts Nick again, in slow exotic licks and kisses, made his way back to her slightly parted lips.

The tiny tremor of her body told him of the victory was close at hand. Nick took pleasure with her lips as he traveled over their softness with his tongue to harvest their sweetness until she strained in breathless battle, her body arching slightly to his call. Relentless in his goal his hands caressed her breast as he played with her lips. With a swiftness that she didn't expect Nick took hold of her head and drove his tongue deep, forcing her to respond, to battle him and he drew a moan deep from within her quivering body.

Nick was prepared when her hands rose to strike. She could no longer deny the rush of sensual feelings he stroked to life. Capturing her wrist he pulled them behind her back, holding them both with one of his large hands, the other forcefully pulled her against his unyielding frame. Backing her up against the cabin wall he pressed her pelvic closer, no longer did he allow any distance between them. He ground his swollen cock against her, forcing her to feel the vibrant life of his swollen shaft. Nick captured her lips as they sucked in the air over her shock, he was not a small man and wanted her to know it. In powerful erotic motion he showed her the evidence of his arousal.

The blue depths of her eyes came to life with the storm he felt moving upward, one bent on destroying her barriers one by one in its awesome wake.

"Noo...!"

His lips silenced her scream against the passion she couldn't control. The tremor coursing through her created a battle she'd already lost. One she would never again use against him.



“You will never ignore me Mackenzie! Never!”

Lifting her in his arms he carried her to the bed. Lying her out before him, in one swift move he pulled the dress and petticoats away. Only the chemise remained at her waist where he’d shoved it and Nick took away the last of her barriers.

The agitated rise and fall of her exposed naked beauty was glorious. She was such a beautiful captive and his eyes told her he was the victor!

Fired in passion his eyes trailed the length of her exquisite body. She reminded him of a golden puma, so graceful her sleek body tight, ready to strike at the first opportunity.

Striping naked before her he knew she was in full awareness of every move he made and would fight him with the last of her will and strength. Her glare defied his victory.

“Listen to your body Mackenzie, it already knows its new owner.” He was taunting her, drawing out her anger. Only if she fought him would she save that beautiful pride he respected. If he destroyed that he would be destroying the woman.

“I hate you!”

“That will soon change to something more.”

“Never!” Through clenched teeth she growled her denial.

Nick moved over her then. He pinned her thrashing arms over her head. Staring down at her smoldering eyes, he’d never seen anything so breathtaking. “You are beautiful and soft beneath me, your body is warm, and seeking me.” As he talked she tried to pull back from the touch of his hand. Nick closed his heart to the insults. In very deliberate care he began to touch her.

The strength in his hand gentled as he rolled his palm over her lips, pulling back from the bite she wanted to take out of him. “Tch, tch, Mackenzie.” His scolding only made her more furious and her struggles to free her hands mounted. Nick inwardly cheered her efforts just as his free hand stilled her struggles with one push into the mattress. But when he squeezed her nipple between his thumb and index finger, rolling it back and forth in expert ease she grew still over the shock of response when her muff raised to find his cock.

“So wanton Mackenzie? What will he think when I tell him how much you wanted me to take you? Will he ever want to look at you again?”

His words were cruel and intentional, his exploration of her body moved lower and she sucked in her belly as his hand moved over it. "You feel like satin, all smooth and warm, so willing my lady. I expected more of a fight."

When she bucked beneath him it took all of his willpower not to jam his cock into her and ride her to the end. But Nick wanted total devastation, one night of destruction, then she'd be his forever!

Nick moved with the speed of a hunter and before she realized his intent he bound her wrist to the bed. He sat back and watched her struggle, knowing she'd never break free. With both hands Nick gripped her hips, her shock came out in a gasp. "If you want to scream, feel free Mackenzie. Of course I'm not sure I'll be able to save you from the crew. I will promise to kill as many as possible before they get to you."

His voice spoke in deadly earnest and each word hit its mark. She lay beneath him, panting in anger and fear. He moved her hips beneath him, positioning her to take his cock full on. She watched and he saw her eyes jump to the head of cock and move over the length pulsing over her stomach. "It wants you."

"You fucking bastard!" Her voice hissed out in fear and laced in hate.

"Oh yes, my sweet lady, I'll be that and more before this night over!"

And without another word Nick plunged his cock into her satin muff, his lips smothered her cry and Nick pushed harder, past the dry entrance, determined to bury himself to the hilt inside her.

Her cries wouldn't stop, but their anguish didn't make him quit. He deliberately hurt her and wanted her to feel every inch of his massive size. "I'm your master now Mackenzie and no man would ever want you back after this fucking!"

Nick was relentless. He drove into her as a man possessed, as if by doing so he could drive out the one that held her love. Mackenzie's groans of pain turned to cries of relief when he finally came and his massive fucking tool snaked out of her. Soiled and tender she wished her hands were free for she would beat him until she bled.

When he rolled off of her, Mac tried to curl away from him, protect herself from him. "You snake! I hate you!"

The hands pulling her back weren't gentle and there wasn't any love in them for her. He was driven in his purpose and she begged him to stop. "Nick please, you hurt me, please don't do this!"

"You won't stop me that easy Mackenzie."

"No more, please Nick."

But his hands were already touching her. She felt his fingers enter the bruised opening of her vagina as his rough thumb played over her clit until finding the nub of passion. Nick worked her body until she groaned in defeat and the climax his hands took her too shamed her.

He refused to even give her that bit of escape and this time his cock played and teased over her clit as he gently opened her thighs to accept him. With a mastery she didn't expect suddenly found Nick pressing his entrance, easing into her lubricated sheath a touch at a time.

Nick watched the tension fall away from her face as he rocked into her in a way she couldn't fight. No longer did she have herself clamped off to fight his taking, now he teased her passion to wake to his cock's call and she responded. Nature took over where she failed to rule and Nick reveled in the difference, he pushed in more and she took him on. He raised and lowered her hips until her body began its own response, meeting his advance with its own.

His lips took her parted ones and his tongue pushed past her barriers just as his cock ravaged her muff. Nick held her head still forcing her to take his kisses until she responded, then he left to nip at her shoulder before capturing her lovely nipple and sucking the hell out of it until her pelvic pushed at his cock in response to what he did to her. "Mine Mackenzie, all mine from now on."

With his declaration Nick moved and flipped her over bringing her thighs to the inside of his. From the back he found her entrance and his cock wasted little time in driving into her. Nick held her to him, never letting much room between them for his next thrust until she moved and hit back and he heard her swear against the act. No longer worried that he'd hurt her Nick's let passion rule, he slammed into her vagina with the power of his hold to bring her to him, accept each plunge for he touched her womb and claimed from her the passion of her climax before letting himself reach that peak.

He stroked and felt every satiny inch of her lovely skin. Touching the curves and mounds she tried so hard to deny him. All the while he

talked softly to her, like he was calming a frightened filly he just finished breaking.

Nick untied her hands, there was no longer a need for restraints. He didn't wait for her to catch her breath or thoughts before launching another masterful attack to claim her and bury his claim into her vagina. Her battles turned to moans of protest that grew deeper and lower as his touch became more ardent, more intimate. Her body responded as if he knew exactly what it needed. When his hand slipped between the silken thighs he trailed up the golden path to that soft warm valley. His legs forced hers apart, opening her to his unwanted caresses. Her gasp at his touch deepened his probe to gentle strokes of the velvet folds of her muff until he found the warm liquid crevice to her womanly core. When his fingers dwelled into the fire Mackenzie's wanton cries drove past her labored breath. Molten gold stilled the fight in her limbs leaving them pliable to his unspoken commands.

Nick kissed her lips over and over until they parted in surrender, allowing his invasion. Drinking of the life coursing through her, he drove her mounting passion on as he mastered her body, her barriers melted beneath his touch.

"Please stop! Oh God, make him stop!"

"No love. You are mine, Mackenzie! I control you. Your struggles are as useless as your body is hot with the passion I have created. Feel it Mackenzie, feel it arch to do my bidding. You're sweet my lady, you'll never be able to deny me again."

Nick released his hold of her chin and his fingers took her hips in his possessive hold to bring the golden triangle up before him. Positioning himself at the entrance of her surrender Nick held her gaze, forcing her to see the truth of his victory, he plunged deep into her molten fire, claiming her in a way she couldn't deny any longer. Deeper he drove, destroying the last of her guards, again and again until she met his thrust her cry of defeat tore through the room, a travesty against her body's betrayal in answer to his call.

Nick didn't relent, he took her until he felt the explosion beyond her control as her vagina wall wrapped around his strong shaft, only then did he join her, moving in perfect union against her contorting sheath. Holding her against her final struggle Nick felt the tears of his victory, the quiver of the passion she could no longer hold at bay.

Even now, as the violent spasms began to calm she pushed weakly to be free of him. Pulling her closer he refused to give her the slightest freedom. She would stay where she now belonged. He would be sure of it, for he would show her many times this night how much and how well he did control her.

“Mine my love...no others ever again.”

## CHAPTER 21

### *Distant Shores*

The sound of the door closing left the shirt-clad woman alone. Rolling over towards the wall Mackenzie brought her knees up in a childlike huddle, *he's gone*. Holding herself she felt devoid of everything. All her anger and fury against his cruelty had been exhausted. Useless, pitiful pleas all, they never penetrated his obsession to prove every destructive vow. If Mackenzie were able to block anything out the first time, he made sure she heard and understood explicitly the next and the time after, until by morning she no longer possessed the strength to shut him out.

The words, the mastering touches, they all had their effect. Even her tears were taken away, leaving her broken and exposed. Bruised beyond healing, only there was no evidence of the blows he inflicted. No, Nick never once really hurt her in a physical sense. But in spirit, inside, he took everything, spared nothing from his invasion.

Shutting her eyes her denial screamed out through the pain holding to the only hope he couldn't destroy. Never would he have the one thing he wanted above all else. Sadly she couldn't close her mind to what happened. *I'm so very sorry my love. I failed to protect your heart...I failed you, Aaron.*

Flashes of rage rested on the woman standing rigidly at the rail. As she had the last few weeks Mackenzie remained on deck every possible moment, always looking from whence they came. Neither gentle persuasion nor anger stopped her sentry. Only in the most sever weather did she relinquish her watch. That she relished his anger over her outspoken behavior was his own fault. Unable to tolerate the reason for her act his temper had ruled.

"You will cease this infernal behavior!"

"I will do no such thing, Nick."

“Don’t push me Mackenzie.”

“What will you do? Drug me? Tie me up? Lock me in? Haven’t you done enough already?”

Those blue eyes were undaunted. The hate they held forbade his interference. They had spoken very little since that first night. Nick still hoped time would ease the hard feelings she carried. Looking at her now it was difficult not to go to her to try and comfort her, only knowing she would never accept such comfort from him held Nick back.

In the confines of their cabin she never refused his touch, but it was always the same, always she made him rule her. There was never any passion on her part for his caress. He drove her body to respond, but never did he receive her warmth. She locked it away. He doubted he’d ever be able to break down the walls she erected against him.

Turning away from the sight of her he couldn’t tolerate the distant longing in those pain filled pools. He hated to admit it, but Masters still claimed her heart.

\* \* \* \*

“Can you make her out Baker?”

“Aye! She be a Colonist! Well I’ll be.”

“What?” Aaron wanted to snatch the glass from his first mate. It had been nearly a month since he passed his letter for Mackenzie to Captain Ellis. They had scoured this area for nearly a week waiting to meet up with him.

If this ship wasn’t Ellis’ he would have to give up. They’d been spotted too many times these last few days to remain any longer. As much as he desperately needed news from her he couldn’t jeopardize his crew.

“Baker!”

“It’s Ellis, Captain!”

“Are you sure?”

“I can’t be wrong, I’d know your ship anywhere. She’s coming in.”

It only took a second for Aaron to realize Baker hadn’t acknowledged his orders. Turning to confront his mate, his body froze in fear over the man’s grievous stare.

The words wouldn’t come, Baker passed him the glass. “The quarter deck, you better look sir.”

Baker would never forget what he saw in the man before him when the sweeping glass came to a rest. Every muscled inch of the dark powerful man shook in violent shock waves. It was the look of a destructive force haunting the captain's eyes that chilled his mate to his old bones.

"Bring her along side to board, Mr. Baker."

"Aye Captain." The devils take the one that caused the wrath of this good man.

"Send Andrew and the girl to my cabin."

"Aye."

Aaron never saw Baker's concerned eyes following his captain's retreat.

In the cabin, an uncontrollable rage filled him, calling her image before him. "No!" An inhuman growl echoed off the walls with the depth of his love being torn from him. "I will find you...I swear, I will find you!"

Andrew's presence filled the cabin. Aaron's anger surged to monstrous proportions over the pain he saw in his friend. He motioned him to the chair, but he refused.

There was no easy way to tell him. "Chamberlain took her the night your letter arrived."

Aaron felt as if he had been kicked in the gut. His breath burned in his chest. "Was she hurt? He didn't..."

"No, the girl said he didn't hurt her. She went without a fight because he threatened to kill Mary and me."

"He'll take her to England."

"Mary is pretty upset, but she heard more than I. They jumped me before I knew they were there."

Andrew saw Aaron's surprise. "I'm afraid my attention was on Delacross."

"Delacross! What the hell was that bastard doing there?" He didn't need an answer, Aaron knew that man well enough to know he would be where he wanted.

"The authorities were only minutes behind Chamberlain's departure. From what Mary heard Delacross' inquiries about Mackenzie brought them both to her. We were going to leave for New Orleans that same night. She already decided to go before all this happened."



Aaron pulled his mind back to the man. "They have a month's lead on us. Tell Baker to set a course for England. Andrew I know you tried."

"She is a strong woman Aaron, she will be alright."

He couldn't answer, his thoughts were too chaotic. "Andrew please ask Mary to come down."

Nodding the man left. Andrew had weeks to come to terms with his failure in protecting the woman. His friend needed time to deal with what would come.

Again she knocked on the large door. Mary did nothing but think and rethink about what she must tell this man. Her indecision finally cleared, but her courage was quickly leaving standing outside his door.

Harder her small fist beat on the door. She remembered the last time he lost her and she feared he'd once again shut himself off. Mary felt confident this man could help her friend. Yes friend, Mackenzie was so much more than a mistress, always had been. Right now Mackenzie needed her husband far too much to let him do this to himself again.

Opening the door, relieved when it wasn't locked, Mary bravely stepped into the man's room. Determined brown eyes found him standing before the portal, she was cautious in approaching. The anger she saw trembling through his virile frame could be unpredictable and heavens, so very dangerous. She possessed a very clear idea of what she would face. *Oh lordy, he would probably sell me papers for what I am about to do.* "Mr. Masters, it is Mary, sir."

That small voice reminded him of Mackenzie, if only it were her. Turning, Aaron saw the girl straighten. Oh yes she was a brave one, Mackenzie's Mary.

"Mary."

"Yes sir. Why don't you sit down, sir?"

The drawn look on his fine face worried her. What she needed to say wouldn't help him much.

Why he listened to her he didn't know, but Aaron did lower himself into the chair. "You too Mary, I'm sorry you must be tired."

"No sir, I will stand, you want some coffee?"

"No."

"Fine, then listen, cause I don't think I can do this twice."

