



Caribbean Splendor

by
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New Concepts Publishing
5202 Humphreys Rd.
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

Prologue

June 1770

"Are you certain, ma cherie?" Raven questioned with his body poised over hers, ready to bring pleasure to her yet again. His voice was soft and warm, like finely aged brandy slipping down her throat.

"Aye, that I am, Raven," she whispered softly as her hands traced the soft angles of his jaw where the slight growth of beard tickled her fingers. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

"Then so am I," he murmured, his lips tantalizing the skin of her neck, igniting all of her emotions.

"May I take off this blindfold?" she asked in a whispery breath as her senses rose higher. "I want to see you."

"Not yet," he said, extending his arm away from her. She heard the hiss of an extinguished light before his lips returned to their former position. "Now you can."

Blaze removed her blindfold only to discover he had plunged the cave into total darkness. "Why did you put out the light?"

"'Tis too dangerous for you to see me, ma cherie," he said seductively as his fingers trailed down her belly toward her womanhood. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

With his slow ministrations, Blaze didn't bother to protest about the light anymore. His hands were all she needed. Languorously her hands traveled up and down,

delighting in the hardened, chiseled plans of his body as well as the smoothness of his skin. Blaze shuddered. Why didn't Daniel make her feel this way?

* * * *

Blaze awoke and stretched languorously. How long had she been asleep? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that the ground was hard and unforgiving, its deep earthy smell mingling with the sweet scent of their lovemaking. She inhaled deeply. That was one aroma she wasn't going to forget as long as she lived. Perhaps....

Raven moved slightly, turning over on his back and taking her into his arms. "Are you awake, mon amie?" he asked sleepily.

"Aye," she murmured, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his bare chest. "Now that I've given myself to you, I am yours totally." Suddenly, he grew tense and stiff. "Is there something wrong?" Her heart banged in her throat. Did she say something wrong?

"Nay, my sweet," he replied then moved to sit up. "You caught me unaware 'tis all."

"I will go anywhere you ask, my love," she said, stroking the rope like muscled arm. "I belong only to you."

He let out a deep sigh. "You do not know what you are saying, ma cherie. If you come away with me, it means that you will never see your family ever again."

"I know what it means," she said, continuing to touch his velvety flesh, "From the moment I kissed you and you made love to me, I was always yours. It has never been any other way."

Without a word, Raven got to his feet and started dressing.

Blaze was stunned. Was this the action of a man who had just been told that a woman loved him with all her heart? "Did I upset you?"

She heard the distant shuffle of breeches as he drew them on and his shirt. Was he going to answer her question or leave her here to find her own way out?

"Since you have given me such a wonderful gift, I'm not wasting it," he said triumphantly. She heard the rustle of silk as he moved to get his boots. "I'm going to leave for a while but I will return. Can I trust you not to run away? To wait for me?"

She leaned up, clutching his arm. "Where are you going?"

Raven tamped his feet into his boots, the hard thud resounding through the cavernous region. "You will have to trust me."

"How will I know you'll be back?"

She felt him kneel next to her. Raven took her hands into his gloved ones, laying her naked palm on his bare chest through the open vee of his shirt. "This tells you," he said in a gentle voice. "This beats only for you. Will you stay?"

"Without question."

With that assurance, he possessed her lips with a fierce abandon then left her, threading his way through the formations that she had bumped into from time to time.

Blaze leaned back, a smile crossing her lips. Finally, the passion she had dreamed about all her life was finally to be hers. To hell with her father. Her grin widened. To hell with Daniel too.

* * * *

Moments ticked by and Raven didn't return.

How long had he been gone?

She wasn't sure. Without any light beside the dim glow of the rocks in the cave, she couldn't tell.

Blaze smoothed down the tattered remains of her calico gown. It was all she could do to keep from trying to find her way out of the cave but she'd promised him that she would wait. So, she would sit here quietly until he came for her.

With the boredom came the tiredness. Her eyelids grew heavy, threatening to close. Suddenly, she heard the distant beat of horses' hooves coming closer to the cave. Was it Raven returning as he had promised?

Blaze leapt to her feet while her heart pounded out of control. Her passage to freedom was almost upon her....

"Blaze! Blaze, where are you?" echoed a familiar male voice, sounding irritated and angry.

Her blood turned cold as the harsh voice echoed through the empty caverns. It sounded like Daniel.

"Blaze? Damn it! Where are you?" he shouted, his voice rebounding through the cave. Daniel didn't sound too happy.

She put her hand over her mouth and sank to her knees, her mind whirling. Please let him go by, she prayed. I don't want him to discover me.

Without warning, her resolve quickened. Raven's lair must not be discovered!

From what she could remember, Raven always exited to her left. Daniel's voice was coming from the right. That meant there must be another tunnel. If she got out of here....

Blaze darted to her left, her hands feeling the rough edges of the formations as she brushed past them, her heart in her throat.

Was she going the right way?

She put her hands in front of her and felt along the wall until she found the opening. With quick feet, she pushed through it, her hands brushing along the walls. The air was more acrid and salty, almost like she was close to sea. Follow it, her instinct told her. Hopefully, it should bring her to the other side.

The floor was damper here than it was inside the cavern. Somehow, it must let out somewhere near the sea. Each step brought her closer to the distant pounding flooded the heady air. Her heart lightened. It must be water crashing against rocks!

Another five steps and Blaze turned a bend. At the end was a bright shaft of pale gray light streaming through it. The end she'd been looking for!

Blaze picked up her pace and moved toward it, pushing through the small opening.

Finally, she was free!

The day was overcast and gray, most forgiving on her unadjusted eyes. Ahead of her, the sea yawned, sapphire blue with mild whitecaps. It rolled in to kiss the sand with regularity then retreated again. Sand, soft and powdery, felt warm under her dirty feet. Now, all she need do is wait here for Raven....

"Blaze!" shouted another familiar male voice.

The temperature of her blood cooled even more. There was only one man to whom that voice belonged to.

She slowly turned to see her father, Lord Combermere, mounted on his stallion overlooking the lush ridge. "She's over here, boys!" he shouted then pushed his horse down the ridge. Within moments, he was in front of her, dismounting his chestnut stallion. "Where ye been, gel?" he cried in his thick Scottish accent. "We hava been worryin' about ye since yer horse came back and ye did not!" The strong familiar aroma of tobacco clung to coat and person. Normally, it would have comforted her but this time it only served to add to anxiety to her discovery.

"I ... I ... guess I fell," she stammered. "All I remember is my horse throwing me."

"Remind me to shoot that nag," he murmured as he pulled away to examine her face. "Ye have a large bruise on yer forehead, gel. Do ye remember what happened?"

"No, Father," she lied. The one thing she would never do is betray Raven.

With that, Daniel and the others came riding over the hill, their frock coats waving in the breeze. From the look on his face, her fiancé was not entirely happy at finding her.

Daniel pulled his horse to a halt and dismounted. He strode over to her in a concerned gait, taking her into a hard embrace. "Blaze, I'm so glad we found you! I can't tell you how much I've missed you," he murmured in a voice tinged with false concern. "I thought something terrible had happened."

"I'm all right," she said, her heart falling to her feet. This was not what she wanted to happen. "How long have I been gone?"

"Three days, gel. You've had me, your mother and your poor betrothed," her father said, gesturing to Daniel, "out of our minds with worry. Promise me that ye won't go riding without someone else with you."

"I ... I ... promise," she said shakily. Her mind spun.

How was she going to let Raven know she didn't leave of her own free will?

"That's a good gel," her father announced as he remounted his horse. "Come, let us get ye back to Collingwood and looked at by a physician."

"That is a most excellent idea, Lord Combermere," Daniel piped in. "I'll take Blaze with me."

"I wouldn't want her with anyone else," he chuckled and turned his animal toward the rise of the hill and scaled it with the others in tow.

Once they were out of sight, Daniel leaned in close, drawing her toward him. "I know you've been with another man, you little wench," he hissed. "I'll find out who the bastard is and kill him."

"I haven't been with anyone, Daniel. I simply fell and hit my head. That's all," she said through clenched teeth, her anger rising. Why did she have to marry him in the first place? The muscles along the shelf of her jaw tightened. If only Daniel didn't have money or good breeding, she could be with the man she loved. Why must everything in her life revolve around status and money?

His lecherous eyes traveled up and down her body. "I know you have because I can smell another man on you. If you ever think you're going to take a lover after we're married, think again."

She whirled around, the heat of her anger igniting her cheeks. "Just what do you think you'll do about it if I decide to?" What difference did it make to Daniel? She wanted him no more than he wanted her.

His grip tightened. "If I catch you with another man, I'll kill you both without hesitation," he leered. "I always thought you were a whore now you've proved me right."

"Let go of me!" she demanded as she tried to writhe out of his grip.

"Never, my dear. I'm just as stuck with you as you are with me. If it weren't for that ridiculous marriage clause in my father's will, I'd be rid of you. But, such as the situation is, we'll just have to deal with it."

"Don't expect me to be the dutiful wife, Daniel. I refuse to play that part," she hissed, trying to wrest herself from his grip. The only thing she wanted to do was to run back to the safety of the cave and hide away until Raven returned. It was the only place she truly felt safe.

A malicious grin spread across his thin lips. "Oh you will and bear me as many brats as possible. You'll turn a blind eye to my infidelities because I have no plans on being discreet," he smirked. "There really is no point, is there?"

"I hate you, Daniel Montgomery, and I always will," she spat as she freed herself from his clutch.

His hateful laughter rang through the air, echoing in the mouth of the cave. "As I hate you, my dear, but it is really best to make the most of the situation is it not?"

* * * *

Justin returned to the cave from readying everything for his and Blaze's departure, his heart light. When Blaze first proposed going with him, he was taken aback. He had never considered the possibility of an ongoing relationship with her. He had seduced her for the sole purpose of getting revenge on her fiancé, Daniel Montgomery. Now that he'd tasted from her cup of passion, he wanted more. He hungered for her like no other woman, scaring him down to his soul. He'd never felt like this before. Usually, he'd leave a woman's bed as soon as the lovemaking was over. He had a rule. One time only and that was it. He had no room in his life for love.

His anger flared slightly. Had it not been for Daniel Montgomery, he'd never have found his father lying in his study in a pool of blood with a broken decanter near his hand.

Justin blinked hard as the hated images arose.

He had walked into Father's study to ask some sound advice on a matter when he discovered his father face down in a pool of blood. Father had cut his own throat.

In Father's fingers, he had found the reason why. Daniel Montgomery, preying upon the Earl's passion for gambling, had filched everything belonging to the Blackmore family, short of the title. After his father's funeral, Justin received a note asking him to honor his father's debt. At first, he refused, thinking it was a ruse to get money. After checking with the steward, he confirmed the validity of the debt. So Justin paid it and embarked on a career of piracy in order to keep everything they owned and his mother and sisters safe. He scowled. If it hadn't been for....

"Blaze? Mon amie? Ma cherie?" he called out into the darkness.

Nothing.

He called for her again. His voice echoed through the jagged crags, amidst the lichen-encased rocks only to bounce back to him eerily.

His pulse quickened along with his heart. Where was she?

Justin stepped inside of the cave and struck a match, finding his way to the candles. He lit them and searched around the dank cavern.

She was gone.

He sank down to a rock, running his gloved hands through his wild black hair. He should have known she would run. She promised she wouldn't but something deep down inside of him knew she was a temptress with no redeeming qualities. Perhaps she had known his intentions all along and played his emotions as well as he played hers....

Flying to his feet, Justin paced around the dim cavern, his gloved fist slamming into the other. It may just well be that she and Daniel had known of his plan and decided to beat him at his own game.

Justin looked up, his fists clenching. Blaze had played him for a fool.

He let out a frustrated sigh. Perhaps she did not go willingly. After all, he tasted the sincerity in her kiss as well as tasted it from her body. What if Daniel had found her and dragged her back...?

His fists clenched harder. No matter what it took, he would find Daniel and Blaze. For Daniel, he'd make him pay. For Blaze, he was going to get the truth one way or another.

Chapter 1

Daniel was dead. Killed by the hand of an angry gambler who accused her husband of cheating. Lonely tears tracked down her face. They weren't for Daniel because she had never shed any tears for him in the past and there was no reason to start now. No, the tears were for her uncertain future as well as Beau's. What if all that Daniel owned passed back into his family's hands? How would they survive?

She should have expected Daniel's death, given his penchant for gambling and women, among his many other vices. What had surprised her was the fact it had taken his enemies this long to do it.

Eerie silence enveloped her as she sat in the damask chair near the window, adding to the numbness flooding her body, making her tense. What was to become of her? She cared nothing for society status so its loss was not important. Her only concern now was income. What kind of position could she obtain? Being the daughter of an English blueblood did not rank high on the employability list.

Blaze Elizabeth Montgomery rose from her chair, letting the telltale parchment fall from her stunned fingertips. Soft sighs escaped her lips as she strode over to the window and placed her hands on the chilly marble sill. Strands of her fiery red hair floated free from its confining snood but she didn't care. None of it mattered now. Perfect images and appearances were of no importance now.

Her husband was gone as well as the life she knew.

So, why couldn't she be the least little upset at the fact he was dead?

Maybe if she loved him, at least a little, she would have been. The fact of the matter was she had hated him with all she had in her. He had been loud and rude not to mention cruel at times. For years, he had paraded his many mixed mistresses in front of her as if they were trophies, meant to hurt her. It did nothing of the sort, only succeeding to drive her further away. The only constant and comfort in her life was little Beau, the quiet reminder of a love long past.

Blaze leaned forward, gazing deeply at the white sand gracing the edge of the lush verge growing under her windows, its specks glowing as though diamonds nestled in the powdery material. Slaves and freemen, their dark skin glistening in the sun, loaded the ships with precious sugar for the rum makers. When she had first come here, she would marvel for hours how well the men worked together, almost like cogs in a wheel. Here, no one was black or white. They all yearned for the same thing, something to call their own.

Her thoughts traveled back to vitality of Splendour. Ah, this wonderful plantation! Her husband's family had built Splendour two generations before, having come from England in search of riches. In Martinique, one could find plenty of that.

Shortly after arriving, the Montgomerys had set up shop and made a quick fortune from sugar cane and pearl cultivation. After a short while, they had discarded the pearl cultivation because it was not as lucrative as the sugar cane. With all of this, Daniel's great grandfather had been able to buy the governorship of the island before the English had handed it back to France.

Her thoughts swiftly returned from the past, enabling her to revel in the beauty before her. Crystal, sapphire waves of the sea greeted her, topped with whitecaps rolling in to kiss the pale sand, wetting it through. In the distance, she watched as a schooner sailed closer to the shore, dropping anchor a safe distance away. White sails, made of starched white canvas, rippled in the strong wind before they came down for docking. The dark vessel bobbed gently in the rolling water, the ocean spray lapping at the hull.

Somehow, that ship reminded her of him. Her heart pounded hard in her chest, making a thin sheen of sweat form on her brow. Oh, how many times had she dreamt of him, her body shivering with anticipation and longing. He made her body alive and filled with desire, an emotion she had not felt in five years.

Raven.

His name blazed into her memory as a brand burned into wood. The feel of his hands over her body, awakening every inch, making her tremble with anticipation ... Blaze shivered. She had to stop thinking about Raven.

Blaze stood rock still, staring outside, her heart beating quickly as the shivers ran up and down her spine. She couldn't think about him anymore. He was a rogue pirate and an undeniable part of her past, but that was all he was.

She wrapped her arms around herself and hugged tightly, as the fears seemed to mount. What was to become of both of them?

"Mama, where's Papa?" Beau yawned as he entered the room, dragging his well-worn doll by one arm.

She turned at the sound of his voice to see him sleepily rubbing his eyes. Her lips widened in a smile. He was the most precious man in her life. "Why are you up, my sweet?" she questioned softly, hiding her emotions for the moment.

Five-year-old Beau shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Mama," he said, his head swiveling around, surveying the room. "Why isn't Papa here?" He stood there in his long nightshirt, clutching the stuffed doll she had given him at Christmas time under his arm. Black tendrils gleamed in the morning sun, taking on an almost blue hue. He was so beautiful.

Tears welled in her eyes. If only Raven could see him! He would certainly be proud of the little man Beau turned out to be.

She slipped into the gold brocade chair and smoothed her ivory gown out, gesturing for him to sit. A smile lit up his face as he ran to her open arms and climbed into her lap. "Now, my sweet, I have something to tell you," she said softly, swiping his hair from his brow. "Your papa is not coming back."

Beau's dark eyebrows shot upwards in question. "Why not?"

Blaze let a tear roll out of her eye so Beau would think it was for Daniel. It wasn't. That bit of emotion was for Beau's beauty as well her own shame at not being able to tell Raven that she carried his child. "Because, my precious, he has gone to sing with the angels."

"Just like old Emma did last year?"

She sat in surprise for a moment, her eyes wide. "I didn't know you remembered that Emma died last year."

His little legs kicked. "I do remember her because she always gave me sugar biscuits when you weren't around."

"Oh," she replied weakly. "I am sorry about your papa, little one."

"I'm not."

She tilted his head up as shock from his words ran through her. "What do you mean? You can't be glad your father is dead?"

Beau shrugged as his hands rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Aye, I am glad he is dead."

"Why?"

"He used to call me 'bastard child' and do mean things to me when you weren't home," Beau murmured as fat tears rolled down his cheeks, his pudgy fingers wiping them away.

Blaze embraced him hard as the remainder of her heart shattered into fragments. She knew what Beau meant. On several occasions, she had returned from town to find Beau with new bruises. Once, she found that he had a sprained arm. He said that had happened when he was playing with the slave children. Daniel had concurred. Later that night, she had crept into Beau's room and examined his arm while he was asleep. A plethora of bruises had covered his injured arm with some of the inflictions looking angry.

Why had she not questioned that before? What kind of a mother would let her child be hurt?

Her emotions tumbled inside of her like a turbulent sea, as anger became a frightening storm. If she had known this was happening, Daniel would have died at her hand, no one else's. He didn't deserve to live. Thankfully, he no longer did.

Blaze swallowed the hard lump forming in her throat. "So Daniel was the one who hurt your arm and did other things to you?"

Her son lowered his head in shame. "Aye, he did. He made me promise never to tell you. He said he'd kill my kitten if I did."

She held him tight, never wanting to let go. "Never forget, my darling, that none of that was your fault. It was mine. I didn't protect you as I should have," she murmured as she rocked him back and forth slowly. "I'll never let it happen again," she promised, her cheek caressing his silky soft hair.

"'Tis all right, Mama," he whispered. "He is gone and he won't hurt either of us any more."

"No, he won't."

Blaze held her son tight as a maelstrom of tears escaped his eyes while more tales came from his lips.

Iron clad resolve filled her soul, forcing her determination to take over. No matter what she ever had to do, she would always protect Beau from the cruelties of life. He would never know another day of suffering while she was alive.

* * * *

Dark, malicious clouds crossed the overcast sky, marching as though they were an advancing army out to destroy their enemies. Soft breezes swept through the small Montgomery family cemetery as they stood before the gray stone vault, the wind rustling the tall blades of emerald colored grass growing wild around the base. Daniel's simple wooden coffin rested on biers, covered in more flowers.

Blaze stood next to Beau holding his tiny hand. Yards of black silk covered her, culminating in an ebony bonnet with matching sheer veil covering her face. Beau was equally clad in midnight colored silk. Only a handful of people had turned out to for Daniel's funeral, most of them probably had money owed to them by Daniel.

Blaze shrugged it off. Most of the women in the town didn't trust her, let alone talk to her. She didn't care. They were nothing but nosy hens anyway.

"We commit the body of your beloved servant, Daniel Robert Montgomery, to the ground. From the earth he came and to the earth he shall return. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the priest droned on as he read from the giant Bible in his hands.

Blaze tuned him out and slowed her heartbeat, gripping Beau's hand tighter in her gloved fist. No matter what happened, Beau would never know the secret of his true parentage.

* * * *

Two days after the solemn funeral, Blaze decided to take Beau to town for a little while in order to get his mind off the solemnity of the occasion. She let him play with the town children amid the glowering eyes of the town people. Unsavory murmurs about her peppered the air and she tried to block them out but it was without success. What did they know anyway?

"She's a witch with that red hair," an older woman openly commented to another elderly hen as they walked down the street behind her. "A real devil's woman."

"It can't be natural," cackled another woman joining the pack. "I'll be she uses something on it."

"To think, she is out and about the day of her husband's funeral!" one young girl gasped. "That child is playing as though he hasn't a care in the world! The dirt has barely settled on her husband's coffin!"

"Well, what did you expect from a woman like her? After all, her son isn't the product of her husband."

"No!" they gasped in unison

Blaze ignored them as their mindless chatter continued, the hurt carving deep grooves into her soul. She was no witch. Her only fault was being born with natural attributes other women envied.

The insults continued until she couldn't take it anymore. Blaze called Beau over and he reluctantly left the town children, climbing sourly into the carriage. She followed him, the insults still ringing in her ears.

"Well, I heard she's had more than one man waiting on her arm," replied the other nosy woman. "I'll bet he's another woman's husband."

Part of her rebellious side wanted to retort a stinging reply to those nosy hens but she restrained herself. What good would it do? Bring her down to their level of insults? No, she had far more intelligence than that. "Drive on, Martin," she ordered the sleek black driver and slid back into the hard leather seat. She left them staring at her. Living well and being happy would be the best revenge on them.

* * * *

Her carriage, stamped with the crest and motto of Splendour, pulled to a halt in front of Madame Garland, the seamstress' establishment. "We're here, Beau," she said, nudging her sleeping son next to her.

He rubbed his eyes with both fists. "Where are we, Mama? I want to go home and play," he said plaintively as boredom crept into his voice.

"We're here to buy you some new clothes," she stated sternly as she stepped out of the carriage and helped him out. "You don't like wearing rags, do you?"

Beau shrugged and yawned. "No, I guess not but I have a lot of clothes at home. Why do I need more when I would rather have toys?"

"Come with me," she sighed. Argument was one thing she was not in the mood for today.

She knocked on the door. There was no response. Blaze looked to the gauzy curtain in the window and saw it part slightly. Good. Madame Garland's was open.

The door opened revealing a plump blond woman with scowl on her face. "Yes?" Normally, Madame Garland was cheerful and happy, always ready to hand Beau a sugar cookie when she came to have her dresses made. She frowned. What caused the sudden change of heart?

She straightened her black bonnet, allowing the ribbons to dance on the breeze. "How are you today, Madame Garland?"

"Good. What can I do for you?" she questioned through slashed red lips.

"Well, I'd like you to measure Beau for a new suit...."

She shook her head sternly, refusing them entry by placing her bulky form covered in blue wool in the way. "I'm afraid not."

"Why not?"

Madame Garland thrust a stack of parchments in her direction, her scowl deepening and allowing the corners of her scarlet tinted lips to pull downward. "Here are all the bills still unpaid by your husband. I will not do any more work until these get paid first."

Shocked by Madame Garland's attitude, Blaze went on the defensive. "I'm sure there's some mistake. If you will just send those to my steward....," she pleaded.

"I have," she barked. "He told me there was no money to pay them."

"There's money to pay them! Let me see those charges," she demanded. Madame Garland dropped them in her gloved hand.

She stared at the telltale numbers.

Ten pounds for her ivory dress and matching hat.

Fifteen pounds for Daniel's white waistcoat and breeches with matching frock coat

Three pounds for hair ribbons.

The list went on and on. Blaze rifled through them, her mind exploding with confusion and anger. What in the world was going on?

She handed them back. "There is a mistake because I know I've got the money. I'll meet with Monsieur LaSalle and see what the problem is. You will be paid."

"I'd better," the older woman snarled, "or else I will turn you into the governor as a debtor." With that, Madame Garland pushed her large frame through the open door slammed it rudely.

Blaze's anger brimmed to the surface but she managed to quell it with a few deep breaths.

This was a mistake.

It simply had to be.

* * * *

Blaze sat before the roaring fire with a tumbler of brandy in her hand she sipped slowly. The last few days had not gone well, starting with Daniel's funeral. Barely anyone showed up except those who thought they'd get something from his demise. She could take the staring but when they had started whispering behind their hands and pointing to her then to Beau, giggling all the while, she ignored them. They weren't worth her trouble to acknowledge.

After the disastrous trip to Madame Garland's, her next journey had been to the shoemaker. He too, had refused her service because of previously unpaid bills. Like Madame Garland, he had gone to her steward, asking for money. Her steward had none to give.

She took a deep breath. Where had all the money gone? Had Daniel gambled it all away?

Worry beat at the temple of her head, tearing at the last remnants of her sanity. Had Daniel lost the deed to Splendour as well?

Blaze took another strong sip, feeling it burn down her throat. Drinking herself into oblivion held no enchantment for her but it did help calm her erratic nerves, enabling her to see things more clearly.

Just as she began to ponder again, soft raps echoed through the room. "Come in," she said half-heartedly, her head swimming in the effects of the brandy.

Angelique, Beau's mulatto nanny, entered the room, her dainty hands behind her back. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

She nodded, refusing to look at anything but the fire. "I am fine, Angelique. Is something wrong?"

Angelique sat in the chair across from her, garnering her attention. Dark hair wrapped around her slender head in multiple braids. Jet colored eyes glared out from under dusky lashes, complemented by high cheekbones, a mark of her Indian ancestry. "It's just some of the servants are getting upset and are threatening to quit if we cannot collect our wages."

"How long as has it been since any of you have been paid?" she questioned quietly despite the fact her anxiety had just tripled.

"More than a month, I do believe," Angelique offered, then sat down across her from her. "We don't want to leave, ma'am. We all love it here."

"So why is everyone threatening to leave?" she said in a slightly belligerent tone. Her servants had previously vowed their undying loyalty until the end. So why were they trying to abandon the sinking ship? No, she would not have everyone leaving her at once.

"I'm not, ma'am," Angelique confessed as she wiped a tear away from her eyes. "It's just that some cannot support their families on nothing."

"If they need food to keep them going, tell everyone to take what they need from the larder," she offered. Maybe that would smooth things over, at least for a little while.

"There is little there, ma'am. The cook cannot buy any more food because the merchant has not been paid in quite a while."

Fury swelled to dangerous tide, making her tremble. When was it going to end? "How much food is left?" she asked wearily, knowing her anger couldn't change anything and gave it up.

Angelique shrugged. "One week, maybe two if the cook can stretch it a bit."

"Good. Tell her to do that," she said sternly, her hands wrapped firmly around the tumbler. "Tomorrow I'm going to see Monsieur LaSalle and see exactly how much is left. The harvest is coming next week and with the cane we have produced, it should be more than enough cover the debt. Tell everyone, I will pay them at the end of next week."

Aye, the harvest! Suddenly, her heart lifted when she said that. She must have completely forgotten about it beforehand. Their plantation had produced more cane last

year and the year before that, more than any other plantation in Martinique. Why couldn't they do that again this year?

Angelique breathed a sigh relief, her hand going to her chest. "That is wonderful, ma'am. I will let everyone know," she said happily, bouncing up from her chair. "They'll all be grateful."

"I'm pleased. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like a little time to myself to think things through."

Angelique bowed. "Aye, ma'am. Would you like me to draw you a bath later?"

She shook her head. "I will let you know if I decide to bathe. Until then, I have a lot to think about before I go and see the solicitor tomorrow. I do not want to be disturbed for the rest of the evening."

"If you should have need of me, just ring."

"I will," Blaze promised as she poured herself another tumbler of brandy.

Once Angelique was gone, she leaned back in the heavily embroidered yellow settee, propping her feet on the matching footstool. She held the glass up to the flames, watching with fascination how the brandy distorted the fire. In an odd sort of way, it reminded her of her own life. Twisted and turned so that it was hard to tell what was false and what was true.

A sudden plethora of tears filled her eyes.

Where was Raven when she needed him?

* * * *

The ship bucked against the waves, making the wrought iron light bob above his head. Smooth polished boards glowed with a dull golden shine. Justin watched it for a moment then let his mind drift as it always did when he finished a raid. He lay on his bunk, stripped to his waist, letting the cool sea breeze blow over him. This raid had been better than the last, bringing more gold than he had ever expected.

When he had received the information that the H.M.S. Winston would be sailing from the coast of England, near Liverpool, a certain thrill surged through him.

Liverpool and Lady Combermere.

He could still remember the sweet smell of those fiery strands as they spilled through his hands while he buried himself in her body, making mad passionate love to her in that cave.

His midsection tightened. How lucky it had been to find his mortal enemy's fiancée lying in the tall grass, unconscious from a fall. Justin snorted. Luck had nothing to do with it. He had been following her movements for weeks, watching and waiting for the right moment. She had a penchant for riding alone, so one day he had followed her to her favorite spot. He had noticed her horse was a skittish mare so he managed to put a harmless snake in her path. Her horse reared, throwing her into the meadow where she had hit her head on a rock. The rest was easy. Several passion-filled few days in the cave completed that part of his plan. Her seduction had been uncomplicated but the havoc it

wreaked on his senses was not. The way her body swam under his, so soft and surrendering....

Justin sat up quickly, wincing at the pain in his shoulder, a souvenir from his last raid. He had to stop thinking about her. She had abandoned him, perhaps some sordid part of her plan.

He played into her hands like a lust filled school-boy, believing all the words falling from her lips. She had bewitched his mind, making him want her all the time. So, when she had offered herself to him, he had hesitated at first but as he thought about it, he had decided to take her with him.

Wouldn't it be the perfect revenge?

He had returned to the cave, his suspicion on alert. What if she were not there as she had promised she would be? Nay, from the way she spoke to him, she wanted to leave with him.

Inside the cave, silence had greeted him, confirming she was gone.

What a lying temptress she was. Perhaps Daniel knew what he intended to do and sent his little harlot to do his bidding.

Justin snarled. He was no woman's toy and never would be. He had never forgotten or forgiven her for what happened those long five years ago. She took over his mind before he knew what happened then left him. That was his method, not hers.

She was the tease and temptress he thought her to be.

He grinned widely. It wasn't as though he was actually in love with her but it was the principle of the situation. Thankfully, he thought far enough ahead to make sure that she never saw him. That way, if they ever met again in person, he could get the truth out of her.

Soft thuds echoed through the room. "Justin?"

"Come in, Henri," he stated, running his hands through his wild tangle of jet colored hair.

Henri, the closest thing he had to a brother, opened the door and stepped inside. His blond hair, dusted with a bit of powder, glinted in the sun. Gray wool covered him while a matching walking stick remained firmly tucked in his hand. "Good morning, my friend. What news of the Colonies?"

Justin yawned. "They are fighting for their freedom from tyrannical England."

"I take it they were grateful for the cloth and food you gave them."

He nodded, wincing at another twinge in his shoulder. "Aye, they were. The man I met with, Benjamin Franklin, was particularly happy because I brought some good tobacco with me this time."

"Don't they harvest their own?" Henri pondered as he picked up a pipe and lit it, inhaling deeply.

"Aye, they do but for some reason, they're having trouble so I managed to steal a few bags of special tobacco seeds that should work well in that soil."

Henri let out a puff of smoke to waft lazily through the air like a white puffy cloud. "I suppose that should keep them happy until we bring them another load," he said then took another deep draw. "Where are we bound for now?" he said as he let another stream of smoke from his nose.

"Martinique," he said dryly. He had found Daniel and his wife after five years of extensive looking, paying every informant with his ill-gotten gains. He was going to destroy Daniel Montgomery just as Daniel had destroyed his family.

"What's in Martinique that is so interesting? I've been there a dozen times and there's nothing that wonderful about it," Henri conjectured as he put his feet up on the deep leather of the bench.

"I have my reasons," he replied.

A blond brow rose. "Care to enlighten me?"

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Do you remember Daniel Montgomery?"

Surprise crawled across Henri's aristocratic features. "You don't mean to tell me...?"

"That I've found him after all these years? Aye, I have and I intend to destroy him as well as that wife of his."

Deep laughter erupted from Henri's throat. "Still steaming after that little wench up and left you? I'm not surprised. Normally, it's the other way around."

Justin gritted his teeth in an effort to abate his seething anger over the situation. "That has nothing to do with it, you stupid ane," he stated, pronouncing the last words with a perfect French accent.

Henri's blue eyes narrowed. "I resent being called an ignorant ass in my own language," he smirked, "even if it's true. Now, tell me, what does it have to do with?"

"Nothing," he growled. It had everything to do with her leaving but he wasn't about to let on. He looked to Henri. From the expression on his friend's face, he wasn't doing a good enough job.

"Say that all you want, my friend, but you're still upset that she walked away from you. The great Justin Blackmore, Second Earl of Sexton, has been spurned!" Henri jibed.

"Get out, Henri," he ordered in a surly tone. "I want to be alone for a while."

Henri got up, his mirth still ringing through the room. "All right, Justin. You win this time," he said as he was stepping outside the door. "This trip to Martinique should be interesting indeed."

The slamming of the door ricocheted around the room, piercing the uneasy silence.

What was he thinking?

He couldn't just go to Martinique and surprise them both. No, there had to be another way to do this. He didn't want them to see him coming.

Justin lay back down on his bunk and stared at the polished oak ceiling above his head. A wrought iron lantern swung back and forth in time with the ship, moving in time

with the gentle slaps of the water against the strong wooden hull of his ship, the *Noir de Chevalier* or Black Knight.

Father, I will avenge your death, he vowed silently, and I will make sure that bastard Montgomery pays for it.

His mind drifted to the hated memory of finding his father. He'd been riding most of the day to relieve his tension about his situation with Lady Holston, a woman he'd seduced then refused to marry. She was merely a dalliance to pass the time and cure his boredom.

With all that on his mind, he had sought his father's council on the matter. What he did find turned his blood cold. His father was in his study, collapsed over his desk. He did not move. At first, Justin had thought him to be asleep but his chest didn't move. He stepped closer, noticing the broken glass scattered around his father's head, mingling with the congealed pool of blood. His first instinct had been to yell and draw attention. He had tried to feel for a heartbeat but his father's flesh was cold, almost too cold. He had been dead quite a while. Under his father's fingers was a note, explaining why he committed such an atrocious act.

Justin blinked hard, refusing to let the tears flow. He hadn't shed a tear then and he wasn't going to now. Now was the time for revenge.

Daniel Montgomery had been behind it all. Montgomery had preyed upon his father's penchant for gambling and bled his family dry. That's why his father killed himself. He couldn't face the shame of losing it all to gambling.

He scowled. Montgomery had forced him into piracy. At first, it was rather difficult but with an experienced crew, he'd been able to make quite a good living. Now he was at the point where he could help the Colonies gain their freedom from England. Not that he wasn't loyal to the crown to a certain extent, but he believed the people in the New World could do better governing themselves than some foreign country across the ocean.

His eyelids grew heavy as the pain in his shoulder increased. He smiled. Henri was right. This was going to be one interesting trip indeed.

* * * *

"It's about time you got here," Andre Le Croix snarled as he paced around the dank cave that smelled of death and moss. He did not want to be here at this time at night. Someone might see him and it wouldn't do his reputation as the magistrate of St. Pierre any good.

"I came as fast as possible, Le Croix. What else to do you want me to do?" the man answered in surly tones.