Aaron focused all his attention on her words. The girl started by telling him about Delacross, or the devil as she labeled him. Aaron was anxious to hear about Chamberlain, but Mary had a way about her. She seemed to have memorized each conversation and he realized she was trying to let him hear and see everything that happened, to help him deal with it.

Only once did Mary's voice falter. "He called her, Lady Chamberlain in front of Delacross. He held a knife in her back, I saw it, but she wasn't afraid of him. No it was the sneaky threat against me and Andrew that stilled her, making her agree to everything he said."

She went on telling how she got free and then found Andrew. "They hit him real hard, surprised it didn't kill him. A regular man would have died. He wouldn't stop though until he reached Captain Ellis' ship and we set sail to find you. Took three of them brutes to bring him down."

Mary confirmed his suspicion that Chamberlain was taking her to England.

"Your letter, we burned it." He nodded at the apology in her voice. "It was the first happiness she had since you left. Near mourned herself sick."

Aaron could imagine, he'd done much the same himself. He started to get up, but Mary's hand on his shoulder stopped him. Her eyes seemed to be judging him.

"I've something to tell you. I know how strong her love for you is..."

Seeing the indecision he tried to help her, feeling what she had to say must be terribly important for her to act so forward with him.

"Go on Mary. If it's my love you doubt, you can rest easy."

"It's not the love sir, it's your pride I worry on."

"Pride?" Not understanding Aaron felt his impatience to be doing something return. "Mary I need to get on deck."

"No, you need to listen. That man that has her, he claimed her as his wife and I fear he mean's to make it true." She saw the flame of rage, felt it consume her, but she couldn't stop. "You don't like my words. If they bother you so, what will you do when you find her and she isn't the same? Will you look at her with that hate and anger? Will she feel it?"

"You ask a lot of questions." Damn it! He was angry. But he wasn't sure at what. This slip of a girl had the strength to say what he refused to even think about!

"The answers are very important. Maybe you need time to think on what I have said. She is going to need your love more now than ever before, if you can't give what you had before he touched her don't bother finding her. It will kill her."

Mary didn't wait for Aaron, but left him standing there to stare after her.

Confronted with her shocking declaration Aaron sat there under the burdensome weight of just exactly what Mary implied.

\* \* \* \*

The gentle knock on his door drew his haunted eyes as it pushed open. Watching the girl enter with the tray, Aaron's mind noted the darkness in the cabin, but he seemed incapable of moving to correct it.

Dark brooding eyes followed Mary and she wondered if he really saw her light the candle or pour the strong black coffee. She'd given him all day to come to her. Learning he hadn't left the cabin, Mary decided if he hadn't reached a decision by now it wasn't the one she hoped for.

"Drink the coffee sir. It will clear your head." Mary took the seat across from him and waited for the man, whose drawn eyes studied her. It seemed an eternity before his large hand took the mug and drank deeply of the brew.

Her heart went out to him. Taking a breath, she steadied herself against those black eyes so full of the pain and anger.

"Mackenzie would be happy to know how deep your friendship goes. You are a strong one Mary, it took more than most men possess to do what you did today."

"I'm not brave. I feared what you could do for my words, but she means more than the papers."

"Yes, I can see that, but I won't use them against you. No, you did and said what I should have made myself see. I'm angry and hurt, it's hard not to let it rule my actions."

"You are a good man sir, but are you too proud to take her back, like before?"

Closing his eyes, Aaron wondered if Mary realized exactly what she'd done to him. Oh yes, she was right, more right than he wanted

to admit. Strangely, when he got past all that violent emotion, all he could think about was Mackenzie. What was she going through? What terrible pain and humiliation was she feeling? Would she blame herself for what she was forced to submit to?

*Oh my love, I know you will.* He knew her so well. She would believe she betrayed him. He wanted to cry for the hurt and confusion she would burden herself with. Mary was so very right.

Seeing the tears silently coming from his closed eyes brought her own.

As if realizing she was there he straightened. "You want your answers, don't you Mary?"

What was it that she held back?

Nodding, Mary braced herself.

"She is my life, Mary, and whatever he does to her won't change that. Mackenzie's love and my love for her can't be touch by him. You were right, he will try, but no matter what he does he will never take that away from her, and neither will I. I want her back Mary, convincing her will take everything I have. I'm glad you made me realize it."

"Good. You will make it right, I know you will."

Aaron didn't push her, for he was starting to see why those two took to each other so well.

"Before you left, did Mackenzie get ill?"

*What a strange question.* "No."

"Well she was, just lately and not because of you, exactly."

"What are you trying to say, Mary?"

"I know these things you see, I have six sisters and being the youngest I have seen it all. What I am trying to ask you is, did she have her monthly?"

Did she? Blushing wasn't something he did, but Mary brought a lot out in a person. Aaron thought on their time together. "No...no I am sure she didn't." There he said it. Staring at the girl, he felt he would shake her silly if that were all she wanted. The smile she threw him left him totally mystified.

"Well she didn't have one after you left either." Mary waited. The blank stare brought a huff of exasperation from her. Slowly she said it all again. "She didn't, and she was sick, coffee made her throw up. Coffee! And she couldn't even wear the corset, she almost passed out!"

Looking at her, he didn't know what she expected. "Mary what?"

"Oh men, you're all so..." seeing his anger flash dangerously at her she didn't say it, but they were. "Mackenzie is carrying your child. She is close to two months into the term by now."

Child! My child? Aaron's eyes filled his face. A son, yes it would be a boy. His son. Oh she would be so happy, he could just imagine her joy.

A dark thunderous cloud tightened his eyes as a terrible thought struck him. "Mary did she know?"

Mary's exuberance shielded her from the hurricane gathering before her. "Oh no sir, she will soon enough, but she just thought it was because she missed you and she pushed herself so hard to keep her mind..." Her words died away. The man before her scared her. Why wasn't he happy? He was, just a second ago. *Oh lordy, it couldn't be!*

"Oh sir, he wouldn't be that cruel?"

"Nick Chamberlain would indeed use the child to hold her, even if it meant raising my son as his own."

"Dear God, help her."

"It's he who needs the help for the pain and lies he is inflicting on her!"

\* \* \* \*

"Lord Chamberlain, we expected you weeks ago, please come in. We received your letter, I must say it was timely."

Nick was glad now that he sent correspondence to his uncle and the solicitor before leaving Boston. "In what way Mr. Walker?"

Walker's firm handled the family's affairs for generations, but Nick wasn't sure where the man's loyalty rested. His uncle, no he had never been that, only his mother's brother, the man had always been able to control his mother. She hadn't been herself since his father's death. The lies that man spun easily swayed her to turn to him, making him trustee over the estate in Nick's absence. Furious, Nick stayed away because of the pleas from his mother. Something the man said penetrated his thoughts.

"What did you just say, Mr. Walker?"

"Why, that your uncle died, just days after your summons was issued for repossession."

"Died?"

"Yes, I am sorry...I just thought, considering the circumstances you weren't close." The man's distress was almost as humorous as his uncle cheating him of the pleasure of ruining him.

"How?"

"How sire?"

"How did the man die, Mr. Walker?"

"Oh yes, well he hung himself."

"He what!"

"They say, the servants that is, said he was distraught over your claim and eminent arrival. Seems he moaned continuously about losing it all."

Nick could only shake his head in disbelief.

"The affairs are all in order and in very good shape."

"Afraid they wouldn't be?"

"Well considering..."

Yes, considering the bastard's greed, Nick was surprised anything remained.

Returning to the carriage after settling his affairs with Mr. Walker, Nick's eyes fell on Mackenzie. The strain of the last week at sea showed heavily on her lovely features. They ran into foul weather off the English coast.

Her thoughts were too far away to listen to what her body was saying. Smiling to himself, Nick knew it was all the better. He would tell her once they were settled at the estate. Oh, yes that was something he thought out completely. Once and for all he would end this fixation she held for Masters.

"Sorry this took so long Mackenzie."

"Is everything in order?" Mackenzie didn't give a hoot about Nick's inheritance, except maybe the slight pleasure she would receive over any difficulties that uncle he mentioned would give him.

Surprised by her inquiry Nick wondered the cause. "Everything went splendid, better than I hoped, my lady." Oh that anger she couldn't hide lit her eyes, betraying her nonchalant attitude. She tried so hard not to show anything to him that Nick relished the little displays. She could no more ignore him than he did her. Seeing her look away and refuse to satisfy his curiosity, brought a smile to his full lips. She would have enjoyed seeing him fight his uncle. "Aren't you curious?"

Damn his hide, she'd like to wipe that grin right off his conceited face.

"Where are we staying tonight? I am tired and need to bath."

Laughing softly at her petty defiance. "You my lovely wife will soon be arriving at our estate. I think you will find the accommodations satisfactory."

The slight increase of coloring on her cheeks said she heard the meaning of his statement.

They rode out of the city. London was one of the few places Mackenzie always wanted to travel abroad to see. But for all its appeal she had no desire to be here.

Driving down the tree-lined countryside Mackenzie regretted her petulant statement to him. She was tired and felt ragged. A hot bath was all she could think of, but she would not say another word. No, Nick seemed to enjoy her tempered remarks and her lingering weakness that drew his unwanted concern. Holding her tongue was getting more and more difficult. Nick barely left her side on the ship. The anger and hate inside her for him was a simmering caldron. She desperately needed space to herself. Maybe the estate would capture his attention? If it was large enough she could ask for a room, her room, where she could escape his domineering presence. For solitude she would even make the supreme sacrifice to be pleasant.

When the carriage started up the long drive to his home, Nick's eyes never left her face. Her reactions came and went on a blink, but Nick caught them. Her eyes were alive with unspoken questions and he wished she'd drop that infernal guard of hers and just blurt them out.

The carriage drew to a halt before the grand stone structure. She tried not to be obvious, but my God it was something out of a storybook. She was surprised there wasn't a moat. Huge, the elegant medieval structure seemed to go on forever. The rooms this place must have. Mackenzie nearly laughed out thinking if she had made it to England in her time, this would probably be one of those English estates in the tour books.

She was so enthralled with Nick's home she didn't realize the man was waiting patiently for her to accept his assistance from the carriage. His hand on her elbow gave her a start, drawing a deep blush over what he must have seen. Never did she want him to see the admiration she unwillingly felt.

"Our home seems to have taken you unawares, my dear?"

"It is impressive, but you knew it would be. Funny how the trappings don't always adorn the owners." Refusing his assistance she tried to walk past him, but she would have been disappointed if her cutting remark didn't draw his anger.

Nick wasn't gentle in capturing her hand and halting her escape. "The lady will soon change her tone."

She glared at his hold upon her, then at those sparkling metallic eyes. Like a hawk sighting their prey, they fixed on her with a hunter stare. Holding her fear in check, Mackenzie hissed out at him. "Never!"

Pulling her against him, Nick took what he wanted, tasting the fire of passion she'd finally shown him. Her struggle brought a flame alive inside him he hadn't felt since Boston. Her fine wall was crumpling bit by bit, and Nick's exhilaration matched her awakened emotions.

When he had taken his fill he let her pull free, but his iron hold refused her retreat. "Fire my lady? Your hatred is sweet to my lips."

"You are a cruel man Nick."

"And you are a hard woman, but I love a challenge. Behave yourself my wife, we have an audience. Unless you would like them to see their new mistress carried up stairs before their eyes and locked away with her husband for the afternoon?"

Try as she did she couldn't stop her reaction to his threat. Nick had never taken his battle against her this far. She blanched, knowing he meant every heated word. He already proved he could rule her, but she feared that in her present state she wouldn't be able to take herself above it. Oh how he hated her ability to do that. Hated that she never responded to him. To her regret his anger made his ardent love making more intense, fierce in its effort to conquer her control.

He could succeed today and she knew it. Already her temper had gotten away from her. If he realized how successful his seduction was becoming he would never stop with a threat.

The defeat in those nervous blue depths warmed through him like a strong brandy. Winning her meant so much to him. He was intoxicated by desire for this woman and ruled by the unprincipled power of its force.

His eyes burned in unspoken challenge throughout the introductions to the staff. Whether it was her mounting worry over



what he would do to her or the tiredness of the journey she could feel herself getting weaker as the faces floated by. If she'd been shocked by Aaron's household, Nick employed an army to run this monstrosity. The few rooms she could see were too large and filled with elegant furnishings, but they couldn't come close to being considered cozy. On top of that, she couldn't stop thinking she had walked into a museum. The paintings alone were worth a fortune if the signatures she made out were authentic. Of course they were, but it all seemed so unreal leaving her light headed. She was just exhausted, that was all that was wrong and must be the reason for this strange feeling inside her.

Mackenzie didn't realize they finally came to the end of the long line of people until Nick started guiding her back. She could feel him staring into her, inwardly moaning she needed to get away from him. Her need drove her to actually try and pull from his hold, but Nick's hold was cold and unrelenting.

The stairs Nick lead her up seemed endless, as did the halls going off both sides at the top. There appeared to be even more passageways leading off those and countless rooms. It would be so easy to get lost. When he stopped in front of a set of double doors she felt her relief.

Her eyes seemed unable to focus on the beautiful room and objects she passed. The collection of servants skirting about added to her confusion. Trying to appear normal, anxious eyes scanned the large sunny room. Sighing, she feared she would embarrass herself in front of all these people by collapsing if she didn't lie down. There was no bed to be seen. With all these people running about she couldn't flop down on it anyway!

There was nothing else to do. "Nick?"

Damn she sounded pathetic and it galled her. Clearing her throat she tried again to get his attention, but he was involved in taking command of everyone and thing in sight.

Never did she want these strangers to see her prostrate on the floor! Turning on shaky legs Mackenzie headed out of the sitting room door. Entering the hall she turned back the way she remembered, having no idea where she was going, neither did she care. Gaining the stairs she took a deep breath to steady herself as she started down, clasping the banister for support.

At the bottom she went to the one room she glimpsed earlier. Seeing the open French doors and feeling the fresh air, she soon found

herself out in the glorious open gardens. Taking deep calming breaths her head gradually cleared.

Before her stood the loveliest garden she had ever seen. Lush green lawns spread out like a carpet with tufts of brilliant colors strategically placed. The beauty took away her nervousness. It was like an artist stood in her exact spot and took his brush, painting the peaceful scene so pleasing to her eyes.

Captured by the sweet fragrances and colors she soon found herself walking among the newly planted flowerbeds. The grass was like a great cushion beneath her feet. Impulsively she pushed off the silk slippers. Heedless of what anyone might think, her stocking soon followed.

The cool blades tickling her toes were pure heaven. Seeing a grove of weeping willows she went towards them. Parting the curtain of feathery green tendrils she went beneath the dome. If only for a while she felt a small part of the solitude she so longed for.

A bench was partially embedded in the huge trunk. Smiling she tried to imagine who might have used it. "If I'm intruding, I apologize, but this is mine for now." She felt foolish speaking out loud, but she hadn't felt so at ease for a long time.

Pulling her legs up under her she leaned back into the trunk. Her eyes half closed as her mind drifted, filling with loving memories. *Oh Aaron, I have not called you for so very long, my love. I promised myself I wouldn't after what has happened. I have been afraid to see you I can't help it. I do fear what you will think of me; the pain I have caused you is unbearable. But even knowing I must let you go, I can not help needing you, wanting to feel you hold me close to your heart. I miss your warm breath on my cheek, the strong beat of your heart lulling me to sleep. My love won't die Aaron I need you so. Come to me, my love. Come to me one last time. My eyes must see you again only then can I let you go, I am sorry, so very sorry.*

His vision came, then blurred and finally faded, making her eyes swell with tears. She tried to hold him, but the sound came again, intruding. Sadly she knew it was useless, reality couldn't be blocked out.