"I expect you to be here waiting on me, not the other way around!" he growled, his hand itching to punch this man square in the jaw. Incompetence was something he would not tolerate for long.

"It won't happen again," the man apologized. "Now, where is the log?"

Andre pulled the thick book from his frock coat pocket and turned it over to the thin being in front of him. "This is it," he said, all but throwing it at the waiting hands. "Take a look."

His friend went over to where the moonlight streamed through the open orifice in the ceiling. Beady eyes narrowed and widened as he read the passages. "Ah, there are a lot of ships between here and England and France. Plenty of them ripe for the taking," he said slyly, the corners of the man's thin lips twitching into an evil smile.

Andre nodded. "Aye, they are. Now give it back," he demanded, jerking it out of surprised fingers.

"Wait! How am I to raid the ships when I don't know they're coming?"

Andre shoved it back into his pocket. "No. I do not want anyone questioning anything. What I will do, however," he replied in smug tones as he extracted a cheroot from his pocket, "is send you a message before each shipment. You will memorize the contents then destroy the note. I don't want to take any chances." He lit the end of the thin cigar and drew deeply. This was working perfectly.

The pale face squinted. "Do you think me stupid?"

"Of course," he replied sarcastically. "Your name is Daniel Montgomery, is it not?"

Chapter 2

With Daniel safely buried in the Montgomery family plot, Blaze felt it was all right to go to the solicitor's office. Monsieur LeSalle, her husband's solicitor, had sent a note several hours after Daniel's death, requesting that she come in for a small chat. That in itself was not a good sign.

Blaze stood stiff and still on the other side of the oak door, taking a deep breath. Were the solicitor's words something she wanted to hear? Daniel had taken care of all their finances and needs despite the fact he was an atrocious husband and father. What had ever possessed her to marry him?

She was already pregnant with another man's child.

Thoughts of regret flooded her mind, spinning wildly. There were other livelier prospects that she would have liked better but with a pregnancy, time was not on her side. Unfortunately, her father had approved none of them with the exception of Daniel. That

was the only because he came from a good family who made their fortune in sugar cane on Martinique.

Some husband.

Some choice.

Blaze shook her head. There was no time to think about that now. Too many other things took precedence now.

She took another deep breath, smoothed down the black organza and knocked. The sound echoed hollowly, adding to her heightened tension. What was he going to tell her?

The door opened, revealing a short man dressed in a nice black wool waistcoat with matching overcoat and knee breeches. Gold twinkled from the fob on his middle button, extending to his left pocket. High polished shoes complete with gold buckles, glared at her from the floor, his spindly legs encased in white hose.

"Ah, Madame Montgomery, 'tis a pleasure to see you," he announced in his tight lipped French accented voice. "Please do come in," he said, gesturing with a sweep of his arm.

"Thank ... you," she stammered then stepped in, removing her gloves. She extended her hand, which he promptly kissed. "It was kind of you to extend your condolences on my husband's death."

His eyes, as blue as a cloudless sky, crinkled with delight as his thin lips spread in a wide smile. "That was the least I could do, Madame, given the untimely and most gruesome manner of his death," he stated in a calm voice as he moved around the massive oak desk. Monsieur LeSalle seated himself then picked up his pipe from his holder. "You don't mind if I smoke, do you?"

She nodded. "As you wish."

"Merci," he stated then proceeded to ready it. "Please give me a moment."

Blaze stared at the room housing this man's life. Books in various leather bound hues lined the shelves decorating the walls, filled with volumes of aging text. The smell of musty leather filled the air, adding to the maleness already present. In the corner was a chair with a table and lamp, presumably where he read his massive collection. Next to the desk was an open window, allowing the salt tang air, peppered with flower fragrance, to mingle with the old odor already there.

"Ahhhh," Monsieur LeSalle sighed as he leaned back in his chair, enjoying his pipe. "I apologize for this but my wife refuses to let me smoke at home. My only choice is here. That in itself is sad. That tells me that I no longer rule my own household...."

"If you will forgive me, Monsieur LeSalle," she interrupted quickly as the pounding of her head heightened, "but I am not here to discuss your personal life though I would rather discuss that than why I'm here." Her hands twisted nervously in her lap, pulling at the cloth of her gloves. What was he going to tell her?

He held up a thin hand. "Please, call me Albert."

"Please tell me why I'm here, Albert," she begged. It was best to get it over rather than hanging on tenterhooks.

Albert took one last puff of his pipe then put it back on its holder as a solemn expression stamped itself on his features. "I'm glad you're sitting down, ma chere, because what I have to tell you is most unpleasant."

* * * *

The carriage ride back to Splendour was a long and arduous one, her mind reeling. What was to become of her and Beau? Where were they to live?

Suddenly, Albert's words rang through her head.

All gone.

You are broke.

The taxes on Splendour have not been paid in five years. This year's harvest wouldn't even come close to paying everything.

All that you own is to be auctioned off to the highest bidder in order to pay all the debt in one month.

When Albert said everything that included her jewels and other valuables such as the brooch her parents gave her on her wedding day. It was a large oval, encrusted with diamonds. In the center was a flame, constructed entirely out of rubies. According to her father who had it designed specifically for her, it would always remind her of the fire residing deep inside of her, fueling her will to survive.

She leaned back against the hard leather of the carriage seat. That was one piece of jewelry they weren't going to get. No matter where she had to hide it, they weren't going to find it when they came in two weeks to inventory everything.

Exasperated sighs escaped her lips. Now what was she to do? She had no marketable skills. She did have some sewing skills but she wasn't sure if they were of the caliber necessary to make money.

Blaze tore the black hat and veiling from her head, throwing it to the floor of the carriage where it landed in an ebony heap.

Why was she going through this mourning ruse?

She felt nothing except hate and loathing for the man she was now ashamed to call her husband. Thankfully, Daniel hadn't had an interest in her. She was simply too light for his taste.

That was a blessing in itself. She had made love to Daniel once but that was right before they were wed so that she could pass Beau off as his own. After that, he always avoided her bed, instead seeking out the bed of the servants. She didn't care. There was only one man she ever wanted to make love to again.

Raven.

He haunted her thoughts night and day.

For five years, she waited. He never returned.

So much for men to count on, she thought sourly to herself. Still, if Raven appeared tomorrow, she'd be hard pressed not to take Beau and leave with him to make a life elsewhere.

Blaze leaned back. Now was not the time to think of him. Now was the time of action.

* * * *

Morning light streamed through her windows, breaking the sweet blissful land of sleep from her head. Blaze managed to escape for those few measly hours though several times she'd awakened and could not sleep for a while, only to fall into a fitful rest for much of the night. She'd thought about her life up until now, about Daniel and how she was grateful he had been interred in his family plot these past two weeks. Most of all, she'd thought of him. The man she had given her innocence to, her love and her life. If only he had come back sooner! She wouldn't have been....

She sat up and stretched, looking around her gloriously furnished room. A settee rested in the corner next to her dark oak vanity. Pale, damask covered chairs decorated the other neglected corners, their seats embroidered heavily. Light colored wallpaper glared at her from the walls, the stamp of the fleur de lis clearly visible. White velvet portieres covered the windows, complemented by sheer curtains veiling her but not the sunlight. This was her haven from the world, her only means of emotional escape when Daniel was at his worst. She felt safer here than any other place in the world.

Blaze sighed and pushed the covers back, tucking back the few errant crimson strands escaping from her braid. There was no use staying in bed because her problems weren't going to take care of themselves. The taxes still had to be paid before everything was sold to the highest bidder. She had to find employment somewhere. The few shops she had frequented the last few weeks had nothing for her. Today, she was to meet with Madame Carleton, the hat maker for a possible position. It didn't pay much but it was better than nothing. Perhaps, she might be able to reason with the tax collectors and perhaps they'd let her pay a little every month....

* * * *

"Thank you, Madame Carleton! You won't regret this," she beamed at the older woman as she rushed past. "I'll be here bright and early tomorrow."

"Be sure that you do," the older woman snapped. "I'm not in the habit of giving hoity-toity plantation women employment. Keep in mind that no one here is going to wait on you. You'll keep the room clean and take care of the ladies that come in," she ordered in a surly tone. Her worn hands smoothed down the simple violet dress embroidered with tiny flowers. Madame Carleton's face drew tight, as if in a permanent pinch, her graying hair pulled back and tucked beneath a simple snood. A few wispy tendrils escaped, adding to her witch-like appearance.

Blaze seethed with anger under the woman's icy gray stare but she kept a happy face. How dare this woman insinuate she could do nothing for herself? Why, the only

servant that was around her constantly was Angelique, Beau's nanny. The others came and went, making sure the house was clean but none of them actually waited on her. "Of course, ma'am," she answered in a polite tone. "I will be the best hat maker you've got," she said then hurried from the store as her anger boiled to a higher temperature. That woman was enough to make a saint lose patience!

She frowned as an ugly thought crossed her mind. How was she going to work under Madame Carleton's scrutiny every day? She'd have to. It was that simple. The taxes needed to be paid and Beau needed to have food and clothes. How she was going to do both, she wasn't sure. Still, there was hope....

Blaze felt herself hit something hard. The force of it knocked her down to the ground where she landed on her backside. Great clouds of dust erupted around her as the sun burned a deep red pattern against her eyelids. She could barely make out the object until the dust parted with a waft of wind. In her path stood a man of mammoth proportions, his body dressed in white satin. His face, shadowed by his large wig and hat, was hard to see. "I do apologize, Madame," he said in a perfectly clipped aristocratic English tone. "I did not see you there."

He bent toward her, extending her aid. "Thank you," she said, grasping his hand and getting up. "I am the one to be sorry because I am the one who did not see you." She looked closer at his face. White powder covered his flesh, his face amazingly thin for a man of his size. His eyebrows, thick and smooth, were white as well, tinted with powder. Through it all, he had the most amazing blue eyes she had ever seen.

"It seems we are two sorry individuals, Mademoiselle...."

"Madame," she corrected gently

His full lips spread into a warm smile. "Madame," he said perfectly, his teeth showing through his grin. "I am Lord Justin Blackmore at your service," he said, swiping his hat off his brow and bowing low. "May I have the name of the most beautiful obstacle I have had the good chance to hit?"

Her cheeks grew hot as his flirty banter echoed around her head. Daniel had never called her beautiful. "Madame Montgomery," she announced, extending her gloved hand.

Justin's lips swept over her ebony gloved hand, leaving a small smear of white. "The pleasure is all mine. I am surprised your husband is not here to escort you around town."

She pulled back quickly, her fingers twining in the strings of her purse. "My ... my ... husband is dead," she managed to choke out of her strangled throat. "If you will excuse me...."

Justin's hand on her shoulder prevented her from pushing past him. "I am truly sorry, Madame, I did not know."

Sincerity dripped from the warm tones of his voice, forcing her to smile. "You could not have known unless he owed you money," she said brusquely, not used to men accosting her. "Good day, sir."

With that, she rushed to the safety of her carriage and got inside, instructing her driver to take her home as quickly as possible. There was something about that man she did not like. Was it his haughty air? She shook her head. There was nothing haughty at all about Lord Blackmore.

She leaned back into the deep leather seat, crossing her arms. Why was she afraid of men all of a sudden? Was it the fear that all men were like Raven and Daniel?

* * * *

"Is that her?"

Justin flicked a glance at Henri who stood next to him as they watched the carriage depart the town square with haste. "Aye, it was her. There's no woman alive with red hair like that." It was the truth. He had sailed the ocean many times over and he'd never found hair that color again.

"So, what do you want to do?" Henri questioned as he straightened his cravat.

Justin turned and started strolling toward the rest of the square of shops, using his walking cane just like any other rich gentleman in St. Pierre. "What I want you to do is find out more about her. Use that network of spies you're always talking about and see what other information you can get me."

"Of course," Henri offered as strolled. "What are you going to do once you have her?"

"I'm not sure yet," he said pensively as he tucked one arm behind his back. "But if this goes the way I think it will, it may turn out to be an adventure all its own."

* * * *

"This is a most beautiful hat, Madame Guilbert," Blaze offered, plucking the red and black hat from the rack. This was the first morning working for Madame Carleton and it was a rough one. So far, Madame Guilbert had liked nothing she had to offer.

"No, I should think not," Madame Guilbert huffed, appreciatively patting the tall mound of powdered hair on her head. "That doesn't complement my gorgeous skin tone."

Behind the officious woman, Blaze wrinkled her nose, careful to be out of the way of the mirror. Madame Guilbert's skin tone remained cloaked by layers of powder and rouge, making it seem as if there were more folds than there actually were. She was a large woman who was under the impression every man in the town was dying of love for her and that no man could resist her. If only she'd admit the truth.

"Of course not," Blaze said quickly. "How silly of me to think so. Here's a perfectly lovely bonnet," she said, plucking another blue and yellow hat from a different rack, "that I think would complement you more." She placed it on the woman's head. "Shall I pin it in place for you?"

"That's what I'm paying you for," snapped Madame Guilbert, her thick fingers toying with the ribbons on either side of her face.

Blaze took the hatpin out and was about to replace it when a small bark captured her attention. She looked down to see Sugar, Madame Guilbert's small white Yorkshire

terrier, sitting next to its mistress' feet. She smiled and went back to work. Just as she was putting the pin in place, Madame Carleton's gray and white tabby, Wentworth, darted out from the back room and scampered through. Sugar, intent on the cat, ran from his spot to go after the fast feline. He ran through Blaze's legs, catching her off guard and making her jam the pin into Madame Guilbert's head.

"Ouch! You wench! Look what you've done!" Madame Guilbert screamed as she tore the hat from her head and held a plump hand to the small wound.

"I'm sorry, Madame! It's just that your dog scared me and I didn't mean to...," she pleaded.

"Enough, you stupid girl! I should...."

Blaze glared at Madame Guilbert, her hands flying to her hips. She simply could not hold her tongue any longer. "Stupid? How am I stupid? I didn't bring my dog to a shop where I knew that a cat was."

"Why you insolent girl," Madame Guilbert hissed through clenched teeth. "I should have you sent...."

The appearance of Madame Carleton cut off their words. "What is going on here?" she questioned, her grizzled eyebrows rising.

"Nothing," Blaze muttered as she dropped the hat to the floor in defeat. This was not going to help her employment here. "I was just apologizing to Madame...," she offered to the older woman.

"This girl is trying to kill me," Madame Guilbert lied. "She actually stuck the pin in my head!" she cried while holding her hand to her head.

Madame Carleton's accusing eyes turned to her. "Is this true?"

"It was an accident. Madame Guilbert's dog ran out from under her chair and scared me...."

"My Sugar is perfect," Madame Guilbert said, crossing her thick arms over her ample bosom. "I want this woman released."

Madame Carleton came over and patted the older woman on the shoulder. "Of course. I treasure your patronage," she snarled then looked to Blaze. "There are plenty of other girls that would be most happy to have this position. Madame Montgomery?"

Blaze held back her tears as she what was coming. "Yes?"

"You're discharged."

* * * *

Blaze started the lonely walk home. Her carriage was no longer an issue because in an effort to save money, she was forced to let the servants that she could do without, go. Now, without a position, she would have to let more of them go.

Just as she turned the corner of the street, an elegant carriage rode in her direction, coming to a slow halt beside her. The driver, a young dark man outfitted with a white wig and black suit, jumped down and opened the door. A woman, elegantly dressed in a

brown satin gown with a low neckline filled with lace, peered out. "Do you need a ride, dear?"

For a moment, she hesitated. Who was this woman? "Aye, that I do but I really don't know you, Madame, so it would be best if I walked home."

"Come now, Blaze, let my driver take you home."

Fear thrummed through her veins. "How do you know my name?"

Friendly titters of laughter escaped the woman's throat. "You stick out in a town of this size. You don't know how many women envy that naturally red-hair of yours."

Her guard lowered a little. "Since you know my name perhaps I can know yours."

"Come up in the carriage and we will get to know each other a little better."

Though she was reluctant, Blaze climbed up into the coach, her body weary. Just as she sank into the deep leather seat, the door slammed. The clatter of the driver getting back up into his own seat resounded through the air, breaking the uneasy silence between them.

The carriage started with a jerk. "My name is Gabrielle," stated the other woman in a soft tone, "but I think you will know me by my better name."

"What is that?"

"Madame Willoughby."

Blaze's mind raced, her heart thumping. Madame Willoughby was the most well known woman in St. Pierre, having run the most successful brothel. Kings and princes sometimes came to St. Pierre just to visit her famous salon just for the sake of saying they had paid her a call. She had a long list of kings and high-ranking nobles that she'd entertained over the years. If Blaze were not mistaken, Madame Willoughby was not much older than she was.

She swallowed the hard lump in her throat. "What is it that you want with me?"

Gabrielle tugged at the edges of her gloves as if to draw them on further then smoothed the folds of her gown down. "Just sit back and listen to what I have to say before you give me an answer."

* * * *

The two weeks flew by, finding Blaze without a position.

What was she going to do?

The conversation with Madame Willoughby floated through her mind like the smoke from a long dead fire. Madame had offered her a job in her brothel. She could have say in her choice of men and work as often as she liked. Madame Willoughby only asked for a small portion of the money she made. With her fire tinted hair and luminous skin, she could command a higher price than the rest of the girls. Madame Willoughby also told her there was a very important client from Europe who had a standing order for a natural red-head. The only stipulation was that he was to be her first customer and he should have her all night.

Blaze shivered. There was only one man she wanted to make love to and he didn't seem to care to be around. How would it be to have to pretend to enjoy lovemaking? She'd only had to do that once before.