She heard Nick calling her and cursed the man, but didn't answer. *Let him think I have run off, it would do him some good to be taken down a peg.*

His voice came close and still she refused to return his call. She heard the anger and yes, fear creeping into her name. He was there, out in the center of the garden, searching the area. Oh why couldn't his precious estate have held his attention a little longer? Her anger rose and she stubbornly remained silent, not caring what it might cost her when he realized how close she was to him.

A thought came to her, stunning her in its wake. She could escape him! Run away. London was so large he would never find her. Why hadn't she thought of it before now? Sadly she knew it wasn't just being on a ship that stopped her from planning. Aaron prevented her from thinking on it. Even knowing it would never be possible to have what they once did, she wanted him to find her. All those hours she watched the empty sea in hope of seeing his sails on the horizon.

If she left Nick, she would be ending any chance of Aaron coming to her. He would come. His pride would drive him to seek revenge, but whom would he reek his justice on? Shaking over what her thoughts told her, Mackenzie actually feared his arrival. Yet, the longing to see him wouldn't be stilled.

Taking a deep, calming breath she would have to think about leaving. Maybe it would be best. By staying she could be giving an even worse injustice to him.

Whatever thoughts she had ended when a very furious, and ever so real, Nick careened through the flimsy wall of her hideaway. He looked ready to fight the world. Those eyes of his were hard and ready to destroy anything in his path. Moaning, she truly pushed too far this time.

"Mackenzie! Didn't you hear me?"

As innocently as possible she faced him. "No."

"No? That's it, that's all you have to say?"

"What would you like me to do? Get down and kiss your feet or beg forgiveness for needing some air! Shit Nick, I almost passed out in front of all your servants! For some stupid reason coming out here seemed like a good idea!"

"Why didn't you say something? If you weren't so...stubborn..."

"I did! But you, my lord! Were too busy to hear me." The last of her heated words drained what little bit of energy she gathered. Unwinding her legs Mackenzie started to rise when Nick's astonished glare riveted to her bare feet. She felt the color drain from her. *Damn!*

She felt like a naughty child trying to hide the evidence when she moved her hand clutching the discards behind her skirt.

“Where are they?”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb Mackenzie, it doesn’t become you. Give them to me.”

“Oh Nick back off! No one saw. Christ, you would think I committed a sin.” When the words left her mouth she wanted to disappear. “Damn you Nick, I’m tired, hungry and I need a bath. For the lord of the manor you are not doing well in seeing to the things I need!”

He wanted to turn her over his knee and whale that righteous attitude right out of her. If she didn’t already look as wretched as she so eloquently pointed out, he’d damn well do it. “If you had bothered to stay where you belonged, you would have been in that tub this very moment. And by now your dinner is cold!”

“Oh, you make me so mad I could spit!”

The screaming fight they had fallen into should have called his anger to the front, but it seemed to evaporate in light of her mounting rage. She looked like a small dust cloud, ready to take off in a whirl. That glorious blonde mane had long since escaped her chignon, free, it swirled around her like it had a life of its own. Her body vibrated with the emotions now set loose. For all his worry and fear at finding her missing Nick held true relief that she had finally lost her handle on that infernal control of hers. And he’d not let her regain her footing.

“Women don’t spit, Mackenzie!”

“Now there you are wrong. Where I come from women do all kinds of things you wouldn’t like.” She was furious to hear the words she threw out at him.

“Really? Well it must be an interesting place. As far as I know there is no such place in England.”

“England? Who said anything about England? I could care less about England.”

“You are distraught, there’s no such place, now let’s go in.” Nick didn’t think she would, but he wanted to push her anger to the limits. “Now give me your shoes and stockings!”

"No! I will go barefoot anytime I want. I like being barefoot. I am sick to death of wearing these stupid slippers. For that matter, I hate all these stupid clothes as well! They are ridiculous!"

"Mackenzie!"

"Don't you Mackenzie me! They are! The tops show way too much and these damn skirts are binding and hot. I could scream for want of my slacks and sweaters."

"I suppose women wear pants as well as spit where you come from? And where might this fantasyland be? Your father would have done better to spank you and curb your foolish notions."

"You leave my father out of this! Oh, I would love to see you there, just once, Nick Chamberlain. Your high and mighty attitude would take one hell of a beating. You in my world, now that, would be something to see. You wouldn't last a week before your male ego suffered."

A sharp warning cut through her, *Shut up Mackenzie! Stop before it's too late!* A strange sensation passed through her. For a second she thought...no, it was gone. He certainly got her steamed up.

"Where might that be?" Nick's voice no longer taunted. The serious note drew her attention and he saw the strange worry showing there. "Where are you from Mackenzie?"

Don't say it girl. Don't even think about it. "You know." Everyone thought her from here. God how could she have gone so far? He was too curious now. She almost said it, told him. A shiver took hold of her, bringing with it an uneasiness she couldn't shake off.

Behind Nick things seemed to be fading, she didn't quite understand what was happening and tried to ignore it.

"Tell me the name of your home, we should visit your fathers grave." Why didn't he believe she could tell him? Why was he thinking about the inn and how lost she was there? The things she didn't know. How out of place she seemed.

Vaguely she answered. Her attention became captured by what was going on about them. "I don't remember."

"You never could lie."

"Stop it Nick! It's not important! Here, take the slippers." She threw them at his feet, hoping, but he didn't take his eyes from her. Mackenzie was getting more frightened by the second.

"This place, where is it?"

“Stop talking about it! You mustn’t ask, I can’t stop it! Nick don’t, please...you don’t understand!”

The earth seemed to sway beneath her. Was she the only one that felt it? Frightened, she sought Nick. He looked so strange so...frightened. Oh no, it was happening, he felt it too!

“Nick run, get away from me! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it, get away...please! Run!” Mackenzie couldn’t stop what was coming. A terror filled her. “Aaron! Aaron help me! I love you, please stop this, I can’t stop it!”

Disbelief flared in him, but he couldn’t dismiss what he saw and felt. He looked quickly about them, but wished he hadn’t. Everything was shimmering in wavy lines, vanishing, except where they stood. When he looked back at Mackenzie she seemed to be trying to tell him something. But he couldn’t hear her, she was moving away from him, but her body wasn’t really going anywhere. Something appeared to be pulling her away from him.

“No! Mackenzie I won’t let this happen!”

Nick lunged after her, he could feel her and he held onto her, refusing with all his strength to let her slip away. A horrible darkness surrounded them. Nick had never known fear of this magnitude; the blackness was everything, filling his being.

\* \* \* \*

“No! Mackenzie don’t let it, fight it!” A nightmare? Rising with his shouts Aaron knew it wasn’t. It was dreadfully real, he could feel a part of him being ripped away. “Fight it Mackenzie! Dear God help her fight it! Hear me my love! I’m here waiting for you and I love you. There is nothing there to go back to, you belong here. You must stay with me! Mackenzie!”

Aaron’s cries filled the dark cabin.

Sensing his loss, he shouted the outrage over what he realized had happened. His voice vibrated with the depth of his pain.

“I won’t loose you! I swear by all the powers on earth and in heaven I will get you back! You are my life, my love and we will raise our child...together! Hear me Mackenzie! I will come to you and bring you back, or stay, I don’t care. But I will be with you, forever Mackenzie!

## CHAPTER 22

### *Awakenings...*

A soft moan stirred the man lying across the small woman beneath him. With sight, awareness crept slowly past the daze in Nick's head.

"Mackenzie?" Gently Nick straightened, lifting her into his arms, cradling her limp form. "Dear God what has happened?"

Holding her with a fear he couldn't let go of, Nick warily took in his surroundings. "Holy...!" Blinking, he looked again, but nothing changed. Strange and unfamiliar the brightly colored room drew his wide-eyed inspection. The manner of it fascinated and scared the hell out of him in the same glance.

His vision clouded against what he couldn't believe he saw. Pulling her closer Nick looked down at her in amazed wonder. "Oh my lady, you didn't have to go to such lengths. What is this strange place? Where are we?"

The answers over the unsettling thoughts started gathering inside of him. Nick didn't like the coldness he felt down to his bones. Thinking it best, Nick pushed back the urge to explore the area. He would wait for her to wake. What they'd just been through was vividly imbedded in his mind. Letting her go could be disastrous, he feared she might disappear.

Whatever happened under that willow tree went beyond man's capability. Looking cautiously about, his instincts screamed that it could happen again in an instant. Nick's only reality came in touching the woman in his arms and he couldn't allow anything to separate them. He maintained a strong conviction Mackenzie held all the answers to the mysteries surrounding him.

Fighting the panic that kept rising with each new object, Nick tried to think. There was always a logical reason for everything...maybe. His attention drifted over the room, then back to

her. He couldn't shake the feeling that the room was somehow familiar. The sinking feeling came to him...it reminded him of Mackenzie.

Smoothing back the hair from her face. "I remember how lost you were." Little things she didn't know that even with the amnesia seemed odd. Somehow Nick knew this had something to do with it.

He sat there holding her, watching as the room grew darker, hoping it meant the sun was setting. Not moving from the spot became its own torture, but he couldn't seem to make himself release her. While he waited the noises around him seemed worse than the unaccustomed sights.

Distant honking sounds filled the night, but they weren't from any geese he knew of. There was one startling noise here in the room with them that he prayed wouldn't come again. A long ringing had blared jerking him to attention, it continued at set intervals and then a click. But what followed had terrorized him. Beads of sweat remained on his furrowed brow remembering how Mackenzie's voice filled the room, but never once did her lips move nor did she wake. Another voice came, a female and an angry one if her voice said anything. She was looking for Mackenzie. Mackenzie was in his arms, if the woman were in the room she would have seen her.

Nick grew increasingly uneasy as night came, but for all his searching he didn't see any lantern or candles that would have made him rise. Facing what might next come without the benefit of light was a foolish venture.

He wished she would wake. Her exhaustion before this strange event is what kept her under. He hated to wake her afraid of what the shock might do to her.

She finally stirred in his arms. A small moan passed her lips stiffening him. "Aaron, oh Aaron help me! I don't want to go back! Please stop it!"

Controlling his flash of anger, Nick forced himself to remain calm. "Mackenzie, it is Nick. Wake up Mackenzie."

"Nick?"

"Yes love, I'm here with you." He didn't tell her he didn't have the slightest idea where here might be. Getting angry over what he already knew wouldn't help them get out of this. "Mackenzie are you alright?"

"Nick it's still black!" Jerking upright Nick held her to him.



"Mackenzie calm down, it's over."

"You! I told you to run! You fool. Can't you ever listen! Oh Nick where are we?"

Even if he had heard her words he wouldn't have left her. He nearly laughed out, wondering what he would have done if he had known where they would end up? Like she said, he was a fool.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

The shiver his words caused her made him hold her against him. Her lack of protest wasn't surprising. The surge of protective feelings Nick held for this woman, made his need to find answers, do something...anything, a call he couldn't ignore any longer. "Mackenzie, I think the sun has set. Are there any candles?"

Fighting her rising panic. "Let me up Nick."

The urge to deny her struck him immobile. "Mackenzie I fear to let you go, you have not seen where we are."

"I know where we are Nick." She said it with sickening finality. "It's alright, please believe me." The sad conviction coming from her made him release her. "Stay put Nick until I get the lights on."

Moving cautiously over the familiar room she quickly found what she sought. Her fingers shook so hard she could barely turn the lamp on.

When the light splashed across the room Nick's large frame bolted up. Before she could say anything he was beside her, pushing her behind him. Swallowing her alarm, Mackenzie fought down the surge of tears. *If only this was the frontier Nick.* After all he had done to her, Mackenzie still felt compassion for the man, for she knew exactly how frightened and bewildered he felt. "Nick it's alright, come here I will show you."

"No! Don't move!"

His hold nearly knocked the breath out of her. "Nick please, there is nothing in these rooms that can harm me or you. It is my home. My home Nick...and my time."

Nick's predatory gaze jerked from the room to her. Those deep topaz eyes held such strong disbelief she couldn't stand seeing them. The night would be long for them both. Taking his hand Mackenzie lead him over to the matching lamp at the other side of the sofa. Slowly she reached and turned it on. Feeling him jump back, she held tight to his hand and turned it off and on until Nick seemed to relax a little.

"It is a light or lamp. Instead of oil it uses electricity. In fact almost all of the things I will show you tonight work on electricity."

Nick accepted her explanation having none better of his own. Curiosity over these gadgets didn't interest him. Taking her shoulders he turned her to face him. Her avoidance of him did little to ease the unrest her words intensified. "Mackenzie look at me."

Satisfied when she did, Nick saw a cold foreboding in her sad eyes. "Where are we?"

"My apartment, it's like a small house."

"Mackenzie?"

She understood what he wanted. How could she tell him? "Brace yourself Nick. I will try and explain, please be patient and listen."

"First, to answer your question, you are in New York City, in what you knew as the Colonies and what I call the United States of America. But I am afraid it is not what you remember." Deciding whatever she said would increase his mounting look of shock and disbelief, Mackenzie took a deep breath and plunged on. "In fact nothing of your world...or existence, remains as you knew it. You are in the year 2003." At least she hoped they were she couldn't guarantee anything right now. "You have followed me back to my time Nick, the future."

The way his eyes stared in that vacant way at her made her want to reach out and shake him, afraid he'd gone into shock or something. "Nick?"

Still he stood there looking at her. In a barely controlled voice he asked her. "Explain how it is possible, how it happened?"

"I am not really sure how to do that. I don't control it, it just happens. I went back into your time and we came here. Each time it was through that awful blackness."

"When do we return?"

She didn't like the way he put that or how she expected him to react to her answer. There was no gentle way to tell him. "I don't know if we will."

He appeared to take it better than she expected.

"When was the first time? Tell me about each time and leave nothing out."

"Alright Nick, why don't I fix some tea and we will sit down and discuss it."

After her revelation Nick's control was on the verge of collapsing, but yelling at her wouldn't help either of them. If it calmed her to do a task, he would let her. He wasn't sure yet if he believed her or if he was crazy or they both were. Before he decided he needed to learn everything he could, then he would do something about the situation.

Staying beside her, Nick was practically under foot. "Nick, please! Can't you sit over there while I do this?"

"No, I feel better right here."

Seeing the tensing in his powerful body she didn't argue. She hoped his attitude wasn't any indication of what was coming. Dealing with Nick before had been near impossible, but here and with what he must face, no...he must accept it as she had; Mackenzie's misgivings ran high.

Nick refused to take his eyes off her or step away as she wanted, fearful she or he might vanish. She moved about the small area as if familiar with it and Nick took some solace in the fact. He almost jumped to move her out of the way when the flame shot up from the silver plate. The look she through him halted him in mid stride.

She sat the cups down at the kitchen table. Moving about the kitchen felt so strange, like she'd never left. If she hadn't seen the broken cup in the sink she could almost believe it could be explained away as some wild dream. But of course Nick's presence strongly denied that possibility. God, what was she going to do with him?