She sat on the white bench near the sea, dressed in an outlawed scarlet gown, watching the waves roll in to wet the sand before it went out again. In the distance, she could see two more ships sailing toward the harbor, their white sails high. Whitecaps rolled along before crashing onto the nearby rocks, their spray rising high. The sound of the water slapping against the rock was normally a comforting sound but it did nothing for her. Her mind was as turbulent as the sea.

In the past two weeks, she'd worked for Madame St. James for two days before she was discharged for accidentally knocking a bottle of ink on Madame Sinclair's newly finished gown. Her next stop was the small bakery run by Monsieur De Fleur. She lasted all of a week. Andre Le Croix, the magistrate, was having a dinner party and had ordered the bread from Monsieur De Fleur. Her job was simply to watch the oven when the loaves were baked the day before to make sure the bread didn't burn. She messed up in a great fashion. Just as the loaves went in, there was an argument between two of the other assistant bakers. She stepped in and tried to break it up. It took her quite a while to get them to settle down. Meanwhile, the bread burned, infuriating Monsieur De Fleur. He discharged her on the spot.

Now that left her with nothing. Her reputation as unreliable circulated around the town, keeping anyone from hiring her. She found this out when she went to several shops and they merely laughed at her for inquiring about the available position.

What should she do?

She leaned forward, cupping her chin in her hands. Beau needed food and clothing as well as shelter. No one else could provide that but her. She let out a resigned sigh. There was only one woman in the town willing to employ her.

Tears tracked their way down her cheek as she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. Was this something she wanted to do? She didn't care for her reputation because it was already marred by jealousy from the women of St. Pierre. What did bother her was the stigma Beau would have to bear because of her decision.

She wiped away the tears and let out a soft sigh. Her answer was right in front of her. All she needed to do now was take it.

Chapter 3

Justin leaned back in his chair, carefully putting his feet up on the footstool, lighting up a cheroot. Henri should be back any moment with information about Blaze and the blackguard Montgomery.

He smiled. Henri was nothing if not inventive. He could find anything out about anyone.

Justin took another deep draw from his cigar. Thankfully, his aunt lent him the use of her country home while she entertained in St. Pierre. He snorted softly. When everything played out right, Blaze would fall right into his lap.

Her salon was opulent to say the least. Red velvet portieres adorned the mullioned windows while hand painted wallpaper decorated the walls. Brocade chairs, imported from France, accented the decor as well as the rest of her cherry wood furniture. Very soon, if things worked out right, he wouldn't need this house....

"Justin!" Henri called out as he all but burst into the room.

"Yes, Henri. What is it?" he said, taking another puff on his cheroot.

"You'll never believe this," Henri said as he strode into the room and threw himself into a chair opposite him. "I've got news that will make you cringe."

"What is it?" From the way Henri was acting, it must be important.

"Your lady friend, what's her name?"

"Blaze."

"Well it seems...." Henri trailed off.

His anger started to grow. "Out with it Henri!"

"It seems that she has a son."

That bit of news didn't interest him. "So?"

"I think the boy to be yours."

He felt his blood turn cold as it slipped from his head and pooled in his feet.

"What do you mean?" he demanded as he sat up quickly, slamming his feet on the floor. There was no possible way she could have given birth to his son.

"I've seen her son, Justin. He looks nothing like that bastard Montgomery," Henri confessed, his gray eyes dancing with delight.

He frowned. "You've never seen Montgomery. I have."

Henri let out a wild peal of laughter. "I've seen the boy, Justin. He looks just like you. Besides, he's around the right age for him to be yours."

Justin leapt to his feet and paced erratically around the room, his hands clenched at his sides. No, it couldn't be true! He'd been so careful ... he stopped in his tracks as his memory raced to the time in question. No, he hadn't been careful at all. The normal practices he had used to keep other women from getting pregnant, he had neglected with Blaze. Maybe part of him wanted her to get....

"Justin? You're quiet all of a sudden," Henri said, extracting a cheroot from the gold compact case. "I guess this is one time you've been caught with your breeches around your ankles, figuratively speaking of course."

Justin heard the mocking tone in Henri's voice and it infuriated him. This was no laughing matter. "This is not amusing, Henri," he snarled. "If this child is mine, then I'll have to find away to get Blaze and my son away from that monster of a husband before I destroy him."

"Oh, that will be easy," Henri offered. "Someone's already done that for you."

He whirled around. "What do you mean?"

"He's already dead."

* * * *

Justin sat in front of the roaring fire, the chilly stem of the sherry filled goblet twirling between his fingers. Twilight had set over St. Pierre, turning the world dark and mysterious. He hadn't moved from the salon all day, the news finally taking root.

He had a son.

No, it couldn't be true.

But what if it was? He at least owed his son the protection of his name.

Blaze on the other hand was another matter. He needed to know the reason for her flight as much for as his own sanity as he did for the end of his torment. Did she go of her own free will or was she forced?

Justin gulped down the sherry, feeling it burn down his throat. Those three days in the cave were perhaps the happiest he'd ever known. Blaze was more than he could ever hope for in a woman, so soft and yielding, her body molding to his....

He shook his head. He must not think about those days because all it did was arouse him. Even if he had another woman around, she'd never dampen those flames Blaze had ignited so long ago. Perhaps he could not forgive her for that either, for awakening something in him that he couldn't ever put to rest again.

His body sank deeper into the chair.

What was he going to do about the child?

From Henri's information gathering hunt, he had found out Daniel had died, leaving Blaze with a mountain of debt to be paid. She had tried to get employed several times but each time was discharged because she didn't know what she was doing. Now her beloved plantation was going to be auctioned off at the end of the month.

Justin leaned his head back and stared at the intricately plastered ceiling. Thanks to his aunt, Madame Willoughby, he'd found out that Blaze had no other recourse than to work as a lady of the evening to get the money she needed. That afforded him a way out. According to his aunt, there was a foreign customer who wanted a natural red-head and he was to be her first customer and would have her all night. So, he would just have to be that foreign customer and find out the truth.

He smiled. It was perfect. He'd pay for her all night but never touch her and make her see that it would be prudent for her to marry him. After all, she had a son to think of, did she not?

Justin set down the glass and stared at the clock. It was almost nine. Henri should still be up unless he was in his room dandling with a servant. He smiled. So what? Hadn't his friend interrupted him several times during the span of their friendship?

* * * *

Days passed quickly, bringing about her first night at the brothel. Before leaving her house, Blaze kissed a sleeping Beau on his soft cheek and rustled the strands of his silky black hair. What I do tonight, my little one, is for you, she whispered. With all her heart, she wished Raven could have known about Beau but there was no way. She had no idea in what part of the world he sailed.

She smiled. Raven may not be here but part of him was. She was grateful for that precious gift.

With a reluctant gait, she left the room and descended the grand staircase, her heart beating hard against the inside of her chest while a thin sheen of perspiration broke out on her brow. Was she ready for this?

Aye, she had to be.

She took the cold doorknob in her hand and turned it, pulling open the door. Pushing the cowl of Angelique's cloak over her head, she left quietly. She chose the route of back roads to Madame Willoughby's. It wasn't her reputation she was worried about, it was Beau's. She was going to keep him from being hurt at all costs.

* * * *

Justin entered the house of his aunt, his eyes surveying the room, searching for Blaze. Girls of all sizes, shapes and colors lingered around the opulent salon with their customers, most of them dressed in revealing garments. Thankfully, Blaze was not among them.

"Justin!" called a woman from his left. He turned to see his aunt, dressed in black, glide toward him.

"Aunt Gabrielle," he said, kissing her cheek and embracing her.

She pulled away. "Why are you dressed like that?" she demanded, pointing to his suit.

He looked down. His satin coat, made of brilliant patches of color, clung to his padded shoulders. A matching waistcoat and knee breeches completed the ensemble, as well as white hose and shoes. Over his black hair, he wore a white wig and blanched his face slightly with powder, covering his tanned complexion. "What is the matter with the way I'm dressed?"

She looped her arm into his. "Nothing. It just surprises me how well you've covered up that handsome face of yours. Are you sure you still wish to pursue this?"

"Of course," he said nonchalantly as they strolled to her private salon and closed the door. "I want to know if this child is mine."

Gabrielle shook her blond head. "I've seen him, Justin and there isn't any doubt. I had my suspicions when I first saw him with his mother and nanny one morning. I tried to get the truth out of her when she came to accept my offer but she was like a stone wall. She revealed nothing."

"As I expect she would," he sighed, longing to take the wig off already. It was making his head perspire and itch. "I will, however, get the truth out of her."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Leave it to me, dear Aunt Gabrielle," he stated in a mild tone as he brushed another kiss across her cheek. "Where is my little playmate for the night hiding?"

"Upstairs, room twelve," she answered quietly.

He turned and was about to leave when his aunt grabbed his arm. "What is it?"

"Whatever you do, don't hurt her. From what I can tell, this girl has been through enough without you making things worse."

He brought her hands to his rouged lips. "I wouldn't dream of it."

With that, he left his bewildered aunt in his wake and headed up the grand staircase towards room twelve. He whistled a light tune and patted the small beaker in his pocket. Blaze wouldn't know what happened to her tomorrow morning.

* * * *

The brandy was warm and fruity as it slipped down her throat. She needed as much as she could handle otherwise tonight would be a total disaster. If this man were pleased with her, perhaps he would be a repeat visitor....

Hollow knocks resounded through the room, making her jump. It was her patron most assuredly, she thought as shudders of fright rippled through her. What was she going to do once she had him in bed?

The knock came again, a bit more impatient this time.

On trembling legs, she got up and opened the door. In the void stood the mammoth form of Lord Blackmore, his body encased in more loud satin than he had been when she first ran into him. "I was wondering when you were going to answer the door," he said sternly, carefully putting his cane in the corner after closing the door.

"Lord Blackmore? Are you the continental client who asked for me?" she questioned in a quivering voice.

"I'm not here on a social call," he snapped and threw his hat on the bed, his eyes traveling up and down her body. "Aye, I am the one with the standing order for a redhead," he said as he extracted a roll of notes and laid them on the bedside table, turning around to face her. "Have I met you before?"

Blaze stared at him for a second in disbelief. Where had his aristocratic manners gone? When she had met him before, he was very well mannered and quite charming.

Now he seemed like an over anxious oaf with little tolerance for conversation. "Aye, that you have, Lord Blackmore. I am the woman who ran into you a few weeks ago."

His eyes narrowed and glared at her. "Lady Montgomery? Why are you in this house of ill repute? Certainly a woman of your stature...."

Her nerves were raw from anticipation, her heart slamming in her chest. Would he not get it over with already and let her move on to her next customer? "It really is none of your concern, Lord Blackmore. Did you purchase conversation or my body for the night?" The question was direct and rude but there was no other way to get things started.

Shock registered on his face for a moment then disappeared. "I see you are direct, which I like. Now, I think we should start with a little brandy."

She was shaking from the previous brandy she had already consumed, her nerves no calmer then they were before. "I think I have had enough brandy...."

His finger against her lips silenced any more protests. "I am paying for you so we'll do what I want. I'm asking you again. Would you like a glass of brandy?"

It was foolish to protest a man who was paying for her. In the end, he would get what he paid for even if she was a little inexperienced about it. "Yes, I think I would," she said shakily. "I do want you to know that I've never done this before and I may not be very good at it."

The sounds of the brandy hitting the goblets rippled through the air, making her more nervous than before. "If I must purchase you for a week, you will learn to please me," he said mildly as he turned around with two full goblets of brandy. "This is for you, my dear. May it bring you luck," he offered as he clanked his glass against hers

She took it with trembling fingers. 'Thank you' was all she could manage to choke out. Her heart was out of control while her body trembled with fear. How was she going to stand all that weight on her? Would he be rough and demand that she do things she was not sure she could do? Was he one of those men who liked to beat their women before they made love to them? She gulped the warm brandy, feeling it burn down her throat. "What would you like me to do first?"

Lord Blackmore strolled over to a chair and sat down, placing goblet on the table next to him. "I would like to see what I've purchased so take off your clothes."

"P ... please ... put out the candle," she said in a quivering tone. The only man who had been near her when she was naked was Raven and even that was in the dark.

He shook his head. "No, Lady Montgomery. I want to see everything I've bought."

The brandy fizzed in her belly, spreading with warmth from her midsection out to her fingertips and toes. A warm feeling of relaxation and invincibility washed over her, making her feel like a brazen temptress. "If that is what you wish," she said slowly as her fingers toyed with the satin ribbons at the neck of her gown provocatively. "Then that is what you shall have." With a quick flick, she undid the top, pulling it slowly down her shoulders, exposing her creamy skin. "Would you like to see more?" He nodded slowly, his hungry gaze trailing up and down her body.

Blaze pulled the gown down further, exposing the tops of her breasts. Taking her hands, she rubbed her arms, making the cleavage between her breasts more visible.

"More?"

He said nothing so she took that as a yes. She dropped the gown to her hips and slipped her hands under her hair, letting the fiery strands cascade down in a crimson shower. Her breasts, ripe and ready, thrust forward for him to see. "Do you like what you've bought?" He nodded again, his gaze remaining on her breasts. She felt her nipples harden at their exposure to the cool air, heightening her feeling.

She strolled over to him languorously like a cat and took his hands, putting them on her breasts and allowing his fingers to tickle her nubs, making them even harder. "They're yours for the rest of the night," she purred. "If that is what you want."

* * * *

Justin touched the rose buds, feeling them harden under his touch just as they had five years ago. His manhood strained even more as he caressed her slowly, the pain of his desire increasing. Light moans escaped her throat as she threw her head back, her body arching under his hands. Work damn it, he commanded the potion he had put into her brandy. He couldn't hold out much longer. The longer she stood before him half naked, the more he ran the risk of her finding out who he really was.

"You want me," she said huskily as she took his hand and hooked his two fingers into her gown at her hips. "I can feel it." Her skin was flushed with a mixture of brandy and anticipation, an unhealthy potion for him.

With that, she pushed the remainder of the material past her hips where it pooled at her feet in a satin puddle. Her special scent echoed from the tangle of the coppery hair between her legs, a perfume he wasn't likely to forget. It was so tempting to press his lips against her womanhood and taste her silky essence again.

"Come with me," she urged gently as she pulled him to his feet. "I will try to please you as best I can," she said softly.

"You already do," he replied in a low key. He couldn't help but look at the luscious body that bore only vague marks of childbearing.

Her arms went around him and pulled him closer, letting his hands cup the rounded mound of her buttocks. Blaze threw her head back as they moved toward the bed, the white plane of her throat oh so ready for his kiss. Out of hunger he pressed his lips to her flesh, the taste of her skin was the same, fueling the already out of control fire burning inside of him.

Blaze walked in a dreamy state, indicating that it wouldn't be long before she was asleep. Good. It wouldn't do him any good if she was awake.

At the bed, she perched herself on the edge and pulled him toward her, her fingers slipping under his cravat. Her legs were open, allowing more of her scent to escape.

"Don't you want to take anything off or would you prefer me to do it?" she purred in a low tone.

"I prefer to watch you," he murmured as his fingers trailed all over her body, a motion he shouldn't be doing if he wanted to save his identity. "You are truly beautiful, Blaze," he whispered low as his fingers reached her hips, daring to plunge toward her womanhood.

"I know you want...." she trailed off, her eyes rolling back slightly. She fell backwards on the bed, landing in the middle. She was finally asleep.

Justin breathed a sigh of relief though it didn't help his situation any. He was harder than he had ever been in his life with no relief in the near future. What was he to do?

He looked down at Blaze, her soft snores echoing through the room, tempting him greatly. Her legs remained parted, the perfume rising from it cloying. His lips pulled into a wide smile as his fingers stroked up her thigh until they reached the tangle of crisp copper curls hiding her womanhood. Instinctively he parted her nether lips, the familiar juices already in place. Her moist heat clamped around his fingers instinctively, refusing to let go. Justin plunged deeper into her, lengthening his strokes and evoking more essence from her. Even in her sleep, her hips rose and fell, as if begging for more of him to be inside of her, those milky thighs rising as if to hold onto his hips.

Justin should have ended it then but he didn't. The reaction of her body as well as her scent was more than enough to capture his attention. His manhood hardened to a state he'd never experienced before, pulsing with unsatiated desire. Justin knew he was torturing himself but he couldn't help it. He had hungered for her like no other woman in the last five years so why shouldn't he enjoy her a little?

Her cries heightened even higher, each stroke like agonizing ecstasy. Unable to resist any longer, Justin sank to his knees and laid his lips against her, the sweet essence of her perfume like a heady potion to him. She tasted sweet as he lapped at her juices, enjoying every drop. Blaze moaned as he opened her up further, giving way for his tongue to plunge deeper into her, searching for the right spot with which he could give her more ecstasy than she could have ever dreamed of.

Faster and faster he pumped his fingers as he nipped at her plump button, her body arching into his face. Justin slipped his arms around her thighs and drew her closer, the pain so close to releasing....

He felt himself explode under the padding, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he laid his head against her thigh. Thankfully, he had given her enough potion to sleep through what he had done or else she would have known who he really was.

Justin pulled away from her and went over the basin, gathering cool water with a wash cloth. Blaze's perfectly creamy legs shone with her essence and would be a silent testimony to what had happened. Though he had wanted her to believe they had made love, the evidence was not something he wanted left behind

Carefully, he cleaned her and closed her legs, tucking her under the covers with gentle care. She moaned a little then rolled over to her side, the yards of crimson hair trailing over the edge of the bed.

Justin flopped down in a nearby chair, utterly exhausted by his efforts. Aye, she still had the power to arouse the devil in him, even when she slept. Besides her seductive power, it was her hair feeding the amorous desire. Never had he ever seen hair that color and chances were he never would again. It was uniquely Blaze and no other woman would compare.

Uneasily, he looked down to his padded groin, grimacing. He would not be able to clean himself up until later so until then, he would have to suffer.

Tiny sighs escaped Blaze's throat, rising through the still air. His flaccid manhood jumped to life, as if waiting for another round with her. Justin let out an exasperated sigh. It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

She felt his lips kiss her wet cavern and nibble at the waiting nub like he had many times before, bringing her to the brink of ecstasy. Murmurs escaped her throat as she reveled in his kiss, her fingers clutching the furs under her head as she arched against him. "Raven," she cried, her body waiting for that sweet relief only he could provide....

"Who is Raven, my dear?" asked a familiar male voice.

Her eyes snapped open and she realized with sudden dread morning had come to find her. Fear filled her belly, sitting there like a stone. She wasn't with Raven. She was in Madame Willoughby's house as one of her working girls. "No one, my lord," she muttered in a sleepy tone as the pounding of her head became worse. "It was just a dream."

Justin stood at the bottom of the bed, folding his cravat neatly with surprisingly slim fingers. "It must have been a spectacular dream because you've called that name all night."

Embarrassment flooded her body, adding to the monstrous headache and the tongue that felt two sizes too big for her mouth. "I ... I ... suppose you'll be a regular visitor now," she stammered as she pulled her body close to the head of the bed and held the covers to her chin. Her heart slammed into her chest as the last memories of the previous night filled her head. With the aid of the brandy, she had been able to make it through last night but how was she going to make it through the nights to come?

Justin slipped his coat on silently and moved toward the chair nearest the sunshine filled window, sliding into it with complete ease despite his bulk. He casually pulled a cheroot from his pocket and lit it with a flourish. "Oh, I intend to be a regular visitor but not the way you think." Swirls of smoke escaped his lips and mouth, forming a cloud of white around his head. She watched him for a moment, her mind spinning. What was he talking about?

She pulled the blanket up farther to her chin, her fiery brow rising. "I don't understand, Lord Blackmore. Do you mean to make me your permanent mistress?" Panic and anxiety mingled to make a terrifying mix that pummeled her veins. Would she have to intoxicate herself every night to have to share his bed? No, even she would not put herself in this sort of situation even if it paid well.

Justin blew lazy smoke rings, letting them circle around his head like a white halo. "This kind of work is not for you is it, Madame Montgomery?"

"Perhaps given a little time, I can adjust," she reasoned quietly. Up until now, she'd reconciled herself to everything else, so why not this?

He shook his head. "No, this isn't for you."

"Why not?"

Justin laid his cheroot in the available cut glass bowl and looked at her through serious blue eyes. "You're too innocent, that's why."

"I've been married...."

"Just listen to me," he ordered as he held his hand up. "Some women excel at this life because they were born to it. For them, it is like second nature. For you, it is a death sentence."

"Why?" Her curiosity piqued at his words. Where was he going with all of this?

"Because of your innocence, Madame Montgomery."

"Blaze, please," she insisted, her curiosity as to where this was going rising high. Confusion slipped over his features. "Blaze?"

She picked up a strand of copper colored hair. "Because of this."

Soft, warm laughter erupted from him. "I should have known. Anyway, to finish what I am saying, this is no place for you Blaze. You're too innocent and not wise in the way of men."

"Did I displease you last night?"

He shook his head. "On the contrary, my dear, you pleased me quite well except that I prefer the women I take to my bed to be a little more seasoned."

Fear and embarrassment soared through her. If she could not please Justin, how was she to survive here? "So you won't make me your permanent paramour?"

"I intend to, Blaze but in a different way," he announced as he picked up his smoldering cheroot. "I have a business arrangement for you."

Her brow lifted. "A business arrangement?"

"Yes. What I am proposing should please you quite well."

She relaxed slightly. "What sort of business arrangement?"

He took another draw on his half-smoked cheroot before stubbing it out in the glass bowl, the vapor from the extinguished fire rising in lazy circles. "I propose that we get married."

Confusion and shock soared through her. "I don't understand, Lord Blackmore."

"Please, if I must call you Blaze, then please call me Justin," he insisted quietly.

"I still don't understand--Justin."

His surprisingly muscular legs crossed over each other, the shiny leather of his shoes gleaming in the morning light. "Let me start at the beginning," he chuckled softly as he placed his hands casually behind his head. "My father, in his infinite wisdom has passed away a short time ago. In his will it states that in order for me to come into my full inheritance, I must have been married and provide an heir by my thirtieth birthday. Since I cannot produce a child of my own...."

"Are you barren?" she interrupted quickly.

"Something like that," he confessed. "I will tell you later but first let me finish why I am asking you to marry me."

She scooted down a little further in the bed, laying her head on the pillow. So far, his story interested her. "Please continue."

"So," he said, taking a deep breath, "my father always wanted to see me married before he died. So that's why he put that clause in his will. I'm happy he couldn't see me like this because he would think me to be a failure," he said, taking the story in a different direction.

"You still haven't explained why you want to marry me."

His generous lips spread into a wide smile. "Forgive me. Sometimes my mind tends to wander. Now, the reason I want to marry you is because of your son."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know I have a son?"

Justin's grin spread across his powdered face. "Because no matter what city in which I reside, I pay people to keep me informed of what is going on. That's how I found out about your son."

"Why me?"

"Because I know of your circumstances and that you would do nothing to bring shame and harm to your son so that is why I have chosen you. Now, is my proposal acceptable?"

Her guard went back up as the mention of Beau's name. "No, Justin. I refuse to put my son in jeopardy."

"Jeopardy?"

"Yes. Daniel abused him greatly and I won't subject him to anymore abuse."

"I've no plans on hurting him," Justin confessed, his features twisting in confusion. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I don't know," she said as her protective nature thrummed throughout her body, her eyes narrowing. "But I will tell you this--if you so much as harm a hair on his head, I will have no hesitation in killing you."

His laughter became harsher. "I have no doubt that you will though I do not appreciate being threatened by a woman. Your motherly demeanor is very touching, I will have to say."

"I'm glad that we understand each other," she stated sternly. Beau would never be harmed again while there was breath left in her body.

His upraised hand cut off her words. "Nay, I have no intention of hurting him, I merely want to adopt him and give him my name."

Her eyes widened. "Is that all you wish?"

Justin's face relaxed slightly as he sank deeper into his chair. "Forgive me, Blaze, I forgot to tell you the rest of the bargain."

Her brow lifted. "And that is?"

"I won't expect you to share my bed because as I have already told you before, I prefer my women a little seasoned. You may pursue who you wish as will I. The only thing that I ask is that you be discreet about it. You wouldn't want people ridiculing our son because his parents have chosen lovers."

"He isn't your son," she corrected tersely. "He is still my son until I decide what I'm going to do."

"How long do you intend on waiting, Blaze? A week? Two weeks? You haven't much time, you know. The month is almost up."

She sat up quickly, pulling the sheet up to her neck. "Ho--how ... did you know?"

His devilish smile returned. "I employ a great many people to keep me informed of the goings on in the city in which I'm residing. So, when I heard about you, I decided to approach you with this arrangement."

Her confusion returned. "Why didn't you approach me before and save me from having to come to Madame Willoughby's?"

Justin's mirth echoed through the room, soft and warm. "Because I wanted to see what type of woman you were and if you could stand up to this sort of marriage. Most women cannot live inside of a marriage of convenience."

Blaze sat there for a moment, pondering on his offer. Beau would have a legitimate father as well as his home, food in his belly and a roof over his head. He would never know what it meant to be hungry or cold. "How long do I have to think about it?"

His features became serious. "The sooner the better, Blaze. The tax collector is breathing down your neck. The sooner I assume your debts, the faster the worries will leave your mind."

"How can you tell...?"

"A man knows. So, think about what I have said," he reiterated as he rose from his chair, "because this is an offer of a lifetime. I have lots of money so you won't have to worry about clothes, food or anything else you and Beau require. I intend to take care of you both."

With that, he picked up his hat from the nightstand and walked out of the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts. Now that her nightmare was over, she had a clear head to think about Justin's offer. After all, it would save Beau from a lifetime of ridicule.

* * * *

Justin walked down the deserted hallway, softly whistling a happy tune. He'd finally found her after five hard years of looking and expected her to be the brazen temptress he imagined she would be by now. Much to his surprise, her innocence surrounded her like a cloak, drawing him back into her web again. She had been nervous when he had entered the room, her hands shaking uncontrollably. He knew from that moment on, this wasn't for her. She was far too inexperienced to be a paramour. That had been his true intent all along until he saw her lying on the bed, her body ripe and ready for his touch. His fingers had traced along her belly, feeling the vague traces of childbearing. He had imagined what it would have been like to hold her and touch her while their child grew inside of her....

He shook his head. Those were thoughts he shouldn't have. After all, he had never seen the child and couldn't be sure the boy belonged to him. All he had was Henri's opinion and sometimes it was a touch misguided. No, he would have to see the boy first before he formed his own opinion.

As for Blaze, she had changed but not in the direction that he thought she would have. Gone was the silly, empty-headed aristocratic daughter of an English lord. In her place was a woman, whose strength knew no bounds, going so far as to sell her body to the highest bidder in order to protect her son from ever having to do without. Her protective nature drew him like a moth to a flame, igniting his own fire.

Stop, his mind cried. She is doing it again! He halted in the middle of the hallway. His inner sense, one that he had always relied on almost implicitly, told him that perhaps he had misjudged her betrayal. Perhaps Montgomery had found her and taken her back by force. From what she had said before about Beau, she must have hated her husband greatly.

He started walking again, his mind whirling. Perhaps there was more to this mystery than he expected.

* * * *

Under the cover of darkness, Andre made his way down the rocky beach, managing to tear a few holes in his precious silk hose. He didn't care. The expenses for new ones were coming out of Daniel's share.

In the distance, he made out Daniel's ship around the secret cove and heard the slight muffles as it was loaded with the stolen rum. He smiled. Good. This cargo was going to make him a small fortune.

He picked up his steps and hurried toward it, his gaze searching for that insignificant runt. He found Daniel lounging against the rocks with a tankard of rum in his hands.

As soon as Daniel saw him, he lifted his tankard in salute. "Aye, as I live and breathe, it's Andre Le Croix," he slurred drunkenly, lifting his tankard in mock toast.

"Shut up you fool!" he snarled as he sank his large body down beside Daniel. "No one is supposed to know who I am."

"They all know," Daniel said then took a deep draught from his cup, spilling half of it down the front of his white shirt. "I've told them who I'm in league with."

Andre froze. If they all knew who he was, that could be the end of him. Out of panic, he grabbed Daniel's shirt by the collar, jerking him up. "What do you mean you told them? This could be the end of us both you stupide bâtard!"

"I resemble that remark," Daniel slurred deeper.

"Of course you resemble that, you idiot!" he cursed then let Daniel go. He was going to have to do something about Daniel before things got out of hand.

"Don't worry, you can trust them."

"I don't even know them! How can I trust them?"

Daniel waved his hand drunkenly in their direction. "They're paid well enough not to talk so don't worry about them."

"They'd better not talk else it'll be all our necks in a noose," he snarled, sinking back next to Daniel. The air around this area was fetid with a mossy smell, mingled with the salty sea air. That was the reason they chose this place as their loading and unloading point. No one dared come out here, especially since the cove was rife with ghost stories.

"They know. Believe me, none of them want to get hung," Daniel stated then looked at him through glassy eyes. "What are you doing here?"

He rubbed his thick hands in fiendish delight. "The month is almost up and I'm going to auction Splendour in a few days."

"So?"

"That means your wife will be all mine as well as Splendour," he answered, his hands rubbing together in a wild fashion. His dream was finally coming true. She would be in his bed, doing things he wanted ... his manhood reacted accordingly. He'd take care of that later. Now, he had more important things to worry about.

"So have at her. God knows I sure don't want her," Daniel said, filling his cup from the flask next to him.

"That's evident."

"I married the wench because I had to, not because I wanted to," Daniel explained, his language becoming less and less comprehensible as the moments ticked by.

"Got her in trouble?"

Daniel shot him a sour look. "NO! That ridiculous marriage clause in my father's will forced me to. Besides, if you look at the brat of hers, you'd know he wasn't mine."

Andre's mind worked in overtime. If the child wasn't Daniel's, whose was it? His hand rubbed his chin. That was a most amazing story. Perhaps, he'd have to find out who the brat's father was. "How do you know?"

"A man shnows theesh shings," Daniel groaned as his eyelids grew heavy. "Shjust looks ash ta boy...." he trailed off his lips becoming silent.

Andre leaned his thick back against the jagged rock and took the half-filled cup from Daniel's hand. This was intriguing. He may not be able to make use of it now but he tucked away in his mind for later.

He took a deep drink of the dark rum. It slipped down his throat as smoothly as a piece of buttered piece of bread, smooth and delicious, its bite slightly tangy. A smile overtook his lips. Soon, very soon, he'd have everything. His next step was the governorship of Martinique. After that, no one could stop him.

Chapter 4

Blaze sat nervously before her vanity table, trembling in her white satin wedding gown. Marriage to a man she barely knew seemed like a very bad idea. She had gone through it once with Daniel, a man she knew less than she did Lord Blackmore. Would this turn out the same way?

Hot tears pricked the inside of her eyelids but she held them back. No, she'd never cry about it. No matter what happened from here on in, she'd never cry about her situation again. She was a woman, making her own decisions about her fate so she needed to stick with them and not blubber about them like an empty headed schoolgirl.

Soft knocks drew her from her dreary thoughts. "Come in," she said, brushing away the evidence of her tears. Blaze took a quick look in the mirror. Her eyes weren't red and puffy but they would be if she kept it up.

Dusky skinned Angelique came through the door with a larger than normal box in her hands. "Are you all right, ma'am?"

Blaze nodded. "I am," she said glumly, her gaze flicking to the pale box tied with a red silk ribbon. "What's that?"

"This just arrived for you," Beau's nanny said in a low tone. "The messenger said it came from Lord Blackmore as his wedding gift to you."

The corner of her mouth twitched, threatening to curve into a smile. Daniel had never given her a present on their wedding day. He had merely shown up. That was his gift. "Thank you," she murmured then took the box from Angelique.

With quick fingers, she untied the bow and lifted the lid. Inside was a smaller box, constructed of black velvet. She lifted it out and opened it. What lay in it stunned her beyond her wildest dreams.

A necklace comprised of rubies and diamonds nestled against the ebony material, casting brilliant colors where the sun caught it. Formed in the shape of a collar, it possessed one giant ruby in the middle surrounded with tiny diamonds. Next to the necklace was a pair of earrings as well as a bracelet.

"Oh, ma'am, that is the most beautiful jewelry I've ever seen," Angelique gushed. "Lord Blackmore must love you a great deal to give you such a gift."

"Perhaps," she answered in a slow tone as her fingers gently touched the precious gems. She knew the truth. There was no love between them but perhaps there could be. Some sort of gentle, caring love. "Help me put these on," she asked, picking up the heavy jewelry from the box.

* * * *

Blaze stood before the mirror, admiring the way the pale satin clung to her. She looked much better today than she had five years previously when she married Daniel. Of course, she was not carrying another man's child this time either.

Soft, resolute sighs escaped her lips. She wasn't doing this for herself. She was doing it for Beau. He had looked so adorable in his pale silk suit with his dark hair tied back in a ribbon. Angelique had brought him in and paraded him around, making sure everything met with her expectations before he was hustled to the church. Before he left, she'd kissed him on the cheek.

The necklace and earrings sparkled nicely, catching the light and making her hair seem more fiery, even underneath the veil. It was very nice of Justin to send them to her. She sighed.

Justin showed her nothing but kindness in the short time she had known him. Everyday since she had said she would marry him, little notes would arrive or perhaps bouquets of flowers with just a little message. It touched her heart completely. Perhaps this marriage would not be so bad after all.

* * * *

"I now pronounce that they be man and wife," droned the vicar, a tired man of sixty who acted as though he'd rather be somewhere else, as he turned to Justin. "Lord Blackmore, you may kiss your bride."

Justin nodded. "Thank you, vicar. I don't mind if I do." With that, his lips brushed against her cheek in a brotherly fashion and retreated. Where was the kiss that most brides got on their wedding day?

"Thank you, husband," she murmured as Justin offered her a silk clad arm. With a regret filled heart, she took it and walked down the aisle amidst the cheers of the congregation that came on Justin's behalf, not hers.

Once outside, Blaze breathed a sigh of relief. The church was stuffy, especially with all the old nosy hens of St. Pierre watching her, waiting to see what she would do next. Well, to hell with them. She was doing what she must to survive.

"Mama, are we all married now?" Beau asked at her side, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"Yes, my pet," she answered then gestured to Justin. "This man is my husband and your new father."

Beau waved his pudgy fingers, his nose scrunching up as he looked at Justin. "Hello."

Justin bent down and held his hand out. "Hello, little master. I want to thank you for being the man of the house and taking care of your mother for me."

"You're welcome," Beau piped back, his fingers taking Justin's hand warily. "Do I have to be the man any more?"

Justin shook his powdered head. "No, sir, you don't. That's my position now. You can be a little boy again, if you want to."

"Good because I don't like being a man," Beau said softly as he laid his head against her skirt, his eyes threatening to close.

Blaze bent down and picked him up, holding him close to her. "He's tired. He was up all night wondering what you were going to be like and how he would like you."

Justin feigned a yawn. "So was I. Perhaps I was more anxious to meet him than he was to meet me," he confessed and cast a look to Beau. "Are you sure he's not too heavy? I will be more than happy to carry him to the carriage."

Stunned, Blaze stopped in her tracks and stared at Justin. All throughout her marriage to Daniel, her husband never once offered to ever hold Beau. It was almost as if Beau disgusted Daniel in some unknown way.