No wonder Aaron treated her like that! The poor man must have been beside himself. Looking at Nick and his threatening glare about the room, she grimaced. No she would never be able to tie him up. Just keeping him hidden away in this large apartment could prove difficult. Damn, why didn't he listen and stay where he belonged!

"Why are you angry Mackenzie?"

Oh how she would love to tell him! Angry was mild for how she felt.

"Sit down Mackenzie and drink your tea."

Distraught, Mackenzie mistook his concern. His authoritative tone grated on her nerves. "No! No Nick, let's get something straight right now. I have no intention of continuing to be dictated to. I am not your wife. In fact, I'm no one's wife now. I am my own person. Do you hear me! My own person! Now you go sit down, I am going to change out of these...these clothes!"

Open mouthed his eyes flamed in fury, he stood rooted to the spot as she walked tauntingly past him, slamming the door to the room she entered behind her. "Never my lady!"

Walking to the door Nick pushed through it nearly knocking it off the hinges. Standing there in the frame his eyes locked on hers, both glared out with equal anger.

"It wasn't locked you idiot!" Grabbing her jeans off the bed she pulled them on over the chemise. It too would have joined the garments heaped on the floor if he'd stayed put another minute. Kicking at the discarded dress she pulled the sweatshirt over her head, yanking her hair out of the collar she tossed it back to fall carelessly about her. Her eyes dared him to say anything.

Storming past his large threatening stance she refused to heed the tightly clenched jaw or the fire shooting out at her from his heated glare. Walking across the living room Mackenzie threw open the door.

"I hope you liked my bedroom, it's the last time you will see it!" He took a step towards her. "You may use my father's room, it's through here. There is also a private bathroom."

Leaving the door open she went to the dining room table and sat down heavily before her legs gave out. *God he was terribly imposing. Those massive muscles of his were like ripcords ready to snap beneath that shirt.* She was treading water and knew it.

Never in his life did he deal with such a stubborn woman! He refused to even look into the room she threw up in his face. The only thing that stopped him from setting her straight was seeing her in those...those skintight pants! What made her put those on? They were worse than the one's he bought for her in New York. They were positively enticing. As much as he would like to prove how wrong her little declaration was, something told him now wasn't the time.

Like a harnessed bull he took the seat beside her.

Sipping the hot tea she avoided his thunderous stare. She didn't think for a moment it was over, or that she accomplished anything. She'd be surprised if the hold he maintained on the cup didn't shatter it. The man was livid with her.

The loud knock on the door brought both of them instantly to their feet.

His hand clamped over her arm. "Stay put!"

Her stomach came up to her throat over what she saw and felt coming from him. That he would do bodily harm to whoever stood in his way right now was obviously clear. "Nick please, someone is at the door. I must answer it."

His eyes ran between her and the door, she wondered what he thought.

"Mackenzie I will not let anyone harm you."

Mackenzie caught her breath, she should have realized what Nick was feeling and thinking?

"It will be alright Nick, honest. Just try and stay calm." When he didn't let go of her. "Please Nick, you must trust me."

Could he? After everything he'd done to her, caused her to suffer? It was plain to see he was no longer in charge of their lives. He didn't want to think what that meant to them. She was right, for now he would have to believe in her.

Releasing her, Nick braced himself for what might happen.

She tried to smile in assurance, but failed miserably if the set look of doom on his face meant anything. Not feeling compassion for Nick proved impossible. Even though all he'd done to her was unforgivable, she couldn't desert him. It angered her no end to admit it to herself.

The knocking turned to banging and with it a shrill voice screamed at the door.

"Mackenzie open up right now or I will kick it down!"

"Gloria?" Shaking her head, she smiled rushing to the door, never expecting to hear that beloved voice again.

Clenching his fist didn't stop him from following. Instinctively Nick judged the objects available to defend her, if necessary. The angry voice he heard was the very same one that had come in the darkness.

Throwing the door open Mackenzie was so overjoyed to see her friend, she failed to notice the man with Gloria nor her own large shadow hovering beside her. "Gloria!"

Taking the girl in her arms, she hugged her, trying to erase the time they'd been apart and the fear she couldn't stop feeling. The rationale part of Mackenzie told her she was trying to prove all this was real.

"Mackenzie? My God ease up, you act like we haven't seen each other for years, not just since last night."

Gloria's words penetrated. "Last night?"

Realizing what her friend must be thinking, she straightened and moved backed to figure out how to correct her stupid impulsiveness. When Nick's arm came possessively about her waist, drawing her in beside his towering figure she almost struck out at him. Only the sly knowing look Gloria threw her prevented it.

"I believe you can stop all the worrying you have been doing over her Gloria. She seems to be in capable hands."

The man's voice was the first indication Mackenzie had of his presence. Looking at the nice blonde hunk beside her friend, Mackenzie gave Gloria a look that equaled her own.

That Gloria even saw it was amazing. Her friend's brown eyes were focused on Nick with such blatant approval Mackenzie felt her own blush coming for her friend's boldness.

"Well Mackenzie, aren't you going to invite us in? If we are interrupting anything...?"

Seeing the knowing look Gloria gave Nick and his returning smile, was all Mackenzie could take.

"Mackenzie, I think I would enjoy meeting your friends."

At least Nick made it plural.

"Yes come in. Would you like some tea?"

"Tea? Mackenzie since when did you give up coffee?"

Just the word turned her stomach over. Nick's observant gaze took in her reaction and he supplied the exclamation her friend sought. "Mackenzie has developed an aversion to the brew of late."

Not one to be put off Gloria moved over to Nick's side. "Really? I suppose you know a lot about Mackenzie?"

Laughing down at Mackenzie's strangely attractive friend, Nick couldn't help himself. She was hardly the threat he first believed. "If the truth be known, I know my lady quite well."

Gloria turned on her. "Why have you kept him a secret? He is marvelous Mackenzie."

"You would think so!" Stalking off to the kitchen Mackenzie couldn't stand it another minute. Banging things around over the range. *Oh he is impossible! Friend, I deserve better than that. Why, she is playing right into his hand! And he loves every moment of my discomfort. He knows I can't say anything, the bastard! Hell, the way I have been acting lately Gloria would have the white coats here, taking me away!*

"Need any help?" Seeing her thunderous rage, Dan sheepishly tried to sooth her. "Hi, I am Dan, Gloria's friend."

Calming herself, she'd forgotten all about him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. She was real worried you know, when you didn't show up at the office this morning. Then she phoned and got no answer, well I couldn't keep her away after work."

Had it only been yesterday? But she had been there, what, seven months! How could it be?

"Hey you are alright, aren't you?"

"Oh yes, I'm fine. I'm sure Gloria told you how much strain I have been under, it just caught up with me today." If nothing else she might turn into a very well versed liar, given time.

"I'm sorry I worried her, things haven't been going too well lately, I needed time."

"That's what I told her. Maybe you should take a few more days. He seems nice."

"What?"

"Nick, you know, that handsome devil in the other room she's drooling over."

Realizing Dan was watching them and what his words implied, she felt compelled to say something. "Gloria doesn't drool, at least not excessively, and you're right, he is a devil, but unfortunately I am stuck with him."

Looking at her more closely she wished she hadn't let her temper dictate her tongue.

"Trouble on the home front?"

Hoping to fix her blunder. "Just the normal problems, he dictates and I refuse."

At the man's knowledgeable smile she finally relaxed.

"He does look like the domineering type."

"Yes, well, you could say he is extremely old fashion."

They joined the other two. Dan, she found, wasn't at all the domineering male, at least on the surface. He sat beside her; she was relieved not to have Nick close until she saw the thunderous stare he kept on her and Dan. Glaring pointedly back at him, she made it clear she didn't want his jealousy.

Gloria was talking, demanding her attention.

"All the years I have known you, you never once kept secrets from me."

Confused, deciding she missed something because of Nick. “What?”

“What? Dan maybe she should come to your office for a visit.”

Jerking her eyes at the man beside her, she saw his embarrassment. “I think one of you better explain that remark.”

“I think I better.” Dan gave Mackenzie his full attention, ignoring the others. “I am Gloria’s friend’s brother.”

“So? I still seem to be in the dark.”

Nick sat looking on, no one but Mackenzie, if her attention hadn’t been else where, would have guessed the volatile danger in the man across from them.

“I am a doctor.”

Bristling, Mackenzie viewed him and Gloria suspiciously. “Let me guess, a psychiatrist?”

“You get the prize.” Gloria was so wrapped up in the appearance of the man in her friend’s life, and what a man he was, she didn’t see the storm coming.

“No Gloria, you take the prize! I don’t believe you, setting me up like this!”

“Oh Mackenzie, I just thought it would help, but I can see I was all wrong, about the problem that is.” Smiling sweetly at Nick, Gloria turned righteously back to her angry friend. “A secret, damn, I can’t believe you kept him from me for so long.”

Nick’s body relaxed a little. Whatever the bold Gloria had done to raise Mackenzie’s anger wasn’t a threat. In fact after their conversation Nick knew he might have an ally. It was hard to imagine Mackenzie being a loner as Gloria called her. Such a waste of warmth and kindness.

“Excuse me Dan, what kind of doctor did you say you were?” Pursuing this couldn’t hurt. Maybe Nick would find out why she was so upset.

“A psychiatrist.”

“You know Nick, he studies the mind and emotions of crazy people.”

Nick smiled at the woman, silently thanking her for that bit of information. After what she said about Mackenzie’s sadness over her father’s death he understood now exactly what Gloria had done and Mackenzie’s reaction. More importantly, what it meant to them.



"Gloria, you are the one I should be examining. I am sorry Mackenzie, it was totally unprofessional of me to agree to this. I never should have done this, not even for my brother. If it helps you are fine as far as I am concerned. Like you said, trouble on the home front is normal."

Dan's smile at him nearly made Nick burst out laughing over the position Gloria put her friend in. This new time may take some getting use to, but as far as he could see nothing here could change their relationship. Nick suspected that Mackenzie was caught in a trap more secure than the one of his own making. From the concern creasing her brow, he surmised she knew it.

Yes, this unexpected flight through time could turn out to be quite advantageous after all.

Nick settled back into the cushions feeling a hell of a lot more confident than he had upon waking. For now he had a lot to learn and his spirit rose to the challenge. Gloria was a wealth of information. A few pointed questions kept her going, while Mackenzie's murderous glare remained on Nick.

Kicking her best friend out crossed her mind for the hundredth time. If she didn't stop running off like that Nick would soon know her life history. As it was he appeared to be storing enough away to be dangerous and Mackenzie couldn't stop wondering how he planned on using it.

She could have kissed Dan when he insisted they leave.

"Mackenzie, I think Dan's right, you need a few days off. I will cover the office."

Why couldn't Gloria see the exasperated look she gave her and shut up! But when Nick chimed in, she almost rallied on them until she saw the strained, almost pleading look he gave her and realized what he was asking for. He needed time to adjust to this new world, even if she didn't.

Alright, she would give him this, she had to. She also had to find a way to get him out of her life. What could a 1700's man do in 2003?

Taking a hard look at him, she tried to see the man without prejudice. He was tall and broad, exceedingly handsome with a physique to be envied and a mind that worked with efficient intelligence. In his own time Nick stuck out as a man's man. He was also royalty, but not a pompous gentleman like you read about. No, he

was a leader, a doer and he possessed the authority and expertise to accomplish anything he wanted.

Sadly Mackenzie knew the fates had turned harshly on him. Here Nick had nothing: no wealth, no estate, and no authority to command.

There must be a way to use his abilities here. Admittedly, she wanted Nick to be as successful now as he had been in his past life. She may not like him, but she wasn't cruel enough to see him destroyed by something he had no control over.

What was she thinking? Her eyes were studying him for some time. She didn't even know what Gloria and Dan were discussing. Sucking in his breath Nick couldn't believe what he saw in her eyes. They were actually soft, almost caring in their warmth upon him.

"Alright Gloria, I am taking the week off."

Stunned by Mackenzie's outburst, Gloria didn't want her to change her mind. "Great, if I need you I will call." Winking at Nick, Gloria rose.

"Nick you will remember our lunch date?"

Taking her hand Nick lifted it, kissing the back of it. "I never forget my appointments with lovely ladies."

Gloria's blush was a rare event, but Mackenzie couldn't blame her, Nick could be very dashing when he wanted to. Why he did so now was what bothered Mackenzie. That look of conspiracy passing between Gloria and Nick didn't go unnoticed and Mackenzie wondered what she'd missed.

Gloria led Mackenzie away from the men with the excuse of taking the cups to the kitchen. Once alone she pounced on her. "I expect an explanation from you and soon. Although I am angry with you, I can understand. He is simply marvelous Mackenzie and so right for you, such a gentleman. Are all Englishmen like that?"

Mackenzie didn't know what to say to her friend's dreamy eyed question.

"Maybe I should go to London and have some fun. See you in a week Mackenzie."

Tidying up after they left, Mackenzie needed to gather her thoughts. It was only nine, but it felt like she had been up for days. Did one get jet lag from time travel? Gloria's instant acceptance of Nick left her rattled. Her friend wasn't usually so easy to win over, making her wonder what those two talked about.

Nick leaned up against the bar watching her absent movements. He'd gotten used to her attire and found he liked what it allowed him to see. He wanted to take her to bed. So much had happened she was his only reality and he needed to hold her, to feel her presence.

Fighting what he wanted, he also knew there would be no better time than now to act on what he believed needed to be settled between them. She was vulnerable, in a way nothing had changed. But what the night still held wouldn't allow Nick to take the same course with her.

Knowing he was watching her, she reminded herself of what she decided concerning their situation. "I am sorry they stayed so long."

"Don't be, your friend was refreshing."

"Gloria would love that. She liked you."

"Why do you find that so surprising?"

Shrugging, she suddenly wished she hadn't started this. "She doesn't usually open up to people that quickly."

"She said the same of you."

Blushing, she wondered what else Gloria told him.

"Mackenzie would you let me hold you for a while?"

The ability to stop staring at him over his request went beyond her. Nick would be blind not to see her suspicion over his request, but when she saw the hurt it rendered in his gaze, she suddenly felt guilty. Too confused she answered the need she saw in the man.

"Alright Nick."

Nick took her hand and led her back to the couch. Sitting down he gently drew her beside him and held her against his shoulder.

"So much has happened. I didn't believe you, you know?"

"I know Nick. I remember how I felt."

"After meeting them I knew what you said to be true. I can tell you I am not looking forward to seeing what your world contains. Just what I have seen here is too much to take in."

Laying her head back against his chest. Her hand came up laying over the rapid beat of his heart. She felt awkward and a little wary of him. If this were a trick to draw her sympathy she would never forgive him.

"I think once you get used to what has happened your curiosity will take over. There is so much to see, so many wonderful inventions. It's a whole new life, Nick."

"That night I found you in the woods, it happened then, didn't it?"

“Yes.”

“It wasn’t the first time?”

“No...”

Mackenzie told Nick what he wanted to hear. His embrace never went beyond comfort. She soon found herself relaxing, relating all, except her time and love for Aaron that was her memory, alone.

“You are a brave woman, Mackenzie.”

She laughed sadly. “I didn’t really have a choice. Once I accepted it, I could deal with the obstacles.” All but her loss, she could never deal with that. Funny, but before she rightfully had Nick to blame, now she had no one and it seem worse knowing there was no chance to correct it.