His brow rose. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No ... it's just that," she stammered

"Your husband never wanted to ever hold him, am I correct?" She nodded. His lips spread into a wide generous smile. "Rest assured, that will never happen with me."

* * * *

Justin read the surprise in those gorgeous green eyes and felt the slumbering beast awaken. No other woman stirred the animal in him as she did, bringing it to life to feast on her passion and essence.

He looked to Beau. There was no doubt in his mind the boy was his son. Beau possessed the fine ebony hair as well as the Blackmore nose and chin, both proud and strong. If he were not mistaken, the boy probably possessed one other Blackmore trait. All the men of the family possessed an extra toe on their left foot. He would have to investigate that little trait on his own later.

"If you want to hold him, Justin, I don't mind," Blaze said quietly as she handed a sleeping Beau over.

He took the boy into his own arms and held him close. The smell of youth and cleanliness hit him like a stone. Though his sisters had children, they had never smelled as good nor seemed as sweet.

He laughed softly. His sister Victoria always told him that having his own children would be totally different.

* * * *

Their reception had a quintessential paring of guests ranging from the royal emissaries of England and France to visiting dignitaries to Martinique. Most of them knew Justin in one form or another, all of them wishing them both a blessed and happy marriage.

She accepted them with a nod of her head while the doubts swam in her head like a pool of poisonous eels. Justin was very likeable and very thoughtful but how was she going to stand to be married to another man she didn't love? Perhaps it could grow in time with Justin. At the moment, she felt nothing but aching loneliness.

The sudden tug at her elbow drew her attention away from her dismal thoughts. "Mama, I'm tired," Beau whined. "Can I go to bed?"

"Sure you can, my pet," she replied, her gaze searching the room for Angelique. "Where is your nanny?"

Beau shrugged. "I saw her leaving with some man with blond hair. They went out into the garden." His confession brought a smile to her lips. Beau always managed to snitch on everyone in one way or another.

"Go and get her...."

"I'll put him to bed," Justin interrupted as he leaned over and touched her hand softly.

"No, really," she protested. "Angelique will do it."

Justin rose from his chair and straightened his coat, giving her the most gentle of smiles. "I don't mind, Blaze. Actually, I would prefer it because it will give Beau and I a little time to be acquainted." He looked to Beau. "Would you like me to put you to bed?"

Beau clung nervously to her skirt, his forbidden thumb hovering dangerously near his mouth. "I ... I ... guess," he said gently still holding onto her.

Justin knelt down amidst the crowd, ignoring the fact his fine silk touched the floor. "Come here a moment, Beau," he offered, holding his arms out.

Beau walked over to him timidly, his steps small. "Why?"

Justin placed a thick arm around Beau's shoulders. "Are you afraid of me?" Beau nodded. He chuckled softly. "There is no need to be, my boy. I've no plan on hurting you. I'll tell you what. In a few weeks, after we've gotten to know each other a little bit, how would like me to buy you a pony?"

Beau's eyes widened. "A real pony?"

He nodded. "Aye, a real pony."

Beau looked to her as if to ask her consent. "Can I, Mama?" His deep blue eyes were wide and round, the anticipation rising in them like a storm. How could she say no?

Her gaze flicked to Justin whose face was that of genuine contentment. She smiled because of the warm feeling he emitted. "Of course you can, Beau," she consented then looked to Justin. "You don't have to buy him a pony."

Their gaze locked for a moment and Blaze couldn't break away if she wanted to. There was a soft light swimming in his azure eyes, a gentle radiance that she could wrap around herself. "I know I'm not obligated to but I want the boy to see I'm not some overbearing, loud and obnoxious tyrant here to take over his home and mother."

"O ... of course ... Justin," she said quickly, breaking their gaze and turning to Beau. "Is it all right if we both put you to bed?" He nodded quietly.

Just as they rose from their places, a blond man, the one standing next to Justin at the wedding, suddenly appeared at his side. "Are you leaving so quickly, Justin?" he questioned as his pale brow rose, the hint of subtle sexual innuendo not faint enough for her to miss.

"We're putting the little one to bed," he said then turned to her. "I'm sorry I didn't get to introduce you before the ceremony but this is Henri, my...."

"Physician," Henri finished and took her offered hand, kissing it on the back in a gentlemanly manner. "My congratulations and well wishes to you, Lady Blackmore." His French accent told of his aristocratic upbringing as well as his arrogant air. Something in the voice was familiar, a tone she had heard before. No, it could not be! Could it be Raven? Nay, it could not be because Raven had dark hair ... or so he wanted her to believe.

"Thank you," she managed despite the knot of suspicion rising in her throat. "If you will excuse us for a few moments, Beau is going to say good night to everyone and go to bed."

Henri looked to Beau. "What a fine lad he is. His father, rest his soul, would be proud of him." His tone was almost mocking but she ignored it.

"Come, Beau," she chided and grabbed his hand, leading him through the throng of people milling about enjoying the new waltzes provided by the musicians hired for the occasion.

* * * *

The last of the guests left reluctantly at midnight and allowed a calm to wash over Splendour. Blaze's head hurt from all the music and conversation not to mention all the delicious French wine that was a gift from Justin's distant family. She quite enjoyed the banquet though no one really talked to her. The women, dressed in their finest airs, did nothing but keep to themselves and point their fingers at her. She knew what they were saying. "What a disgrace!" she had overheard Madame Pritchard tell Mademoiselle Winston, "It has not even been a month since that poor man was laid to rest!"

"Aye!" Mistress Winston had concurred. "That woman is a harlot! Why in the world would that wonderful English lord want to marry her when there are plenty of decent young women in town?"

Whenever Justin came around them, they quieted down, appearing as though they were enjoying the feast. The moment his back had turned, they started in on her again.

"Are you all right, Blaze?"

Justin's abrupt question broke through her errant thoughts, bringing her back to reality. "I'm fine, Justin," she sighed heavily. "I'm just a little tired. Would you like to retire now?"

His face turned even paler than his powder. "There's something I must tell you, Blaze."

Justin's voice was solemn and grim, igniting all of her warning signals. "What is wrong?" she questioned softly as she laid a hand on his satin sleeve.

"I can't spend the night with you."

"Why?" What was making him apprehensive? She'd spent the night with him before and was quite prepared to do so again. After all, he was her husband.

Justin nudged her elbow and guided her to the stairs, their way lit by a servant carrying a candelabrum. "There is a minor problem."

"What sort of problem?"

His gaze flicked to the servant then back to her. "I will tell you in the bedroom."

Silently they walked up the rest of the winding staircase to the next floor, their shoes making quiet clicks on the parquet floor. Each sound grated on her nerves as her mind dreamed up all sorts of possibilities. Was she that unattractive to look at? Or could it have been she was that inexperienced?

At her bedroom door, soon to be Justin's as well, the servant opened the door and ushered them inside. Salty tangs of sea air wafted through the open window, peppered with the aroma of wild jasmine. Her sheer curtains rippled gently, the only sound breaking the silence. She looked to the bed. Her servants had turned down the red satin coverlet and laid a red rose on each white pillow.

"Thank you," Justin said to the servant. "Have a good night."

"Night, sir," replied the servant. He laid the candelabra down and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Once the hard snap of the lock ticking back into place died away, she turned to him. "Now we are alone, Justin. What is it that you wished to tell me?"

He walked softly over the ember filled fireplace and placed his arm precariously on the side of the mantles, staring into the small flames. "Do you remember when I told you I had an illness that prevented me from having children?" he stated in a solemn and grave tone.

"Ye ... yes," she stammered, "but what does that have to do with now?" Her heart beat fast. Was he dying? No, he couldn't be.

"Well," he said in a resigned tone as he left the fireplace and went to a nearby chair, settling in it so that his back was to her. "It seems that it has returned."

She went to his side and knelt next to his chair. "What does this mean?"

"It means, my dear, that I can no longer perform any marital duties." She breathed a sigh of relief. He looked sharply to her, his white brows rising in surprise. "Why did you do that?"

"For a moment, I thought you to be dying. I'm glad I'm wrong." It was the truth. In the little time that she had known Justin, she grew quite fond of him as a friend, perhaps the only man she might be able to count on in the future.

"Really? I thought you would be asking for an annulment already."

"No, I wouldn't, Justin. All of us have one thing or another that is defective. True friends look beyond that and care for each other in spite of it."

* * * *

Justin stared at his bride for a moment, his mind in disbelief. This definitely was not the young foolish girl he'd seduced and left behind in Liverpool. She was a true woman with a heart of gold. Perhaps he'd misjudged her all along. "Is that what we are? Friends?"

She nodded, her captivatingly red hair turning to fire by the moonlight. "Yes, Justin, even though we are husband and wife. I haven't known you very long but there is something familiar and warm about you but I can't quite place it," she said softly, her finger going to her chin. "I honestly don't know why but that is beside the point."

If only she knew the truth. He was dying to take her into his arms and make love to her again, plunging himself into the pool of passion again and again. The hunger for her had consumed the last five years though he desperately tried to drink her away or worse, use other woman in order to drive her out of his mind. Nothing worked. "Perhaps I remind you of someone."

Her emerald eyes glinted with a faraway look, as if she pictured someone in her mind. "Maybe," she said lightly, the color of her eyes deepening as her mind returned. "Think nothing of your malady, Justin. It doesn't change you or make you any less of a man."

Blaze's fingers touched the back of his powdered hand lightly, sending the flames of ardor spiking up his veins. The sleeping dragon of desire stirred. "You are truly a remarkable woman, Blaze," he commented.

"Not really," she replied, standing up and turning around. "Could you undo my gown for me?"

He hesitated for a moment, the knowledge that her creamy, shimmering skin lay just below those hooks and fastenings. "Why?"

"I want to get ready for bed," she replied in a soft, breathless tone. This didn't do his mind or his ardor any good.

Justin stood up, his body stiff as he reigned in the emotions. "Of course, how silly of me." The silk lacings in his hands reminded him of another time when she was helpless in his arms, the violet-laced scent clinging to her. Only this time, there was no damp cave. "There you go, my dear," he said as he finished. "Now, if you will excuse me, I'll retire to my room now."

She turned around sharply, her beautiful features taking on an expression of confusion. "What do you mean? I thought you were going to sleep in here with me?"

"No, my dear. Since I cannot be a husband in the traditional sense, I would prefer to sleep in another room," he lied. He'd preferred to stay with her and hold her all night but it was highly dangerous to do so.

"Oh," she said grimly. "What room did you take?"

"The adjoining one to yours."

"Good," she replied as her tongue darted out between her lips and made him insane with desire. "If you should need me, then call for me."

He brushed a hesitant kiss across her forehead. "I shall my dear," he said. "Sleep well."

With that, he left her room and drifted into his own, locking the door securely behind him. He leaned against its safety, laying his head against the cool wood and listening. At first, he heard the rustle of her gown then nothing. After a few moments, he heard her get into her bed. Good. The sooner she was asleep, the sooner he could take off his hated costume and rest as well.

Just as started to walk away, a muffled noise drew him back. Justin laid his head against the wood. Deep within the recesses of her chamber, he heard a subtle moan then a soft sob. Why was she crying?

Her footsteps echoed around her room, the dull creaks reaching his ears. "Raven," he thought he heard her cry. "Where are you?"

Justin banged his head against the cool wood. He understood completely. From the information gleaned by Henri, he knew that Blaze had no friend to call her own. All of the women in St. Pierre disdained her, more than likely jealous and threatened by her natural beauty and attributes. Now, here he was claiming to be a friend yet he had abandoned her just as everyone else had.

He took a deep breath. Perhaps it was time that Raven paid a visit to Martinique.

* * * *

Andre sat behind his mahogany desk, perching the edges of his buckled shoes at the corner. His hands were behind his head, his gaze drawn out to the sea. Blissful blue waters greeted him, the sounds of the working going on drifting through the slightly open window. Tangs of the salty sea air floated around his head, mingling with the smell of his pipe perched between his lips. Today was going to be a good day. He was going to sign the register and get Splendour on the auction block the next day. Only it wouldn't be there very long because he intended drive up the price so far that no one else was would able to buy it. Then, Blaze and everything she owned, would be his....

He frowned. What was he going to do about that brat of hers?

Malicious chuckles escaped his throat. Why, that was a problem most easily remedied. There was a delightful little thing called boarding school in Europe where he would send the boy so far into the continent that she'd never see him again. She wouldn't make a fuss about it because he would be the master of the house. If she didn't behave....

Urgent knocks rang at his door, breaking the aura of his thought. He quickly spun around, slamming his feet to the floor and throwing open a ledger, pretending to be working on it. "Come in," he snapped, picking up a quill and dipping it into ink.

The door opened and a man, very tall in stature but round in girth, stepped through. His frock coat was of blue silk with yellow knots tied all over it. A waistcoat and breeches completed the ensemble, minus the lover's knots. Thick legs descended toward his feet, covered in white hose and filling high buckled black shoes. The stranger had a white powdered wig covering his head while the same paste covered his face. Andre's eyes narrowed. Why the man looked positively womanish in his dress! "May I help you?"

The stranger strode over to his desk in a graceful gait despite his size and sat down, propping his cane against his inner thigh and doffing his hat, casually dropping it on the desk. A small cloud of white dust erupted from that gesture. "You are Monsieur Le Croix, I presume?"

Andre nodded. "I am. May I inquire who you are and why are you here? I am a busy man after all." This man was strangely arrogant not to mention English. What did he want?

"Of course," the man said. "I don't mean to keep you from your duties. I am the Earl of Sexton but most people know me as Lord Justin Blackmore."

Andre racked his brain. Blackmore, Blackmore ... that name sounded so familiar. Where had he heard it before? Shaking the notion from his head for the moment, he turned his attention back to Lord Blackmore. "How can I help you?"

Justin tapped his cane impatiently on the floor. "Just as you are a busy man, so am I. The reason I'm here is that I want to settle any debts that my wife may have obtained."

His grizzled brow rose. "Your wife?"

Justin nodded. "I think you know her. She's the widow Montgomery."

Andre's heart stopped, his breath hitching slightly. It felt as though someone hit him hard in the chest, deflating his lungs. What was going on? Blaze was still widowed as far as he knew. "You wed the widow Montgomery?" he questioned, wiping all emotion from his face. It was best not to let anyone know what he was thinking, at least not yet.

Justin nodded. "Aye, I did yesterday. I'm surprised you didn't hear about it. Most of St. Pierre had been invited."

"I ... I ... was called away on an urgent matter," he said quickly, leaning back on his chair. Somehow an invitation hadn't found its way to his home but he wasn't about to let the boorish Blackmore know that. "You do know that Splendour is going to be auctioned off tomorrow because of her debts."

Justin's face darkened beneath his powdered face. "That is why I'm here, my good man. Now if you will kindly give me the amount, I will see that it is paid."

"It is a large amount," Andre continued. Perhaps that would thwart Justin's zealotry.

"I don't care what the amount is, man," Justin scowled. "Why is it so difficult for you to understand what I am asking?"

It was best to diffuse the situation for now. "Forgive me, Lord Blackmore. It's just that I want to make sure you're well aware of the situation and that you won't take it out on your dear wife," he lied.

"Don't worry, I won't because I know it isn't her fault."

"How is that?"

Justin leaned back in hard chair, placing his amazingly thin hands on his large thighs. "From what I understand, her husband was nothing more than a philandering gambler who did this to her." His brows rose in question. "What is your interest in my wife?"

Tenseness filled the air, making his uneasy. It was best to give this presumptive and pompous Justin what he came for. "Nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Let me give you that figure."

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, after a few more words of mixed conversation, Justin left his office with a brazen swagger, having paid every penny of the debt.

Andre frowned. There was something amiss about this man. He noticed that Justin's legs weren't as big as his thighs nor were his hands pudgy or red, which accompanied a man of his size. Justin had to be up to something, that much he knew.

Rumbles of deep seeded laughter escaped his throat. Here he was, contemplating things that simply didn't exist! His imagination was simply too much for him sometimes. Still, there was something about Justin that didn't quite fit.

His thoughts turned to Blaze. Damn it! How in the hell did she slip past him like a ship in the night? Somehow, she'd gotten this bastard to marry her and pay her debts. Obviously, she was far more cunning than he had thought.

Andre leaned back in his chair and assumed the position he was in before Justin arrived. Aye, he would find out what was behind this 'marriage' and expose it for what it was.

He thought back to Justin. That man was a problem that wouldn't take long to get rid of, especially when he hired the right man to do it.

* * * *

"So what did you find out?" Henry questioned as he sank into the plush red sofa of the salon at the country house.

Justin took off his hat and threw it on the table as well as the wig. His damp dark locks tumbled down, falling to either side of his face. He let out a sigh relief. That confounded thing made him sweat miserably. "Nothing though I suspect that he's up to something," he said as he slumped into love seat and dropped his throbbing feet on the footstool. He was used to his low-heeled boots, not these high monstrosities. "How does your twin stand these shoes and these clothes?"

Henri shrugged his thin shoulders. "He's a strange one, my brother. Actually, I've seen him dress up as a woman at balls and dance with every available male then reveal at the end of the evening his true identity. Imagine the look on those poor fools' faces when they find out!"

Justin laughed. "I can see that your brother is as much a trickster as you. Now, what did you find out?"

"Give me a cheroot and I'll tell you," Henri offered as he held his hand out.

With that, Justin withdrew the compact case from his pocket and tossed it to his friend. "Spill it."

"Thank you, Justin," Henri said as he caught it easily in one hand. "It seems there's been a rash of rum thefts on the island," he answered casually as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "Nobody knows how or when it's taken, all they know is that it is."

"So?"