“I am sorry Mackenzie.”

Pulling away she looked at him. Never once had he admitted an error in judgment concerning his actions against her.

“You’re a hard lady Mackenzie.”

“Why are you sorry now, Nick? Why not then?”

“Then, I did what I had to, to protect you.” And he would again. “I don’t regret my actions, even knowing I earned your hate for the pain I caused you. They would have hung you.”

Confused over his words, but knowing he believed them to be right, her eyes dropped, knowing what he said to be true. “Why Nick? Why the other?”

Lifting her chin so she had to see him give her the answer. “I love you. I have since that first night in the woods. I know you understand that. Claiming you as my wife gave you my protection in a way no one could refute. My need to insure your safety extended to the basic need a man feels for the woman he loves. Without claiming you in every sense, including your submission to the fact, I could never truly protect your life. If you are honest with yourself, you will understand what I am telling you.”

She couldn’t stop the tears and didn’t know if they came for Nick or her?

“You see Mackenzie, I never realized that he was protecting you then. What I regret is the loss of hope this has caused you. Always you believed he would come and take you from me. He would have you know, I never believed otherwise.”

“But you said...”

“What I said I had to say to help you deal with what I did to you. You may not understand, but I had to. I love you too much to let you go.”

“Nick it won’t work between us.”

Brushing her tears away, Nick knew what she meant, but he also knew she no longer had any options, Masters couldn’t help her now. She would realize that all too soon. What he would tell her would be the cruelest act he ever committed against this woman, but for her to know the truth, now, would destroy her and he couldn’t allow that to happen. Somehow he must rectify what Masters no longer could and fate had decided for them all.

“I know your heart will always be with him. It’s now something I can accept easily, sometimes my anger over it gets out of hand, but I have always realized the truth.” Now that he had to tell her, Nick found it hard to find the words.

Mackenzie never took her gaze away from him. She believed it was the first time he’d ever really been honest with her and maybe even with himself. The struggle she saw taking place inside him told her how important his next words would be.

“Mackenzie, you and I are tied in so many ways now.”

“You will be fine here Nick. I just know everything will be fine. We’ll find a way for you to use your talents successfully.”

“I am not concerned about that, it will work out. I love a challenge.”

His eyes twinkled at her, earning a tentative smile. If his future here wasn’t the problem something very monumental was glossing over what should have been his main priority under the circumstances.

“What is it Nick? Something is wrong, what?”

“Nothing is wrong, Mackenzie. Not like you think, in fact from my view point it’s wonderful.”

He almost wished that confusion in her lovely eyes would stay. Taking her hands in his, Nick couldn’t put it off any longer. “Mackenzie, you’re an intelligent lady, after what I learned tonight I would say you are brilliant.”

Why didn’t his compliment thrill her? Why did she feel there was some underlying motive here?

“But in some things, actually one thing, yourself, you seem to be lacking the appropriate knowledge. I believe it’s because you were

raised by your father.” Oh, he’d caused a sharp reaction this time. Their relationship truly was special. “Don’t get bristly yet, Mackenzie. It is really a compliment in a fashion. Your father taught you how to use that brain of yours and to be proud of your abilities. What he failed in, was the womanly aspect he couldn’t have known anything about.”

“Damn it Nick would you just tell me what it is you are getting at.”

*Stopping her swearing was next on his list. Maybe not, he rather enjoyed her open defiance.* “Alright, but I am a man too and it is just as difficult for me as your father.” He tried to go easy. “Haven’t you once wondered about the changes in yourself lately?”

Seeing her blank expression nearly ruined him. “Think about it. The coffee, your weakness, the sickness and changes, even I have noticed when I hold you.”

Taking her hands he ignored her resistance and placed them across her lower abdomen. “Touch yourself, what do you feel?” Raising her hands he pressed them to her breast, noting her sharp intake of breath over the tenderness. “They are tender, aren’t they Mackenzie?”

Nodding she dropped her hands, avoiding his eyes. She didn’t understand what he wanted. A nagging awareness crept inside her head, but she pushed it away, afraid of what it meant.

“You can’t ignore it Mackenzie, I can’t let you, I’m sorry it didn’t happen with the one you wanted it to, but it has happened and it is with me. You are carrying my child Mackenzie, my son grows there inside you.” Nick put her hands back and held them there.

Slowly her head ceased its shaking denial. Overly bright eyes searched his in question.

“A baby Mackenzie, yours and mine.”

*Baby?* Things came to her, could it be true? Nick’s baby? Nick’s, not Aaron’s! “No! You’re lying, it’s another trick to get me to agree to everything!”

He tried to pull her to him, but she hit his hands away. “No, I won’t listen to anymore of your lies. I won’t! I can’t be pregnant.”

His large frame came up with hers off the couch. “You are, you know you are.” Nick kept his anger over her violent denial in check. Reminding himself he expected this from her didn’t make it any easier to face.

"No, I've just been tired and the journey wore me out."

"You are only denying the child because it is mine and not your lovers. Deny it all you want, because soon you will not be able to, to yourself or anyone else." Gripping her shoulders he made her look at him. "That is my baby inside you, mine do you hear. I won't deny what I did to you, I haven't, but that child will not suffer because of it. I thought you a better person than this. To extend your hate to the babe, because of me, is more than I believed you capable of."

The tears flowed down her cheeks. She shook against his painful words. She didn't hate the baby, if there was one. How could he think she would do that?

Shaking her, Nick wanted to hold her, not yell at her, but if he stopped now, gave her one chance to think, she might realize...no, he had to stop that at all cost. Even he couldn't deal with an anguishing truth of just what she lost. God he never thought he would say it, but he prayed that man didn't know she carried his child. That was more loss than any man should have to bare.

"Mackenzie, listen to me. I want that child, you come with it whether you like it or not. I refuse to relinquish my claim to my heir. You will be my wife and have my child. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

So soft, did her answer really come? He barely dared believe. "You agree then? Mackenzie?"

Looking up into his eyes stole any strength she had left to fight him. If she did carry his child, he was right. She couldn't deny his claim or what he asked of her. *Aaron, please forgive me for what I must do.*

"If I carry your child...I will be your wife." The weakness she couldn't keep back washed through her in a violent rushing wave.

Nick felt the change and quickly lifting her in his arms he walked back to the room she claimed as her own.

If he insisted on staying she didn't think she could argue the point. Her thoughts seemed all muddled, leaving her wondering if she even had a right to tell him to go.

Lying her on the bed, Nick stripped off her shirt and pants ignoring the moan of protest she uttered. Pulling the quilt up about her he leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Sleep safe, my lady."

Surprised blue eyes followed the man out of the room. Turning on her side, she buried her head under the soft familiar cover. Thoroughly drained sleep quickly captured her ragged mind.

Leaving her Nick found the other bed collapsing across it. A day like none he could ever imagine finally stole the last of his energy, throwing him into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The dark reddened eyes refused to give in to the exhaustion that burned inside. Angry, their fierce glare watching the massive white sails went back out to open waters. Why had he persisted in coming here? He faced what he expected at Chamberlain's estate. Nothing! She had vanished.

Torturing himself by verifying what he already knew didn't change anything. Driving his ship and men to reach the English coast in record time had been the act of a desperate man. The evidence he forced himself to face took away all his denials. Learning that Nick also disappeared was a blow he nearly didn't survive.

Aaron felt, since that first night in the cabin after Mary left him, what was happening to Mackenzie. God, he even knew her fear as his own and exactly what caused such rendering terror.

Had that man followed her back?

No one found a trace of them or a struggle to give evidence as to what might have caused their disappearance from the grounds. Everything told Aaron it was so and his rage consumed him. Nick was there with her, leaving Aaron helpless in preventing him from convincing her the child was his. Mackenzie may have survived everything he could inflict upon her, but this?

Sadly Aaron knew her too well; he knew exactly how she would take that bastard's declaration.

Looking out over the blue water, the color of her eyes, the haunting loss came again. How and why this happened didn't matter. He must find a way to reach her. If only she would call him. If she would just call to him he could travel through the void and reach her.

"Damn it Mackenzie, you haunted me when I knew not who you were! Why won't you call me now, when we both know the love between us? Won't you wield your power over me and bring me to you?"

"A curse on you Nick Chamberlain! You are the cause of this silence. You have poisoned her mind to what she should feel in her



heart. I promise you, even with the barriers of time, you will pay for the deceit of your destruction.”

Turning from the rail Aaron shouted out a course setting to Mr. Baker. Stopping before he reached the companionway to his cabin, Aaron felt a surge of hope course through him. “I’ll be! Of course! Oh darling you are guiding me, aren’t you!”

With lighter steps Aaron went below to verify his log over what he had just realized. The settings he just gave Baker were the same ones they had been at when he’d gone to her that first night. Smiling over his discovery, Aaron’s spirits soared. Somehow he was going to be with her and he didn’t care where it would be.

“Oh love, you just keep thinking of me. I will find you.” Aaron started his own summons across the space that separated them. If she wouldn’t call him he would hound her until she had no choice but to listen.

And he started his campaign. Every minute detail of their time together came into his mind and he reached out to tell her, remind her, refusing to believe in defeat. Oh yes, he had as much right to use his power over her as she once did to him. Right now the force he felt would be an awesome weapon!

## CHAPTER 23

### *Expecting*

Pulling on her skirt and silk blouse she should have felt wonderful over the freedom found in her old wardrobe. But even the luxury of a real shower didn't lift her spirits. Brooding, she held little desire to face the day and Nick.

This morning, after a night of longing dreams of Aaron, Mackenzie wondered if she could remain civil to Nick if he persisted in his demands. Today she would have her answer if what he said was true. The voice that kept telling her it was true, she was pregnant, wouldn't be silenced.

Walking into the living room Mackenzie was too involved over what she needed to find out to take any notice of Nick's presence at the table. Punching out the number of the physician she remembered one of the girls at the office using and after considerable persuasion and insistence, she had an appointment for this morning.

Nick listened to the one sided conversation, not really sure what contraption she was using, it seemed she could talk to people. She was right, there were many inventions to be discovered, later. He gathered she was going to see a doctor Mitchell and Nick didn't need to ask why. He had every intention of accompanying her where ever or whatever it meant. Nearly groaning over the thought of what waited outside these walls, Nick cast the dark thoughts off.

Knowing Mackenzie wouldn't remain docile now that she was secure in her surroundings, Nick rose before dawn to prepare for what the day with her might bring forth. The first trial came in that small room she called a bathroom. Thankfully he remembered seeing how she made water come out of the pipe in the kitchen. He was glad he'd been alone, even if her assistance would have been useful. His attempts at conquering the strange working marvels were admittedly

hilarious. Smiling at the memory Nick shook his head over the advantages to be found. One was definitely the indoor plumbing. He was definitely curious and a shame that his questions would have to wait. Right now Mackenzie was his only concern until this was settled he would not deviate.

When she moved into the kitchen still unaware of him. Nick knew where her thoughts were. "The water is still hot for tea."

Jumping at his voice, she spun about and saw him for the first time. Not only did he look rested, but refreshed, making her wonder what he was up to. He shaved and his coppery locks were still damp. So he did find the shower.

Her eyes lowered realizing he also discovered her fathers' clothes. She hadn't realized they were the same size. Begrudgingly Nick looked very attractive and every bit the modern man. But inside she was still dealing with a very outdated masculine attitude. If it were contagious all the females in her time and beyond would hate her.

Memories of another, more impressive man, equal in attitude, made her look away. Smiling despite the sadness, she wondered if any woman could resist Aaron. Damn, jealousy was the least of her problems!

Aaron and Nick were much alike, but how different her feelings and acceptance were. She knew now she gloried in Aaron's protective dominance, that authoritative personality thrilled and excited her beyond earth's precious bounds. As hard as she tried not to think of Aaron the more impossible it seemed. Why now, when she felt the hopelessness, did he come to her so strongly? Nick was right, she did believe he would come and save her, even knowing what she would face in Aaron.

Remembering her appointment she forced her thoughts away.

"I hope you don't mind me using your fathers' clothes?"

"No...they fit you. We will have to go shopping and get you what you need."

"These will do fine for now. Why did you hold on to them?" He was curious, but he also needed to distract her.

"I don't know. I guess I figured if they were still here maybe he would be back."

Finishing her tea, she noticed the time. Gathering her purse she started to go, stopping when she felt Nick behind her. Turning she nearly bumped into him. "Nick! Stop following me."

He ignored her temper. "Where are you going?"

"I have an appointment. I'll be back."

"With a doctor, to see about the baby?"

It wasn't exactly a question. He must have overheard her call.

"Yes, I need to know."

"Fine, let's go."

When he moved to open the door, she stayed glued to the spot.

"What are you doing Nick?"

Smiling at her. "I am going with you."

"No you are not."

"I am, the child and your welfare are my concern, where you go I go. I will try not to interfere, but I am going."

She didn't have the time to argue. "Come on then."

Nick followed; each step outside the door made him wonder how wise his insistence had been. Using every bit of his training and will power he fought his horror over the strange sights and sounds assaulting his senses.

The box they entered seemed harmless enough and he waited as she punched out number one. In a breath it felt as if the world fell from beneath him, sending his stomach up to his throat. Pressing against the wall he braced himself for the landing. Nick prayed she wouldn't turn and see his fright. When the door rushed open Nick grabbed her arm and pulled her out of that death trap before it gave way beneath them.

"Nick? Slow down."

Slowing against his better judgment he didn't want her to get frightened, his own was enough to deal with. He kept his eyes on her; the sudden mass of people about when they stepped out of the large room and onto the street captured his attention. His body stiffened in readiness, it was like a battleground, the anticipation of an explosion taking place froze him in his tracks. Nothing could have prepared him for the pandemonium. So much movement. Things rushed by at wild speeds and the noise! It was bedlam for sure. Nick's battle to remain in control became so intense he didn't realize Mackenzie walked on.

The cab pulled up, as she started to get in it came to her that Nick wasn't beside her. Panic quickly replaced her anger with him. Frantically her eyes searched the crowded sidewalk. When she saw him she could have kick herself over her own stupidity. Waving the cab on, she pushed her way back to Nick.

The total look of panic on his normally strong features made her cringe. At least she held some knowledge of what she faced in his time. This man was alienated from everything in her world. Taking his clenched hand, she pressed her fingers through his. Talking calmly, Mackenzie urged him with her hand about his waist to start walking.

“Nick I’m sorry, I didn’t realize what you would be seeing. Remember I told you there were changes. I guess I should have prepared you. We will walk, alright? I will tell you about your new world. Ask anything you want.”

He squeezed her hand in response and listened to her voice. It did indeed have a soothing effect on him. Her revelations soon brought out his curiosity and the panic slipped away.

His questions were pointed, but when she saw the wonderment begin to cross his face she knew he was going to be alright. She wouldn’t let herself forget again, regardless of what was between them she had to help him get through this adjustment.

By the time they reached the doctor’s building Nick was firing questions at her so fast she barely answered one before his thirst for more came rushing in, taking them in another direction. Mackenzie decided Nick needed to see and feel all there was to cope with it. After the appointment they would spend the afternoon walking around the city.

When her name was called Mackenzie wasn’t prepared for Nick’s next action and didn’t realize he followed her into the examining room. “Nick you can’t stay in here.”

“Why not, I have the right.”

The doctor’s unexpected input left Mackenzie without an argument. “Are you the father?”

“Yes sir, she is carrying my child.”

“Then I agree young lady, he does have a right.”

Seeing the girl’s dismay and remembering what she put on the chart as far as her marriage status he could well imagine the position she found herself in with this imposing man. Smiling to himself, Doctor Mitchell didn’t usually run across this situation. It was usually the woman demanding that the man acknowledge his responsibility, not what he saw to be the lady’s obvious distress. Right now he needed her less agitated.

“Well, Mr.?”

“Mr. Nicholas Chamberlain.”

“Yes Mr. Chamberlain, I can understand your concern, I must however ask if you might not wait outside, so the lady won’t be embarrassed or tense by your presence until I have made the exam. She will be perfectly fine. My nurse will stay to help her. Once I am finished I will call you in and we will talk.”

Nick’s eyes were dangerously bright, Mackenzie nearly moaned over the scene she feared. After staring at the doctor Nick turned to her. “Will you be alright if I wait out here? I will stay by the door if you need me.”

Maybe it was the concern he held her in, she didn’t know, but she rested her hand on his cheek. “I will be fine Nick.”

“I will not leave.”

The scene made the doctor more curious about these two than he had been in years. Every once in awhile it took something like this to make him appreciate how complex life was. He hoped whatever the problem it could be worked out.

The exam was something Mackenzie never experienced before and she knew she almost wished Nick were holding her hand, instead of the nurse. But if he’d been shocked before seeing this equipment and knowing what she did about medical practices in his time, Nick would probably have done something rash, thinking she was being hurt. She knew almost immediately that Nick spoke the truth. The doctor was telling her everything looked normal.

“I think we should let him in now, alright?”

“Yes, I think you better.” The doctor was nervous over the pacing they could hear in the corridor too.

When Nick entered she saw his eyes taking everything in and silently praised his iron control. Holding her hand out to him she hoped to draw his attention away from the machines.

“Nick?”

“Is everything alright? Why are you lying down?”

“I’m fine Nick.”

The doctor took control. “Nick, she is fine and so is the baby. I thought you would like to see for yourself.”

“See?” Nick dared not ask how he could do such a thing. Everything in the room scared the hell out of him. Finding her lying on the table, he knew naked beneath that gown, was about all he could

tolerate. But she seemed calm so Nick forced himself to wait and watch.

“Yes, it is an ultra sound machine. We can get a picture of the baby from the waves bouncing off the fetus. Of course it is still very small and hardly developed to look much like it will when it is grown, but it gives us the information we need to insure a healthy child will be born.”

Intent on every word, only one question came from the tense man clasping the girl’s hand in a death grip. “Will it hurt her or the child?”

Mackenzie remained quiet hoping the doctor could ease Nick’s concern. She was stunned to see the how much care he actually held for them. “It tickles Nick, that’s all. Doctor rest it on Nick’s hand so he can feel it.”

The stern lines on his face began to relax. “Watch the screen. There, we’ve located the baby, see the small form.”

“That is the child?”

Laughing at Nick’s disbelieving outburst. “Yes young man, remember it is just starting to grow. I will give you books so you will understand. For now take my word everything is fine for a ten to twelve week old fetus.”

Nick heard Mackenzie’s sharp intake of breath. Could they actually tell how old a child was by this? He hadn’t known. Thinking quickly Nick knew what she would be thinking and was relieved he already had an answer to her unspoken question.

“Now let’s hear the heart beat.”

When the swishing noise filled the room the troubled questions fell away over her excitement. Faint at first they both heard the strong, steady beat of the baby’s heart. “Oh my, Nick do you hear it?”

“It is beautiful Mackenzie.” Thrilling! It was unbelievable what this time accomplished. No matter what happened he wouldn’t have missed this and never would he forget such an experience. The tears came rolling down her cheeks and Nick brushed them away. “It is good isn’t it, Mackenzie?”

“Yes Nick, it’s wonderful.” His lips took hers in a warm gentle kiss surprising her and leaving her with a strange avalanche of unwanted feelings.

After she dressed, they had a conference with the doctor. He lectured on everything she could and couldn’t do and eat. Nick took charge, promising she would heed all the doctor’s advice. She didn’t

seem to mind Nick taking over or the way he hovered over her like a knight ready to slaughter the dragons. It had to be the child and knowing it was really there that did this to her. That, and Nick's joyous smile demanding her own in return.

Nick even made it clear he wanted to be at the birth when the doctor mentioned it. And he insisted the doctor take them on a tour of the hospital and explain the procedure. Nick's wariness of the hospital was obvious. Mackenzie knew what he expected of them, she remembered Mary called them death houses.

They did walk, but Nick refused to let her take him about the city. "No, there are other times we will walk, I don't want you to get tired."

Seeing the restaurant she liked, she practically had to beg Nick to agree that they stop and eat. Nick ordered, but the change she saw in him made her wish she hadn't persisted. "What's wrong Nick? Don't you like the food?"

"It is fine. Mackenzie are all places so expensive?"

A dollar in his time could have stocked a kitchen; ten for a fish dinner must have seemed exorbitant.

"I'm afraid everything is inflated in value now."

Nick asked her prices of things like shoes, shirts and her apartment. She knew what was taking place in his mind, but not how to help. The man's pride was taking a hell of a beating and she feared it would have to stand even more before it was over.

It seemed she was noticing a lot of things she had never allowed herself to see about Nick before. Unable to stop herself she was also constantly comparing him to Aaron. In truth Aaron dominated her thoughts even over Nick's presence. Telling herself it was useless to do this when it was Nick's child inside her, even Aaron couldn't change what that meant. Nick had the claim on her he so desperately wanted. That he wanted her to get pregnant she already accepted. He wasn't even trying to hide his satisfaction from her. There would be no dealing with that male conceit now. Nor could she deny his demands.

She dismissed the notion she could have the baby alone since she'd seen his reaction in the exam room. He would never allow it and she wasn't cruel enough to insist. Somehow she would make herself accept what was now out of her hands.

\* \* \* \*



*No! No you don't my lady. I know exactly what is going through that pretty head of yours. I won't allow it!* For the last days it seemed the more he concentrated the stronger Aaron felt her. He seemed to know everything, like he was there, observing. She fought his intrusion, but he didn't stop, couldn't give it up. He was certain now just how strong their bonds were. He also knew it was his strength that had to save them. Nick's presence was too overpowering and Aaron felt Mackenzie weakening against his assault. She wasn't fighting!

Furious at her, Aaron also knew the reason. If he could just get her to listen, if just once her guard fell, he was positive he could get to her.

Tonight they would be at the exact location the night he'd first gone to her. As he hoped his calling gained in strength. He could feel his power intensified the closer they came. Tonight he would try to break through the barriers. The conviction that he only had one chance and he couldn't fail never left him. "Tonight Mackenzie, tonight you won't be able to fight me. Open your heart and listen even if it hurts, you must hear my calls!"

\* \* \* \*

The last couple of days Nick demanded every spare moment of her time. She showed him everything she could think of inside and out of the apartment. Explaining how things like cars and plumbing worked defeated her until she remembered the library. She'd never seen Nick so excited. They even took a cab home because of all the books they'd checked out.

Nick hated the cars; his leeriness over their safety was indisputable considering how they whipped in and out of traffic. The last driver had been the typical boisterous and obnoxious cabby. Mackenzie didn't know whether to scream or laugh when Nick jerked the man by the collar and threatened him in a way that paled even that tough character.

"You will refrain from such profanity in front of the lady. One more word and you will be seeing an explicit demonstration of the phrase you are so fond of using. Understand?"

Nodding in earnest, the man didn't utter another word, four letter or otherwise.

“The men in your time need to be taught some manners, my lady.” Mackenzie didn’t hide her humor. “And maybe the women as well, hey Mackenzie?”

Blushing, Nick made it clear how he felt about her vocabulary.

Nick became familiar with his new surroundings in record time. His knowledgeable grasp of everything didn’t surprise her. It was obvious the man would do fine, but she couldn’t help but worry over what profession Nick would fit into. Nick would never be satisfied with a labor job. Physically he could do anything. His pride would be the problem. They had to make some decisions and soon.

“You seem to know your way around Nick.”

“This city is no different than the frontier, in fact I find many similarities.”

She didn’t press for explanations. It was enough that he was gaining more confidence every day.

“I am to meet Gloria for lunch today. Do you mind Mackenzie?”

She tried not to be suspicious over her friend’s involvement with Nick. With Gloria it came with the territory. Mackenzie knew she was still smarting over the other evening and Dan.

“No Nick, I have some things to do around here.” Gloria called to remind Nick of their appointment. Nick’s phone manners were very clipped and remained mostly one-syllable words. Sighing she knew he would grow more comfortable with the contraptions, given time. He already mastered most of the items in the kitchen and bath. She actually thought he liked their conveniences, especially the availability of running hot water. He loved taking showers, using every excuse he could to try it out.

Even now his hair was damp from the one he took before leaving to meet Gloria. Her father’s wardrobe became a godsend and Nick appreciated her father’s excellent taste. Mackenzie noticed how well he looked, extremely masculine, but with a very sophisticated air. The clothes moved with his virile grace like a second skin. Nick would never lose that wild aura, he would always be the stalker, the hunter.

He avoided mention of their future these last days. Acting as if nothing had changed. She was thankful he stayed in her father’s room. It wouldn’t last. She knew that possessive light he held her in and it seemed stronger than before.

Her deep thoughts over where they were headed prevented any intrusion. When his arm came about her, leaning her back into his frame, she stiffened at the unexpected contact.

"You are very beautiful when you're off alone like that. Those unguarded blue eyes are an exotic potion on my senses." His hand covered her lower abdomen in all his male ownership. "I think you are prettier now, if that is possible. There is a golden halo about you, a soft warmth basking you in ivory magic."

She couldn't find her voice and shut her eyes against his tender onslaught. How did one fight a battle when the attacker used honeyed caresses and tender words to beat down their opponent's defenses?

"You'll be late Nick."

Smiling into the fragrant locks he buried his lips at the back of her neck. The warmth of his breath feathered against her skin. "Only if I walk, my lady."

Moving her around in his arms Nick raised her head to stare into the depths that couldn't look away. "Having a child agrees with you."

"Nick..." He hushed her plea by placing a finger over her soft lips.

"Don't Mackenzie, I will give you a while longer. I want you, have no doubts about that, but I want more than you ever allowed me before, I always have."

"I'm sorry Nick."

"Sorry? I am the one that is sorry." Lowering his lips to hers, he covered her warmth with the tender depth of his words. Gentle, no demands, no ruling, Nick showed her what he wanted and how pleasurable it could be when giving without the need to conquer.

Breathless, her confused eyes fell to his lips when he pulled away. "I'm here for you, no other Mackenzie. I am real and I love you, that is why I will give you the time your eyes plead for. But Mackenzie, I will not wait forever, I have learned time is fleeting. A day here, month there, you see I have learned what you still want to deny. Fate has given me what I may have been unable to hold in my time. I am the one your destiny brought you to and together we will raise the evidence of that joining."

His eyes looked so deeply into hers, she knew he saw her thoughts. The slow shake of her head wanted to deny his belief, but his golden gaze never let her. The hunter had his prey and she lost the struggle to escape those masterful talons. He left her standing there

with her thoughts. Staring at the closed door as she tried to shake off the feelings Nick left behind.

Gaining the bedroom Mackenzie laid down on the bed. Exhausted by what just happened she closed her eyes. Images of Aaron immediately filled the darkness behind her lids. Flinging them open she willed him to leave.

“No Aaron...I’m sorry. Oh God, you don’t know how sorry I am. Please leave me. Please stop hounding my every waking and sleeping thoughts. Nick is right, I don’t want it, but he is right! It is his child, his. Do you hear me? I can’t, I tried to stop him but he has won. He knows it, I know it and you have to! Please let me go. Let it end! I can’t go on like this. For me, Aaron, release me!”

His calls were so persistent, so unrelenting, nothing stopped them from getting stronger. As much as she wanted him, she knew it was over. She was here and it was impossible to reach him. Whatever allowed her to reach him the first time cruelly corrected its mistake and left broken lives in its wake!

If only the child was Aaron’s. To live without him was a destructive fate. If the child were his at least then she would have a small part of him to keep near her.

Even if the father held no place in her heart, she did love the child. That was the problem, she must sever the hold Aaron was trying to keep alive. For the sake of the baby she needed to stop him. In honesty Mackenzie admitted the sad truth for herself as well, because if she failed to banish Aaron Nick would destroy what little she held of Aaron. Nick would be ruthless this time, she was sure of it.

Shaking her head to clear it, she must find a way. But how? How could she end a love so deep it was sealed insider her very soul? It would be killing a part of herself. Did she really want to do this?

Flicking on the light switch Mackenzie finished going over the large stack of mail she ignored because of Nick. She looked out at the darkening sky and frowned. Nick was late, though she knew he was capable of handling himself she couldn’t help but worry when he didn’t returned from his lunch date with Gloria. Staring at the phone she caught herself. Of course Nick wouldn’t think of using it.

Getting up she started pacing again. She never stopped thinking about Aaron. He was doing this to her. Oh yes, she was positive Aaron was causing her to see him at every turn. His essence filled her senses! She’d swear she could even smell his crisp ocean scent

penetrating the room. Still she fought him; the pain Aaron inflicted was nearly unbearable. Aaron was using his own magic, as he called it, against her.

The sudden thought came to her. Could he? My god, could he come to her as he had before? She called him then. Was he trying to reach her in the same way?

Troubled blue eyes scanned the room. "No! He can't, it's impossible." No that wasn't true, he'd come once before. Her mind raced over the possibility. She could help him! What would it hurt to try?

Gasping she sunk down into the couch. "It would hurt you, my love. Hurt you so deeply you would never forgive me." Tears welled up blurring her vision. What had she been thinking? To try and bring him to her when she carried another's child. Even if he could eventually accepted her after... No, now the evidence would always be between them. Always a reminder of what she failed to keep sacred.

She brushed the wetness on her cheek away and with it the foolish hope she almost opened her heart to. At that moment Nick and Gloria came through the door, filling the room with excited chatter. Straightening herself, she hoped she appeared calmer than she felt. As wrong as it was Mackenzie could not dismiss the possibility that Aaron could come to her. Trying to concentrate on what they were telling her proved difficult. Aaron's presence seemed to be all around her. Biting her lips, she swore his aroma was there, stronger than before.

"Mackenzie is something wrong? Are you sick?" Nick's hands were on her shoulders. He was looking her over from head to foot. She hadn't realized he was standing before her. What had he asked?

"I'm sorry, what did you say Nick?"

She nearly blanched at the sudden venom of anger that flashed in his eyes. Silently moaning, Mackenzie couldn't shake the conviction Nick knew exactly where her thoughts were.

"What's wrong Mackenzie?" Harshly his hands dug into her shoulders.

"Nothing! I was just worried because you were late."

Nick wanted to disagree with her excuse, but remembering Gloria's presence he backed off. Later they would settle this and his look conveyed his feelings.

Fool that I am. He knows, damn him. Now his anger will dictate. *Aaron if you can hear me, stop this before I loose what little I have left of you!*

Gloria didn't know what to make of these two. Nick was everything a woman could want in a man. Everything she could ever want for her friend. Mackenzie should be thrilled over Nick, but Gloria's long friendship told her something wasn't all it appeared to be.