Henri extracted the cheroot and closed the case, tapping the end of the thin cigar on it. "Here's where it gets more interesting. I overheard two men in the tavern talking. It seems that they know where the rum is going and who is taking it. I also overheard the name Montgomery."

Justin leaned back, digesting all the information his inquisitive friend had. What did it all mean? "Montgomery's dead, Henri."

"That's what we think or are supposed to think," Henri conjectured as he lit the end of the cheroot. Lazy rings of smoke circled his head, mingling with the sweet scent of roses that filled the air.

It became all too clear. If Montgomery faked his death, he might be the one stealing the rum and selling it for profit. Somehow, Andre Le Croix fitted into this. When he had spoken about Blaze, Justin was sure he saw some spark of lust rise in those plain eyes of his....

"You're quiet again, Blackmore. What are you thinking?"

"If Montgomery is alive and is the one stealing the rum then I have almost a sure bet that Andre Le Croix is involved as well."

A blond brow lifted. "What makes you think that?"

His hands clenched as his anger boiled. This man would never get close enough to Blaze to hurt her. "You should have seen the way he looked when he talked about Blaze. There was pure lust in his eyes."

"Every living man that sees hers is filled with lust!" Henri chuckled. "That makes him no different."

He flashed Henri a murderous look. "I'd appreciate if you didn't speak about my wife like that."

Henri held up his hands in mock surrender. "You've got me, friend, but you forgot one little thing. If Montgomery is alive then your marriage to Blaze is null and void."

Justin cringed. He hadn't thought of that when Henri mentioned that Montgomery might still be alive. "I know but she won't find out. When this is all over, she'll know no different than before."

"So what do you want to do?"

He grinned, his fingers interlacing together. "Montgomery and Le Croix have a game afoot and I intend to find out where they play."

Chapter 5

Distant rumbles of thunder brought her from the depths of sleep. Blaze opened her eyes to see the day was gray and somber as it poured through the open window. Velvety emerald fronds of the nearby palm tree swayed in time with the drift of the wind, swift and strong. She frowned. From what she had experienced, the whip of the wind meant it was going to be a strong storm.

She stretched and yawned before turning to look at the adjoining door between her and Justin's rooms. Was he up yet? Since she really didn't know him that well, she wasn't sure if he was an early riser or a late sleeper.

Blaze sat up, staring in its direction. There was only one way to find out. Pushing out of the bed, she padded over to the door and laid her ear against the cool wood.

Silence greeted her.

Sighs rumbled from her throat, making her take a deep breath. With a quick turn of the knob, the door opened. Justin's room was empty. His bed had been made up, appearing as though it had not been slept in at all. She stepped in.

He'd only been here one day yet the room contained an air of masculinity. His hats lined up neatly on the racks while his cane stood silently in the corner. On the dresser were several bottles of expensive English and French cologne as well as a flagon of powder and rouge. She frowned. Why did Justin persist in wearing things only women used?

With a curious mind, she stepped over to the heavy oak armoire and opened it. Justin's suits, each one uglier and more outlandish than the last, sat on their hooks. Blaze wanted to laugh at his clothes but she didn't dare. What Justin wanted to wear was up to him, not her. She had no right to mock his choices.

Blaze closed the door and walked around the bed, looking at everything. On the nightstand next to the bed, something silvery caught her eye. She walked over and picked it up. It was a small hand-painted portrait, encapsulated by a silver frame. A man and a woman sat together, gazing into each other's eyes. Love and passion flowed between them. That much was evident.

"What are you doing in my room?" Justin thundered from the doorway.

She jumped, dropping the portrait on the bed and turning to see Justin's angry eyes glaring at her. "I ... I ... was just...."

"Snooping around in my room," he finished in a harsh tone as he stormed over to the bed and scooped up the picture. "In the future, I wish for you to leave my things alone."

"I didn't mean to pry," she apologized then moved out of his reach, standing in front of the open window. "I was looking for you."

"What do you need?"

"I thought since this is our first day together, we should spend some time with each other," she said, turning to face the window. "I'd like to show you around Splendour."

Before he could answer, a shaft of bright sunlight broke through the clouds and streamed through the open window. He groaned. As the light streamed through the fabric of her nightgown, he could see her perfect body, ripe for his touch. Each curve of her body glowed with the vitality of youth. It was a place he remembered well, a place he hungered to be again.

Then, as if she sensed that he was watching her, Blaze put her hands under her hair and fanned out the fiery strands, letting them fall like a fire-laden curtain. It was almost more than he could take. As if that weren't bad enough, she arched her back and stretched, her left leg bent forward. Her nipples strained against the cotton of her gown, hardening as if he'd touched them. Oh, in all that's holy, why was it so hard resisting her?

He hardened underneath his breeches. Thankfully, he'd remembered to pad heavily down there. "Are you finished?"

Her copper brows arched in surprised expression. "Excuse me?"

"I know what you're doing," he snapped then turned away. "You're trying to arouse me."

He had no choice but to turn away and let anger cover his real emotion otherwise he'd lose total control of the situation. That was something he couldn't afford to do, at least not yet.

Blaze's tight hand on his shoulder spun him around. Anger flared in the depths of those emerald green eyes, flashing like lightning during a fierce storm. "I'm sorry if that bothered you, Justin but I was not trying to arouse you. I would never do that because I care about you. If you must know, I am still tired so I was just stretching. Not everything I do is a mock to your malady."

Her lips, still as plump and rosy as he had remembered, hovered below his, tempting him to taste them again. Crimson strands floated around her head, mussed as if she'd spent the night in his arms. He swallowed hard. Tension was becoming too strong a word for his vocabulary lately. "I'm sorry, Blaze," he apologized quickly. "It's just that I'm used to women trying to tease me all the time because it amuses them." He stepped away as the cloying scent of her perfume assailed his nostrils.

Blaze's anger abated slightly but it still burned hotly in her eyes. "I'm not one of them and you'd better get used to the fact I'm not going to tease and tantalize you. If its amusement I seek, I can watch Beau play with the other children or play games with him."

"Good," he said despite the fact that the padding beneath his tightened more. "Perhaps a stroll around Splendour would do me a world of good. Afterwards, I'll see the plantation overseer and get an idea how the plantation is running."

A generous smile crossed those sensuous lips, making the situation worse. "I'm glad you see things my way," she said, brushing a kiss across his cheek and looked down at the portrait in his clasped hand. "Who are those people?"

"My parents," he answered in a slow tone. Blaze had stepped away then bent slightly to look at it. Unfortunately, that gave him an eagle's eye view down her nightdress. He stared for a moment at those rosy nipples he had once held between his lips, nibbling and suckling those precious buds ... Damn wasn't she ever going to quit?

"A handsome couple," she said then started walking away. "You look a lot like your father."

"Thank you," he said, his jaw aching because he was clenching it so hard.

Blaze stopped at the door and turned. "We'll get a start after the morning meal."

"That will be fine."

She frowned, the furrow between those fiery brows deepening. "Is something else bothering you, Justin?"

"Just a nagging tooth is all," he lied, bringing his hand up to his jaw. "It will go away in a little while."

"Good," Blaze said, putting one foot out the door when she stopped and turned. "I forgot to ask you if it's alright to take Beau with us."

"It's fine," he answered through clenched teeth, holding his hand up to his face. His jaw was really hurting now from having to hold it so tight.

"I'll go and tell him," she said and bounced out of the room.

Justin strode over and closed the door, leaning against it. Another minute or two, it would have been all over for him. Blaze was like a tempting dish. One taste and you went back for more, never getting your fill.

His breathing labored a little longer before settling back into normal rhythm. Just looking at her the way he did was very dangerous to his mind as well as his soul. A smile

crossed his lips. He may not be able to enjoy her now but as Raven, he was going enjoy her as he never had before.

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Dinner was a quiet affair. Justin took Daniel's place at the head at the table and she resumed her normal spot. The only difference was that Beau was with them He beamed from ear to ear at being allowed to dine in their company.

"My other papa didn't like me eating with him and Mama," he chimed as his little feet kicked under the table. "I had to eat with my nanny."

Justin spread his napkin on his lap and leaned back. "A lot of things are going to change around here, Beau, and this is one of them," he announced then looked at her. "There are some things I'm going to change here at Splendour as well."

She sipped on her wine, her heart banging in her throat. "As in?"

"For instance," he said, taking a small drink from his cup, "most of the workers, free and slave, aren't given time to eat a noon meal. I'm instituting that they are allowed a half hour to do so."

Blaze breathed a sigh of relief because he didn't put her on an allowance. The year before Daniel's death, he had put her on a restriction that gave her very little money for clothing or shoes for Beau. To make matters worse, she had to account to Daniel for every pound and shilling. If there was something that he did not approve of, it had gone back to the merchant who sold it to her while the outlandish and expensive things he purchased remained in his possession. "Anything else?"

Justin put a small amount of sweet potato on his plate. "Also, I'm changing who I buy supplies from. I've been going over the books with Monsieur Le Salle and it seems the merchants your dearly departed husband was dealing with were overcharging him by a pretty penny."

"Can I have candy from time to time?" Beau piped in as he beat on a bit of beef with the back of his spoon, his legs kicking wildly.

"Perhaps but I can't let you if you don't eat a proper meal," Justin chastised softly.

Blaze inhaled deeply and held her breath as the fear crept in, waiting for Beau's indignation. Whenever he did that in front of Daniel, he had screamed at Beau and threatened the strap. There was no way she'd let Justin hurt her son.

"I want candy now!" Beau wailed, kicking his feet under the table harder, succeeding in pounding the wood and shaking the dishes.

Justin drew a deep breath and laid his fork aside, the look on his face becoming lethal. "Now, Beau, you're not being a good little boy. Only good children get candy."

"But I'm a good boy!" Beau reiterated, clanging his spoon against the delicate china dishes. "I want candy!"

The clang of metal against china was ear splitting. "Beau, stop this!" she demanded, yanking the spoon out of his hand. "Do you want to go to your room?"

"No," he blubbered then cast his head down, his body racking with soft sobs.

"Your papa won't buy you anything if you don't behave," she said, picking Beau's napkin up off the floor and placing it on her son's lap.

"He's not my papa. I don't have one," he murmured, his head still down.

Justin leaned back, his features relaxing. "You're right, Beau, I'm not your papa but what I want to be is your friend. You can call me Justin if you like until you feel comfortable calling me Papa."

Beau looked up, his eyes moist. "Can I, Mama?"

She gazed at Justin, trying to study his emotions through his face. It was almost like looking at a block of stone. She couldn't read him at all. "If he said it's all right, then I suppose so."

"Thank you, Justin! Will you read to me and play games with me?"

"Of course, Beau. What are friends for?"

Through this entire conversation, Blaze's chest was tight with the air she was reluctant to let out. She'd thought Justin would react the same way Daniel did when Beau acted up. He did not.

She let out a quick breath, releasing the tension. It was good to be free of argument for once.

Justin's white eyebrow rose. "Is something wrong?"

Blaze shook her head. "No, Justin, there's nothing wrong."

"You were waiting for me to pounce on him, weren't you?"

Her fingers fiddled with the corners of her napkin under the table. "When he did that when Daniel was alive, my former husband always wanted to beat the life out of him for it. I would have killed him had he laid a hand on Beau."

Justin's amazingly full lips curved into a smile. "As any mother would to protect her child. Don't worry, I'd never yell at him unless he did something to endanger himself," he said then turned to Beau riffling the ebony strands of his hair. "You'd never do anything like that would you, son?"

"No, sir," Beau replied, picking up a bit of bread and shoving it into his mouth, smearing his face with butter. "I'd never do that."

Her heart thumped uneasily. She waited for any moment his calm demeanor change into something awful, the hateful memories of Daniel rising to the surface. Daniel would always yell at Beau for the slightest thing. The butter on Beau's face would have sent Daniel into a rage.

"Oh, there is one more thing I want to change if you don't mind," Justin asked as he wiped the corner of his mouth.

She took another deep drink of wine to steady her nerves. "Yes?"

Justin turned to Beau. "Actually, I should ask you this, son. How would you like a dog?"

"A doggie?" Beau said excitedly as he turned to her, clapping his pudgy hands together. "Can I have a doggie, Mama?"

She was utterly taken aback at Justin's kindness. Once she had tried to get a dog for Beau but Daniel threatened to kill the puppy if she brought it home. "Yes, you can have one. It would be a nice addition to your cat," she said, letting her gaze rest on Justin. In the last few days, she'd grown more to know him than she would have if they'd been married for years. She was growing quite fond of him.

"How about in the next few days, we go to town and pick you out the best dog that St. Pierre has to offer?"

Sheer excitement and anticipation filled Beau so much that he flew out of his chair and launched himself into Justin's arms. "You are the best friend a little boy like me could want," he said then pulled away, staring at Justin through sincere eyes. "I wish you were my real papa."

Blaze felt a stab of regret. Beau's real father didn't know he existed. "Your papa went to sing with the angels, my dove," she said forlornly, her mind immediately thinking of Raven. What would he say if he saw Beau? Would he acknowledge his own son?

"I know," her son answered solemnly, "but I've got a friend that's better than any papa."

She looked up. "You've won him over, Justin. You really do have a way with children."

"I know," he said, hugging Beau tightly. "I've figured out what makes them tick."

Beau looked up with dark, surprised eyes. "I'm not a clock so why would I tick?"

Their laughter mingled together, rising high in the velvety richness that was the dining room. Blaze looked up and locked gazes with Justin. There was something in his eyes, as if he hid a secret that only she could uncover. They were a rich blue shade, deep around the edges going lighter toward the middle, reminding her of a sky after a long rainstorm.

Their gaze held for a long moment before she forced herself to look away. It was best not to encourage him or else she'd have to deal with another round of his accusatory anger.

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Justin's voice filled the salon as he read Beau a book, the warm and rich tones rising and falling with the story, even drawing her into it. She worked on a tapestry and looked up now and then to see Beau completely enthralled. Blaze smiled. For all her fear, Justin was as calm as he could be around Beau, never threatening and overbearing, completely opposite of Daniel. She was always waiting for a lion that wasn't there to spring.

"Well, I think this little one is ready for bed," Justin announced.

She looked up. Beau was indeed sleep, his head lying against Justin's embroidered shoulder. "I guess he is. Normally, when I read to him, he never goes to sleep."

"Maybe I bored him."

For a moment, she stared at him and the kindness flowing from him. Strangely, she felt very comfortable in his presence, as if he were indeed an old and dear friend.

"No, I don't think so. You even had me enraptured with the story."

Justin yawned, covering it with the back of his hand. "I'm going to put him to bed then I'm going to bed myself."

Blaze glanced at the clock. It was only nine. "It's not that late. I thought maybe...."

"No, Blaze. I'm really exhausted and I need my sleep. It's another side effect of my sickness," he said and stood up with Beau in his arms.

She got up from behind her embroidery hoop and touched Beau's silky head. "All right, if you're sure. I'll check on you later to see if you need anything."

His free hand clamped onto her wrist. "That isn't necessary, Blaze. I'll be fine but if I need you, I'll call for you."

Tiny stabs of her hurt pricked at her insides. "I'm just trying to help...."

"Don't," he snapped briskly and started to walk away with Beau safely in his thick arms. "I don't need anyone helping me. It isn't as if I'm an invalid."

She marched forward and stopped him, spinning him around. Why was he suddenly being rude with her? All she wanted was for him to invite her into his life and let her help. Why could he not realize he wouldn't have to face this illness alone? "I never said you were an invalid, Justin," she stated brusquely. "You don't have to face your sickness alone anymore. I'm by your side and I want to help."

His brows pulled together tautly. "No, I've lived with it alone this long. I won't burden anyone else with it."

"But...."

"Leave me alone, Blaze," he barked and proceeded to the stairs.

"Fine," she retorted harshly. "Be by yourself. I'm not tired so I'm going to take a walk."

Justin halted, refusing to turn around. "No. I don't want you wandering around by yourself. There are too many rogues waiting to fall on a woman like you."

"I can take care of myself," she said angrily. "I've done it this long so I don't want to burden you with my care."

"Suit yourself." His sharp reply stunned her but she wasn't about to try and soothe him.

Blaze selected a knitted shawl from the butler's extended hands and wrapped it around her shoulders. She looked to the empty staircase. If solitude was what he wanted, she would gladly give it to him.

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Darkness enveloped Martinique, wrapping it in a thin, mild blanket. The slave quarters were quiet except for the low singing that was mellow and calming, filling the air with tranquility. The sea at her left was inky and black with small whitecaps, rolling in to taste the sand on the beach. No clouds pervaded the sky, giving a perfect view of the stars

twinkling overhead. Warm sand bubbled between her bare toes, soft and silky, reminding her of the days when she carried Beau. For days, she'd wander out to the beach and stand looking at the sea, thinking of Raven. Where was he now? What country was he in? Evil thoughts had crept in. Why hadn't he come to save her?

She kept walking, letting her mind churn with its maddening myriad of thoughts. Justin could be so two sided at times. One moment he was tender and caring while a paranoid monster then next. During these times, she wasn't sure who she was going to get.

Blaze turned to see where she was. The house was a fair distance away as were the slave quarters. She stepped behind the smokehouse and leaned against the wall, her hands crossing her bosom. What was she going to do about Justin?

Just as she stood up, a strong arm locked around her waist while a gloved hand slipped around her mouth to prevent her from screaming.

"Say nothing, ma cherie," whispered the French accented voice, his breath hot against her ear. Her heart hammered in her chest as terror sped along her veins. Who was this man and what did he want with her?

She struggled hard but he was too strong as he held her against him. "You do not know how long I've waited to see you again," he said huskily as he pressed his obvious bulge against her backside, parting her cheeks slightly. "Does this confirm it for you?"