Yet Mackenzie look lovelier than Gloria ever remembered her being. There was a softness about her. Suddenly cringing Gloria also saw a deep sadness in her friend. Was it because of Nick? She didn't want to think so.

Looking harder, Gloria decided she missed something very important. Maybe she let Nick's unique qualities hamper her judgment. Admittedly he was nothing like any man she ever knew. A renaissance man. He possessed charm, manners and a very dangerous essence that added a thrilling excitement to his handsome ruggedness. He was prideful, domineering and intelligent, but so was her friend. What was it that intrigued her to the point of not seeing Mackenzie's uneasiness around him? Gloria didn't like the answer that came to her. Mackenzie, not Nick, should be her concern. What was it she missed?

Yes, it was there, a wariness existed in those large blue eyes. "Mackenzie why don't we get some coffee or tea made up. Nick you don't mind waiting to tell Mackenzie our news, do you?"

"No Gloria, tea would be fine."

After spending the day with Gloria Nick caught the different look in those brown eyes. Had she seen her friend's troubled gaze? Today he learned what he set out to from Mackenzie's friend. He also learned Gloria was a very sharp lady and her loyalty to Mackenzie ran deep. Mackenzie's business was impressive and through Gloria, Nick discovered what it was about and how to utilize it. Already he made Gloria see how valuable his input could be, the first of many. But if Gloria became suspicious, it could ruin his plans.

As much as Nick came to detest his spying roles in the past, he knew the experiences were invaluable to him now. All those years of fitting in quickly, sizing up a situation and grasping what he needed to be accepted worked today. This was just another role, one he needed in order to fit into Mackenzie's world. Living off her was eating away

at him and the sooner he corrected it, the sooner she would accept his role as her husband. Nick knew exactly how to alleviate any ill feelings Gloria might be getting. Nick watched them closely, knowing what he would do.

“Mackenzie, where did you meet Nick?”

Still worried over what action Nick would take Mackenzie wasn't paying too much attention to Gloria. “We met a while back.”

“Really, why didn't you ever mention him?”

Realizing where Gloria's questions were leading Mackenzie searched for a believable lie. “I guess Nick was there when I needed him and I wanted to get to know him.”

“But...”

“Is the tea ready?” Nick looked innocently at the two girls. He didn't miss the look of exasperation in Gloria nor the worried frown Mackenzie held her friend in.

Stopping Gloria's probing questions was foremost in Mackenzie's thoughts. She would never know that for once Nick and she were in agreement.

“So what did you two do today?”

“Gloria showed me your advertising business.”

“She did? But I would have taken you, Nick.” Why did she say that? Like she cared or something. Damn he confused her!

“You were tired after showing me New York these last days.” Nick's wink helped calm her agitation. “Besides, I think going there right now wouldn't be a good idea for you.”

Gloria's alert eyes took in Nick's hand covering Mackenzie's, but she was more interested in the affect his words had on her. A flash of expected anger came from Mackenzie.

“Why shouldn't I go to the office? Is something wrong?” She looked at Gloria, but Nick answered.

“There is nothing wrong. In fact, I would say Gloria is very efficient and handling everything rather well. No, Mackenzie, I only meant it might tire you, remember what the doctor said, you need rest right now, your strength was down.” Nick knew exactly what he was doing and she reacted as he expected.

“I'm fine, the doctor says that to everyone that is...” Realizing what she almost said, Mackenzie stopped in mid sentence to look at Gloria, whose sharp gaze made her moan.

“What doctor? What is wrong? Why do you need a doctor?”

Squeezing her hand Nick spoke to her. "I'm sorry Mackenzie, I didn't think."

Was he lying? Wondering didn't help the position she found herself in with Gloria.

"Mackenzie! Damn you answer me!"

"Calm down Gloria. It's nothing serious."

Nick's barely audible laugh made her cringe. Oh yes, he was enjoying this.

Gloria's eyes darted from one to the other in perplexed amazement. "What is going on between you two?"

"Gloria, I am pregnant."

"Pregnant? Nick and you...a baby!"

Nodding her head, she waited, apprehensive over her friend's reaction.

"So that's it. It's wonderful! How far along are you, when is it due? Is everything alright? When are you getting married?"

"Hold it. One question at a time. I am fine, I am close to twelve weeks along."

"Three months? You kept Nick a secret that long?"

Mackenzie didn't answer her. Turning away she went into the kitchen. She hadn't thought about how far she was into her pregnancy since she heard the doctor mention it. Two to three months pregnant? But Nick...It was only a little more than a month since he...

Gloria called her to come back. Grabbing the crackers and cheese she fought down the thoughts plaguing her, she needed to think. She couldn't look at Nick, afraid of what he would see. There was something she must remember, but what?

Gloria's excitement never reached Mackenzie. Thoughts of another time, another's love haunted her. Only her friend's insistence on knowing when they planned to get married penetrated her concentration, bringing on a strange reaction inside Mackenzie.

A feeling of rebellion reared, as if a great beast were stirring, one with the strength she'd never called on before. She was married! Like hell she would marry again. Never!

Alone, she needed to be alone; there was something she must recall. Damn it what was it? Standing up Mackenzie went over to the desk and started sifting through the papers. "The book. Where is the book?"



Where was the book from the doctor's office? There was something in there, something that happened...in the book.

"Mackenzie what are you doing?"

"What? Oh nothing Gloria. I'll be there in a minute. I need to find something."

"Alright but hurry up. I want to tell you what Nick did today. He is marvelous you know. We would have lost that account, but Nick's idea cinched it and then he started on another."

Absently she answered. "Yes I know." Slamming the drawer, she tried to remember when she last saw it. Nick! He'd devoured that book. It must be in the bedroom. Practically running down the hall, she rushed into the room. Searching, she failed to find it. The mounting urgency wouldn't let her stop. Going back to the dining room, she looked at Nick. The way he looked back at her made her shiver. He knows!

"Where's the book, Nick?"

She almost thought his eyes brightened in a silent plea.

"Let it go Mackenzie."

## CHAPTER 24

### *No More Lies*

“The book? Where is the doctor’s book?”

Shaking his head, his denial cut into her and with it the sharpness of recall. “On the ship Nick, that first day I woke up, the sea wasn’t rough, was it Nick? There was no storm.” A pain stabbed through her with such force she gripped herself to fight it and continue.

Shouting, she demanded answers. “I wasn’t sea sick. Was I Nick? The meat, the smell of it turned my stomach! I was pregnant then, wasn’t I?”

Still he refused to give her the answers she sought. But she saw it. Saw the truth in the pain streaking his face and brightening his eyes. “Why Nick? Why did you lie? You knew all this time! Even before you made love to me. You knew!”

Her accusation over his deceit released with the violence of the storm brewing.

“Yes, I knew Mackenzie.”

“Mackenzie, what’s going on?”

Neither answered or looked at the worried girl.

Groaning at the depth of what he’d done, made her believe, the hurt it gave. The joy she prayed for, hoped for, couldn’t get past the terrible hurt felt anguish tearing at her soul. “Why did you hurt me like this? Tell me, damn you! Tell me!”

Rising Nick faced the furious wild look he prayed would never come. The knowledge he fought against and failed to conceal. His pain tore at him, but he knew she would never believe him, not now.

“I didn’t want the pain you are feeling now, to ever be a part of you. Can’t you understand? Knowing your child was mine, not his, would have let you accept what has happened.”

“Even for you this was a cruel thing to do. Stealing from me the one thing I had left of him.” The tears flowed down her cheeks, but she neither knew or cared.

“Cruel? No Mackenzie. This is cruel! This! Knowing you carry his child and no way to be with him. To spend the rest of your life mourning your loss in his child. That is cruel Mackenzie, not I. My love for you was too great to let this happen. I wish you had never discovered the truth, for I never would have told you.”

Staring at him, she didn’t want to believe his words, but she couldn’t refuse to see his pain, the hurtful light he held her in. Yes, she believed him, God help her she did, and the pain it gave her was more severe than ever before. “Oh Nick, I pity us both. I am sorry, truly I am.” Turning from him, she closed her eyes and concentrated with every fiber in her being. “So help me if its possible I will make it happen.”

She was removing herself from them, sealing her thoughts, not even realizing she was speaking out.

“Mackenzie? My God Nick what is going on? What is she doing?”

Amber eyes filled with love and pain knew. “Don’t interfere, let her be Gloria. And pray I don’t stop her, as I fear I want to.”

Gloria stared up at him more afraid of the devastation in this man than anything she ever faced before. Looking at Mackenzie, she held herself back. What ever was happening, if it meant harm to Mackenzie Nick would never allow it to happen.

Mackenzie tried to see him, call his image before her as he tried to make her see these last days. She knew now Aaron knew the truth, some how he knew about the child. He wanted them back. Groaning over what she might have destroyed she tried again to reach out to him.

Nothing, she nearly lost her resolve. Hugging herself she fought to relax, let her thoughts clear of everything but Aaron. “I’m so sorry Aaron, I have been fighting you. Please don’t give up on me. I have been a blind fool. I am here Aaron. My heart is open to you. Oh please, I need you!”

Was it too late? Had she driven him away forever?

“Concentrate Mackenzie, open your mind to the sea. Aaron will be on his ship, where it all started, remember Mackenzie. The stiff sea breeze filling those magnificent white sails. Visualize him, see him at

the wheel. Call to him, make him listen, you can reach him Mackenzie, your love can reach through the darkness, remember.”

Open mouthed, Gloria gazed up in startled fascination at the man beside her. Tanned cheeks wet from his silent tears were pulled tight with the effort he used to control his voice and free the words to her friend. Whatever was happening, she dared not breathe, least she shatter the communication between them.

“You only came back because of your doubts. Doubts I put there, ones I reinforced to keep you, it was a lie Mackenzie. Hear me, a lie. His love would never falter because of what I did to you. Just as mine couldn’t be stopped even knowing you belonged to him. Don’t you see? He loves you and nothing, neither by man nor forces can end it. Go to him.”

A blackness darker than the night started stealing the light from the room. It appeared faintly at first and then with a terrifying swiftness it closed around Mackenzie.

“No!”

Gloria made a move to reach her, but Nick’s arms locked her to him. Desperate she struggled to break free and pull Mackenzie back from the void closing in on her friend.

“Don’t Gloria, don’t interfere, she’s going back to him.”

“Who? Damn it let me go!”

“Shut up or I will make you! Watch.”

She couldn’t have stopped watching even if the fright she felt made her want to shut her eyes. That inky cloud started circling about Mackenzie’s legs moving to enclose her in its lifeless void. The scream Gloria felt coming died at the smile Mackenzie turned on them.

“Gloria, take care of Nick. He needs you. Thank you Nick, I will only remember your love...I promise.” She hoped it would enough. Their gazes locked for an instant and they both knew only one could go back.

Nick nodded and smiled sadly, urging her to go before he lost his resolve and pulled her back.

When she stepped forward, her body instantly lost its density, the void moved with her, ebbing away as her image faded from sight. The light slowly came back to fill the room until its brilliance was all that remained, throwing Gloria’s tear filled scream back at her.

“Where is she? Nick? Where did she go?”

“Back where she belongs.”

Nick folded the shattered girl in his arms, soothing her cries and alarm with his own loss. Together they sought their comfort in each other's arms. Mackenzie's words to each binding them in their embrace.

\* \* \* \*

Swish! The cutlass fell, catching his billowing sleeve. Moving with the agility he didn't feel, Aaron avoided the blade's cutting edge. Parlaying the next sweep, deflecting the vicious blow.

Again Masters prevented Dubois' heavy attack. He wanted the man's blood more than ever. Revenge drove his expert thrust against the man he hated with a venom that ate at him.

Aaron's piercing gaze saw the hate glaring out of the man. The air reeked with his lust for death, his death. Aaron knew if what he feared this battle just cost him he would gladly lower the blade fending off the blows and give Dubois the revenge he desired.

His thoughts brought a surge of anger to him, Aaron stepped and struck, lashing out, driving Dubois back across the deck. Pushing him past the fighting throng of men. Dubois already caused him more than the loss of his lively hood and life in the colonies, and the realization made Aaron renew his fight.

Aaron almost reached her, he actually saw her again in her home, that familiar room. All her fighting against him didn't stopped him from going to her, he'd almost won until the call of alarm went up ending his forced seclusion to do what he came here to accomplish.

Dubois attacked his ship, breaching her with his men after coming up along side during the night. Aaron knew they were too close to the coast to be safe, but he hadn't expected Dubois to be the one to stumble on them. It was a chance he would repeat once he finished this fight and prayed that the opportunity to reach Mackenzie hadn't disappeared. The nagging suspicion that he missed his one and only chance wouldn't leave him. How many times did one get to breech time?

“You were a fool Masters! I have been waiting for you to sneak back here. I knew her reward would bring you.”

The man's words stiffened Aaron making him lose his concentration. Dubois' blade dipped catching him across the chest. The searing pain brought Aaron's senses into sharp focus.

“She's not where you can harm her Dubois.”

“No, but she will be once you’re dead. I will have both her and my revenge on you and Brown for destroying me.”

“David...” His friend’s name rushed out. Aaron’s eyes darkened in threat at the man waving his sword in threatening teases before him.

“Yes, Brown. He’s done your dirty work. The Boston bitches no longer frequent my sister’s shop! I’ll fix him once you are finished. In fact he may already be lying in some alley by now if Jenkins received my orders from Georgette. She was quite angry with you. Fought me she did, over your little beauty. Now she wishes she had helped me get her. The pleasure I have missed will be doubly harsh on your wife once I find her. Cohen, the spineless bastard, will keep his bargain and turn her over to me.”

Aaron held no fear that Dubois could carrying out his threat against Mackenzie. Ironically, not even he could reach her. But David was another matter. “You are a fool Dubois. Cohen is using you, always has.”

Taunting him, Aaron played with Dubois’ cutlass, trying to keep him off balance, hoping he would say more.

“The man had more than Chamberlain’s papers in that office. All our records of his take from my raids were in there. But of course you never doubted that did you?”

“So Cohen was the one covering for you.”

Dubois’ eyes lit up over Aaron’s meaning. Shrugging, he lunged carelessly. Aaron’s blade ripped through his sleeve leaving a trail of seeping red.

Angered by the pain Dubois’ words came out in a harsh sneer.

“I will tell you what you want Masters. For you won’t have the means of using it. I have the papers on Cohen and he was more than willing to follow my instructions. The fool was going to drop the charges against you and your lovely wife. Blaming her for the theft was easy, even easier was drawing you here to save her pretty hide. When I finish with you I will go and fetch her from Chamberlain. Oh she will come, thinking I have you. A month on the open sea will show her who rules her lovely body.”

Even knowing Dubois’ threats lacked any chance of reaching Mackenzie, Aaron’s anger over what the man implied infuriated him. He’d learned enough and was through wasting time.

It was nearly dawn; Aaron must try once more to get her back. His urgency drove him at the man. Blades flashing in the fading darkness sparked across the deck.

\* \* \* \*

Blackness, that horrible void. She stepped through it, letting it swallow her in its suffocating timelessness. Over and over she repeated his name, visualized him on the ship.

Nick's words came. Aaron would be on his ship, she prayed that she would end the journey there and find him. Anywhere else would be disastrous. Was she a fool for attempting this journey without him? Desperate hope made her take that step. The swirling darkness seemed endless, swallowing her thoughts, pulling her deeper, deeper into the abyss.

Fighting, Mackenzie struggled against its commanding power. Knowing she must remain conscience. Refusing to give into the fear mounting to terror, she held only Aaron's image before her eyes.

A calm silence penetrated her senses, then a loud noise of sharp intensity reeled through her mind. Deafening, the ringing came again, clashing with its force. Trying to smother the painful intrusion by covering her ears she pulled her hands from the wet coldness beneath them. The damp sensation jolted through her like electricity. "I'm touch something, something solid."

Forcing herself to ignore the ringing she concentrated on her hands. Straining to focus in the dim light it became a brilliant glare to eyes so long in darkness.

The wooden floor beneath her trembling fingers slowly came into view. With her clearing vision she took a tentative sweep of everything close to her. Afraid to believe, fearing what it meant if she was wrong. Mackenzie hoped it was the deck of a ship, Aaron's ship.

Realizing she was lying flat out on it, she gathered her strength, pushing herself up to her knees. Waiting to feel the steadiness return to her body. Absently she told herself time travel was too hard on one's body to do it too often. No desire to try it again she prayed this would be the last time.

The ringing came again, only this time it was a sound she remembered all too well and what it meant. It was coming from all around her, no matter which direction she turned the noise of steel hitting steel, and the loud grunt and curses of men, filled the air.

She found herself on the familiar quarterdeck, only returning sanity stopped her from kissing the weathered boards beneath her. Her joy over knowing this was Aaron's ship was short lived when the realization set in that the ship was under siege. The battle going on around her became all too real to be a dream. No, she was here and right in the middle of a bloody fight!

Frantically her eyes searched the deck for the only person her desperate thoughts wanted.

There! Hungry blue eyes feasted on the sight of him. "Oh Aaron, it's really you."

In her excitement she moved towards the one man she came so far to find. Suddenly a man fell before her, stealing her gaze from Aaron and filling it with the death struggle at her feet. The violent shock for what was going on tore the scream from her constricted throat.

The torture in her cry didn't cloud Aaron's knowledge of who the scream belonged to. Aaron's battle heated eyes riveted to the terrified woman standing frozen on the deck in the midst of fighting men. The jerking body of a man at her feet captured her shocked gaze until the man moved no more.

"Mackenzie!"

Dubois' blade ended Aaron's call. Trying to reach her was impossible. When Aaron saw Dubois angry eyes immobilized by what he himself just realized, Aaron knew by the flash of lust filling those cold embers he must keep Dubois away from her at all cost. All the man's hideous threats against Mackenzie crystallized in sickening reality. Aaron couldn't fail her.

Dubois' laughter cut through the violent air. With the glare of impending victory he drove at Aaron with the force of a devil inside him.

At Aaron's cry she tore her eyes away from the dead man at her feet. The shaking inside her as her stomach revolted nearly threw her to the deck. The thought of falling beside the body kept her upright. The sight of the man Aaron fought swept a new terror through her weakened state. "Dubois!"

The battle these two fought was not a game. This time one man would die!

"No, not now, not after everything!" Frantic, Mackenzie wanted to help Aaron and stop Dubois.



Looking about her she saw the blood smeared cutlass still clasped in the dead man's hand.

"Please forgive me." Gritting her teeth Mackenzie pried the handle out of the stiff hold. Picking it up she swallowed her revulsion for what she just did.

Making her way around the foray of battling men, all her thoughts centered on reaching Aaron. It went beyond her to stand ideally by while Aaron fought for his life. With the heavy sword clamped in both hands she approached, deciding how to stop Dubois.

Dubois spotted her first; his sneer came across the distance. "Keep hold of that if you wish pretty lady, but it will do little good when I finish here."

"You bastard!" Mackenzie's hateful words drew an angry curse from him. But worse, she drew Aaron's attention away from Dubois.

"Mackenzie get the hell out of here!"

Dubois took the opportunity and plunged his blade into Aaron's shoulder, sending him down to the deck. Realizing what she caused to happen and seeing Aaron fall, when Dubois raised his blade for the final death blow something snapped inside her.

The scream that tore from the woman halted all hands in motion. All eyes turned in stunned surprise to watch the crazed woman. Wild blonde hair flew out from behind the pant clad she-devil charging at the shocked Dubois.

Cutlass raised she swung at him again and again, pushing him away from the prone form now behind her. She raised the blade; teeth barred and swung it with the force only fury could instill. Mackenzie drove the man who now fought seriously for his life against the madness in her he provoked.

"Stop it Mackenzie!"

"I will kill you, you bastard!"

Dubois never doubted her declaration. Her blows held the strength of ten men and he fell back beneath the onslaught.

It was Andrew that first broke out of the trance seeing Mackenzie put them in. He didn't want to know how, nor where those strange clothes she wore came from. The reason for her attack against Dubois is what finally made him act.

Yelling at the stunned men to attack, he saw they had the advantage. Plunging his sword into the pirate before him, Andrew set out to reach Mackenzie. Andrew came up behind her ducking to miss

the upswing of her blade. *Shit! How was he going to save her and kill that man?* He hesitated almost wondering if he should, she looked hell bent on destruction and could very well kill Dubois without his help.

“Grab her carefully about the waist. Damn, be careful Andrew she is with child. Pull her back, I will get Dubois.” Andrew nodded at Aaron, after he pulled his gaze away from the seeping wound.

Moving with the advantage his size allowed Andrew went in low, beneath her deadly swing, hauling her fighting body up into the air and out of harms’ way. Her vicious scream at being stopped came down on him with a fury that shook him to the bone. His large hands grabbed her wrist just before she could bring the blade down on his head.

“Mrs. Masters, it’s Andrew!”

Unseeing eyes filled with rage cleared in realization at the man holding her. “Andrew?” Her joy at seeing him was short lived. “Let me go Andrew. Dubois...”

“Aaron will take care of him.”

“Aaron?” Hearing the pain in her voice Andrew turn her to see Aaron. She struggled, but Andrew’s strength and loyalty to Aaron would never let her go. Ceasing her fight she watched in tense relief at the man she feared had died. “Andrew help him, he is bleeding.”

“No Mackenzie, he wants to finish this, it’s time.”

As if Andrew could foresee Aaron’s next move, Aaron did end it. Mackenzie closed her eyes against the shock in Dubois over the blade entering his body.

“Let me go Andrew.”

Answering her soft request, Andrew gently released the woman.

“Aaron?” Mackenzie waited knowing Aaron’s attention was still on the silent man on the deck before him.

Turning, his dark disbelieving eyes upon her, they studied her until she wanted to scream out. From her head to her feet and back his gaze traveled, trying to believe she was really there.

“How? Never mind, I don’t care.” Opening his arms she rushed to him. When his arms closed about her he rocked her within his embrace, his hands roamed over her in loving reassuring caresses.

“Aaron, Aaron I was so afraid. I thought he killed you.”

“Afraid? Mackenzie, it looked more like you were furious...enough to kill.”

Realizing what she did, she stubbornly defended her action. "I would have if Andrew hadn't stopped me."

"Ah, my little fighter, God it's wonderful to feel you, hold you again." Aaron's lips took hers in such wonderment the world spun about them in their joy.

Realizing what drove her to attack Dubois, she pushed him from her. "You're hurt! Let me see." Laughing, at her Aaron refused to let her leave his embrace.

"I am fine, now." When she struggled he held fast. "Could I hold you thus if I wasn't?"

"No, but Aaron please let me tend your wound."

"I don't think I will ever stop fearing to release you my love."

Raising her hand she covered his lips over his painful admission. "I know Aaron."

Aaron did as she asked, but refused to leave the deck. While she fetched the things she needed Aaron assessed the damage with Baker and Andrews. Once satisfied, he finally relented and let her tend the wounds.

"Ouch Mackenzie, don't kill me."

Smiling, Mackenzie's gaze told Aaron more than any words could what she wanted to do to him. Moving to him she kissed around the bandaged area. "Oh never that Aaron."

Neither would have broken what started if Andrew hadn't intervened. "Captain the deck is secured, I think the lady should go below."

Aaron and Mackenzie looked up at the man whose nervous voice refused to be ignored. His quick glance at her before turning his eyes skyward did it.

Looking down at herself Mackenzie groaned. "Oh Aaron I forgot!"

Too happy to have her back, not even her outlandish pants could take away his raised spirits. Laughing, Aaron smothered her against him, hugging her so tight Mackenzie thought she would pass out. "There's someone standing over there that can help correct your beautifully sinful attire and will be happy to see you."

Turning her away from him, Aaron gave her a gentle push. "I will be down as soon as we finish here."

Seeing Mary standing by the companionway Mackenzie's excited cry sent her flying across the deck to the girl.

Aaron's voice rang out issuing orders with an exuberance they hadn't heard from their captain for some time. No one questioned the captain's wife strange appearance; any that dared received a deadly stare from his mate before being told she must have been on Dubois' ship. Any decree would have been accepted after they had seen her defend their captain. Many an eye held envy for what those two found for each other.

With an impatience that Mackenzie could barely contain she paced the confines of the cabin.

"You will wear the boards clear through if you don't stop."

"Oh Mary where is he?"

"The man has responsibilities."

"I know." It didn't help. Just knowing he was near and being separated from him shredded her nerves to a frazzle. Turning too quickly at the sound in the hall she nearly tripped over the folds of her dress.

Shaking the full skirt, she didn't see Aaron come in raising a finger to Mary for silence as the girl stepped out. Stopping her heated curse, she remembered herself. No, she would never regret any of the convenience she left behind. Being here was all that mattered. She still pinch herself to be sure it was real. She wondered if either of them would ever relax over it. Smiling, Mackenzie knew she'd never go back, not now. Nick took care of that. They both knew the rife in time had to be balanced at each end to close it. Why she felt so strongly about it she didn't know. Maybe it was Nick who knew, his words reinforced her hope. She saw it in his eyes and knew he made the sacrifice for her.

Smiling to herself she hoped the look Gloria's gaze with upon Nick would blossom between them. If Gloria had anything to do with it Nick would soon forget his old life. "Tell her, tell her everything..."

"Tell who love?"

His arms came about her pulling her into his large comforting frame. How wonderful it felt. "This is where I belong."

"And exactly where you are going to remain." Nuzzling her creamy skin at her neck Aaron lost himself in the heady sensation of touching her. Moving his hands to her back he quickly tried to undo Mary's handiwork.

"I told her not to do it up." Giggling Mackenzie wiggled under Aaron's unrelenting touch.

“Hell!” One quick pull and the buttons went skating across the floor. Just as quickly Aaron dismissed the rest of her garments until she stood in naked loveliness before him. Warm dark eyes drank in the beauty, like a starved man he couldn’t suppress his moan of pleasure.

“Ah love I have missed you.” Moving to her, his fingertips traced the contours of her face, down the smooth column of her graceful throat, brushing away those wild spirals that hindered his view. His dark gaze smoldered over her deep moan when his hand flowed over the soft mounds of her breasts, teasing the taunt scarlet rose buds. Still lower he splayed his hands over the sensitive area beneath her navel.

“You will wake our son, Aaron.”

Running his finger over the slight evidence of the child. “When did you discover his lie?” Aaron’s hate and anger were evident in the control she heard coming from the man she loved.

“When you kept calling me and refused to let me go. I am sorry I fought you, I...”

Covering her mouth with his Aaron silenced the pain that could no longer hurt them. Pressing her against him drove the fire burning in him to a wild blaze, one that made savoring their joining impossible, he wanted her now, later he could make slow luxurious love to his lady. Now he needed her as much as the air he breathed.

Sweeping her up into his arms, her own desire drove her fingers to pull at his shirt, tugging at it her futile attempts sent them falling in laughter onto the bed. Frantically they pulled and yanked until Aaron was as naked as she. Moving over her she scooted away to come up on her knees. “No, it’s my turn. Please I need to see you, be sure.”

“Oh I am very real, my love.” His straying eyes made her see for herself the evidence of just how real and impatient he was. Mac sucked in her breath over the size of his jumping cock. She lost all protest when he pulled her down beneath him.

His legs held her down, covering her in a way that left no doubt as to his meaning. Mastering her fine breast, Aaron took in their remembered essence, and when his mouth covered the tender nipples he created an ecstasy that sent her spice swaying in heated desire to find his cockhead. Aaron smiled, knowing she was truly there with him when he felt her spice roll over the head and spread his love drops over her clit. “Ah my sweet lovely.”

Moving sensually beneath him Mackenzie refused to let him be the only one that touched and fondled what they both craved. Rotating her hips she purred wantonly against his pulsating cock. "I want you to take me Aaron, give me what I have longed for, for so very long."

"Gladly my love."

Aaron gripped her hips and guided his cock to the entrance of her vagina. The warm sweetness of her spice made him groan over his need to take her. His hands moved her and raised her to meet him. His thrust went deep, claiming what he nearly lost and she arched to take all him. He drove into her with the force driven by the fear he lived with, never again would he relinquish his claim, she was where she belonged, they were as one.

She rose to meet his urgency with her own. Her warmth encased his penis and Mac felt the power of his cock and she held on, refusing to release the fire that burned between them. And when she moved to mold her enflamed clit against him Aaron's groan of satisfaction ignited her passion. She ground herself to him and couldn't get near enough!

"It will be all right my lovely."

Mackenzie smiled and her tears flowed, her hands roamed over his chest then slid lower until she gently grasped his balls, coaxing them and inflaming his wild cock until they rocked into a rhythm of shared rapture. Aaron's thrust became too urgent for her to hold back. She let herself feel every vibrant inch of him and held on to his shoulders, enthralled with the man taking possession of her. Needing him closer, knowing it would never be enough. Always there would be this need in her to hold him, feel his masterful strokes, ones that could touch that elusive center of her womb. Only his love ever conquered, only Aaron could ignite and capture the fire of her own love.

As if he knew her thoughts and felt the surge of her desire he drove deeper, reclaiming all that was his, all that she willingly gave in love to this man. "You are mine Mackenzie. My woman. My lover. My love. My wife and the mother of my child."

"Yes Aaron, always yours."

Each vow was emphasized by the deep penetration he took and received in return as she opened in beautiful surrender to be loved through time.

## EPILOGUE

Dear Aaron and Mackenzie,

It was nice to hear from you. Mr. Baker's arrival was to say at best, timely. The papers were where you thought. Cohen was more than willing to cooperate in exchange.

I am happy to inform you the business and your house are waiting for you to return and take control. All the charges have been dropped, with a public apology from the crown. Of course, I don't expect to see either of you for sometime. Take care of her Aaron. I expect to see my Godson soon.

The business is thriving so no need to worry. Soon all will be settled.

Oh, I almost forgot, Madame Oulette has disappeared. I doubt we will ever hear from the woman again.

As Always, your devoted friend  
David Brown

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jewel Adams is considered one of the pioneers in Electronic Publishing. She ventured into publishing on the Internet, before it was vogue, by serializing her novels free to readers. “The net is a new frontier for authors to take their craft beyond established genre limits.” Jewel’s romances are fresh and sassy, with a unique writing style that will capture your heart’s imagination.

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