Blaze froze for a moment as the familiar voice assailed her senses, the identity of the man behind her rising to the surface. Raven? Was it really Raven here?

"I will remove my hand if you promise not to scream, ma cherie," he said softly. She nodded and he removed his hand.

She spun around and stared at him, blinking hard. Was she dreaming? "Ra ... Raven, is that you?"

He said nothing as his lips plowed hers, his strong arms locking around her and pulling her back to his chest. She plundered his mouth, her tongue tasting every crevice and nook, the flames igniting her senses. He was here again!

His lips slipped from hers and burned a hot trail of molten kisses down her neck. Her nipples hardened and burned for his touch, heightened by the warmth radiating from his black silk shirt. "Raven, where have you been for the last five years? Why did you not come back?" She murmured as she drowned in the sensations he evoked, her body arching under his hands.

"I did," he whispered against her neck, his hand cradling the shelf of her jaw. "You weren't there like you had promised."

"I was there," she confessed as his hands cradled her breasts, his thumbs toying with her marble nubs. "Bu ... but Daniel found me and took me away," she confessed through parted lips, her breath coming faster and faster as his scorching kiss trailed down her breasts, his hands quickly freeing them from constraint.

He stopped and looked up at her, his eyes glittering black pools. "How did he find you?"

Blaze felt the hurt and shame rise like the tide at night, her anger burning at a low ember threatening to flame quickly. She pushed away from him, stepping from beyond his arms. "It doesn't matter," she sighed and turned away to face the sea, "Do you know how many nights I waited up for you, to come to Daniel and demand that I leave with you?"

Raven shook his head, the familiar black strands gleaming in the moonlight. "No, ma cherie. How many nights?"

"Enough nights to last me an eternity," she offered as a frustrated sigh escaped her lips, and she drew her shawl around her shoulders. "Do you know how angry I've been with you for the last five years?"

His hand circled her waist, drawing her close to him as he pulled her to the safety of the shadows behind the smokehouse. "You've every right to be. I should have come to get you but I thought you had betrayed me and gone with your husband."

Blaze let her hand trail over his smooth cheek, the familiar skin and its manly scent too much for her to resist. "I never wanted that man," she said, slightly sniffing as the tears of regret threatened to flow. "My father made me marry him because of his money. The only thing I wanted was you. I cared nothing for the money. I only wanted to be happy."

Raven's arms went around her, pulling her hard against him. "Oh, ma cherie, if I had only known--I would have come for you. I would have fought the hounds of hell to take you with me."

She looked up into his eyes underneath his mask, dark and unfathomable, trying to read the swirling eddy of emotion in them. "Sadly, it's too late now."

His gloved hand ran down her cheek, warm and soft. "You are a widow now, Blaze. Come with me and let us make a new life somewhere else."

"No, Raven. I'm not a widow. I married Lord Blackmore yesterday."

Hostility poured from him in waves. "Why did you do that?"

"I needed to keep a roof over my son's head as well as shoes on his feet and food in his belly. Justin provided that..." She stopped her words, speaking them before she should. Now, he was more than likely to hurl insults at her.

His hands captured her shoulders strongly and spun her around, his eye questioning her words. "You have a son?"

She stood silent for a moment, blinking hard and swallowing the lump in her throat. "So do you."

Justin stood before her and held her shoulders, his hands trembling. So it was true. "What are saying, ma cherie? The boy is mine?"

Blaze nodded, her face a myriad of emotions. "Yes, Raven. I conceived him from those blissful days in the cave," she confessed, her sniffles rising through the air. "Aside from the fact that my father wanted me to marry Daniel for his title and money, I had to marry him to protect the baby from the stigma of illegitimacy." She pulled away from him, walking toward the edge of the rough smokehouse, her shoulders straight. "It wasn't easy for me, Raven. Day after day, I waited for you and you didn't come. After a while, I started hating you. Hating you for the hell you put me through, making me live with that disgrace of a man...."

Her words stabbed Justin like a sword in the heart. For the first time, he sensed her despair and anger. All the time he'd spent away from her, he had hated her as well for making him fall in love with her then leave like a thief in the night. Now they were two people locked in a misunderstood mutual hatred they both needed to let go. "Blaze," he called softly as he walked over to her, his gloved hand outstretched. "Look at me."

She rotated slowly and looked at him through mournful eyes, her face devoid of any trace of tears. Damn! Why hadn't he just gone after her instead of assuming that she had used him? "So where does this leave us, Raven? Are you going to love me again and leave me again?"

"No, ma cherie," he promised as the call of the tern rippled overhead. "I will never do that. I love you too much." His gloved hand cupped her chin gently, tilting her luscious mouth towards his. "You don't know how long I've waited to taste the honey of your lips again," he murmured softly against her lips, the tide of lust rising to high.

Blaze opened her mouth and welcomed him in. His familiar tongue touched every crevice and danced with hers, igniting the sensual fire smoldering only for him. Her heart beat out of control as he maneuvered her against the smokehouse, pulling her deep into the black shadows.

"I want you now, Blaze," he whispered against her, his lips trailing down her neck where her skin became a molten fire. He teased and tantalized the flesh, making her arms tingle with anticipation.

"Not here," she protested weakly. "Someone might see."

"I don't care, ma cherie," he said as the hardness in his breeches became almost too much to bear for him. "I want them all to know you belong to me."

Before she could protest any further, Raven unlaced the front of her gown and exposed her breasts. His mouth hungrily found her ripened nipples. She threw her head back in abandon, moans of ecstasy escaping her as suckled one distended nipple into his mouth. He kneaded her other breast, rolling the bud between his fingers.

She felt the moist juice form in her sex in anticipation of his penetration, the culmination of five years of waiting for and wanting him. Her heart and her love were finally together again.

Without reservation, Raven pushed her hard against the clapboard walls of the building and held her up, urging her legs to wrap around his waist. She obliged happily,

pulling up her gown to keep it from getting in the way. His weight easily held her as he continued to kiss her passionately, his hardness lying against her thigh, exciting her immeasurably.

He pushed against her, his hand disappearing beneath her gown and pushing past her undergarments. Somehow, he had removed his glove because she felt his naked fingers opening her moist lips and plunging deep inside, searching for the spot that would send her into wild ecstasy. Her hips bucked against him as if to demand more of him to fill her. Raven chuckled softly against her lips and thrust against her, as a gasp filled her throat. He'd managed to free himself from his breeches and plunge deep into her, his shaft hard and ready.

Blaze wrapped her arms around his neck hard, feeling the silky black hair trail over her arm as he made love to her harder, the creak of the boards rising in harmony with his efforts. She bobbed in time with him, her hips enduring his urgent strokes. "That's it," she gasped, "that is what I have waited so long for."

"As have I," he whispered against her slick throat, the taste of her skin like the sweetest wine. The fact that he was deep inside of her only heightened his overly charged ardor.

She held on tighter as he brought her to her own climax, the breadth of his shoulders and the musky, masculine scent of him enticing her to hold back just a bit to enjoy the lovemaking a bit more.

Raven sensed she was close but he was much closer so he slowed his pace, pulling back as if he were going to withdraw only to plunge deeper. The sounds of her gasps drove him on further, urging him to pick up his pace but he refused. He wanted them to reach their heights together.

Blaze let her cries escape her throat, the care that anyone would see her slowly slipping away. She was with Raven again and all was forgiven.... Her body shuddered uncontrollably followed by Raven

He leaned against the wall, holding them both there. "You ... were ... worth ... waiting for, Blaze," he confessed as he held her close, his manhood slipping from inside of her. "Come with me."

"Where? I told you that I was married...." She stopped as her thoughts whirled to poor Justin. He was sick in his bed and here she was making love to Raven. What kind of wife would do that to her husband?

He looked at her with dark, sparkling eyes lying dangerously beneath his black mask. "Do not remind me of that lout, Blaze. He has no right to you."

Raven allowed her to the ground, her gown falling gently to her ankles. He tucked himself back into his breeches then backed her up against the wall, his hands on either side of her head so she could not escape his heady stare. "You belong to me, no one else. No man or marriage will ever change that."

"You don't understand about Justin. We're married in name only. He has his pursuits-and, well, I have mine."

"You almost sound as if you want the bastard to make love to you."

Her fingers trailed against his wet cheek. "He's nothing compared to you."

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The sky lightened to a soft blue as the sun started to peek over the horizon. Light fingers of pink began to stretch through the morning as Raven pulled his horse to a stop on the path leading to Splendour. After their tryst against the smokehouse, Raven had decided to take her to his lair where he made long, leisurely love to her all night long. She had wanted to stay there with him but her better sense told her to return before both Justin and Beau woke up.

"Why are we stopping?" she asked, pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

"This is the path to your home and you should be able to make it. I'd take you further but I don't want to risk being seen or," he murmured as his gloved fingers trailed down her neck, making her shiver, "have this bit of heaven compromised."

She looked straight ahead. Trees, tall and majestic, lined each side of the path, dark and forbidding. Everything still had the silvery pall of the moon as it sank lower in the sky, making it all seem entirely too eerie. "I don't like walking alone in these woods," she said, shivering a little bit more.

"You won't be alone," he said, picking up her hand and kissing her palm. "I'll follow you and make sure you get there unharmed. You'll never have to worry about anyone hurting you or my son, including that lout of a husband of yours."

She spun around. "Justin wouldn't do that. He adores Beau."

"He'd better not or it won't be his malady he'll be worrying about."

Surprise crossed her features. "How did you know about that?"

"I have a network of spies all over the world that find things out for me. I paid handsomely to find out about this Blackmore and what I've found out is worth the price," he whispered as his hands graced her thighs. The pressure he exerted sent chills of excitement racing up and down her spine. "You'll never belong to anyone but me, will you?"

"Never to anyone but you," she answered, her breathing labored. His presence was intoxicating.

Raven dismounted then stood next to his horse, holding his arms out. She slid into them reluctantly, not wanting this magical night to end. "Do you really have to leave?" The warmth and pleasure she'd hungered for in the last five years was in front of her, fleeting as it was. Would he return to her as he had promised?

His gloved fingers tilted her chin up. "Yes, ma cherie," he said in a voice washing over her rich and smooth like the best brandy. "But the parting will only be for a short while. You will see me again."

"When?"

"Let me surprise you," he whispered then bent his head, taking possession of her lips yet again. His kiss was deep and urgent, his tongue probing the cavernous recesses of her mouth, encouraging the fire below to rage again, her body shivering with complete abandon. Blaze joined in the dance, her hands on his strong, ebony silk clad shoulders, trying to grasp onto him until the last possible moment.

His thick arms wrapped around her waist, strong and comforting, holding her close to the hardened planes of his body. Oh, why couldn't she just take Beau and leave with him? Justin could have Splendour. All that she cared about was right here--in front of her.

Raven pulled away and stared deep into her eyes. "Au revoir," he said with his French accented voice rising through the air. "Until we meet again, mon amie."

With that, he mounted his horse and sped off in order to hide himself as he followed, leaving her to her own devices.

Calls of the wild creatures floated around her, making her tremble a little bit. She really didn't want to be out here but she had no choice. It was the only way home.

As she walked, her mind mulled over what Raven had said. He hadn't searched for her because he thought she wanted to go with Daniel. She hated him for not coming to save her from five years of living hell. Perhaps all was not completely forgiven but in time, she could learn to forget it and move on with her life.

Tears of joy hovered in her eyes, threatening to fall. The secret she'd carried for the last five years was revealed to the man it mattered most to and he accepted it without question. In fact, he was overjoyed. Since Beau's birth, she'd always imagined Raven would accuse her of being a whore and that Beau was some other man's son. He hadn't. Instead, he had accepted Beau and made glorious love to her as if nothing else mattered.

Her arms wrapped around her for warmth while her heart pounded out of control. Raven was back! In these past five years, she prayed so hard for his return and now he was here!

Briefly, she'd thought of Justin. Certainly, he'd never begrudge her Raven, would he? No, he wouldn't. After all, that was their agreement, was it not?

She sighed. In a way she'd felt sorry for Justin. The warmth of passion would never be his.

With that thought in mind, Blaze trudged on as the sky began to lighten even more, turning the world from an inky black to a precious blue. All of a sudden, a new terror struck her. What if Justin awoke before she had returned? She didn't want him to know where she'd been, let alone who she'd been with.

Blaze picked up her skirt and her pace. She had to make it back before the sun completely peeked over the horizon.

Chapter 6

Justin, dressed in the dreaded pads of his costume, slipped his bulkiness through the window, moving quietly across the floor to his wardrobe.

In the dim light of the morning, a figure, swathed in the silk coverlet sat up straight. "Blaze!" the stranger whispered hoarsely.

He spun around, his hand on the pistol in his frock coat pocket. "Henri?" he said softly as the familiar voice assailed his ears.

"Oui," his friend yawned, pushing the covers back. "I've been waiting for you to come back. What took you so long?"

"Guess," he said, tip toeing over to his wardrobe where kept the long nightshirts. He quickly removed the padding and pushed a latch on the side. A drawer opened. Wads of linen went into it and he flicked it shut. With it closed, no one snooping about would suspect it. Thankfully he'd had enough foresight to have it brought from his ship while they were out or otherwise he'd have to go to desperate measures to hide everything.

"No wonder you're in such a good mood," Henri quipped as he hopped out of bed, fully dressed. He dropped the wig casually on the armature made for it. "You should have her more often."

"I intend to," he said quietly as Henri helped him into his nightshirt. "I may not enjoy her as Justin Blackmore but I'm sure going to enjoy the hell out of her as Raven." Quick fingers slapped the wig on his head and hid any stray strands.

"Good because I hate when you're in a sour mood," Henri replied in an annoyed voice as he walked over and adjusted the wig. "Now that's much better."

"You don't know how refreshing it is to wear my own clothing and not your brother's," he said as slipped a pillow from the bed and pushed it underneath the yellow and white striped silk caftan. "There. How do I look?"

"You don't have your powder on."

"I'm not wearing that to go to sleep," he protested. After all, there was only so much of this ruse he could take.

Henri scowled. "You'll have to in case she comes in here."

Damn it! He hated when Henri was right. He hadn't bothered to lock the doors before he left. After tonight's escapade, he needed to make that a standard practice. "The flagon of powder is over on my bureau," Justin sighed as he pointed to the cut glass bowl. The white fluff made his face itch immeasurably, his fingers always dying to scratch.

Thick paste, a mixture of his sweat and powder, formed at the back of his neck where it sat until he washed it off.

Henri applied the face powder quickly, followed by a touch of rouge. "There," he pronounced in a low grumble. "You look the part. Now, if you'll excuse me, my bed at your aunt's country house is calling."

"What is the matter with you, my friend?" Justin smirked. He hadn't seen Henri this annoyed in quite a while.

"I need a woman," Henri grumbled sourly as he padded around the room and found his shoes. "I haven't had one in a while so don't rub it in that you have."

"Ah, the grace of womanhood," he said triumphantly. "It is a wonderful thing...."

Sounds of someone moving in Blaze's room echoed through the adjoining door, cutting his words off. With that, Justin dove under the covers and turned over while Henri hit the floor and rolled under the bed.

Sharp clicks filled the air as the door creaked open. "Justin?" she called out softly. He didn't move despite the fact his heart pounded out of control, her gentle breathy voice firing his loins again.

Her breathing was soft and even, unlike her gasps of ecstasy in the cave as he drove into her, hard and fast. She had clung to him, the tips of her fingers digging into his flesh as she approached ... Stop! Not now!

It was too late. His manhood stiffened on the breathy sound of her voice before he could stop it.

Blaze drew a tired sigh before she stepped out, closing the door behind her. Once he heard the catch fall into place, Justin bent over the bed and peered under it. Henri held his breath, his face red. With a gesture, he signaled his friend it was all right for him to leave. Henri scooted out and flashed a toothy smile before climbing out of the window.

Justin exhaled a long breath. That was close. Next time, he'd have to get home a while before Blaze otherwise, she'd catch Henri in bed and not him. He couldn't take the chance that she'd figure out what was going on.

* * * *

"Is there something wrong, Justin?" Blaze asked. For some odd reason, he was quiet and less jovial than normal.

"Nay," he replied as he finished what little was left on his plate. "Oh, I forgot to tell you that a dear friend will be coming today to call," he announced as he finished dabbing at the corners of his rouged mouth.

She tried to focus on his statement but it was incredibly hard. He sat across from her dressed in a gaudy blue suit embroidered with tiny red hearts. His wig, smaller than usual, made his face seem exceptionally white. Though he appeared tired, he was more relaxed than she'd seen him in a while. Perhaps the anticipation of his friend's visit brought him that peaceful attitude.

Her eyebrows shot up. "A friend?"

Justin nodded. "My physician, Henri de Montand. You remember him, don't you? He was at our wedding."

Blaze adjusted the napkin in her lap, toying with the edges. Try as she might, she could not stop the glorious memories of her night with Raven from spinning through her mind like threads through silk. "Where is he staying?" she asked quietly in an attempt to push those glorious memories back into her mind, savoring them for later.

"Chateau Marmont."

She frowned at the thought of his friend staying in a strange hotel. "Why not have him stay in the house? We have the room." Loneliness is the last thing she wanted Justin to feel. After all it was his house as well and he should be able to entertain.

His lips stretched into a mild grin. "I didn't want to have someone stay here without asking you first, my dear. That would be most improper."

Justin's consideration staggered her. According to the law, Splendour was his to do with as he wished yet he asked for her permission. "Tha ... thank you, Justin for thinking of me. Of course he can stay. I'll have one of the servants make up a guest room this afternoon."

Justin's hand swept across the table and captured hers, his thumb caressing the back of her hand. "It's you I have to thank, Blaze. My friend would be much happier here than at some unfamiliar hotel."

Odd sensations spiraled from the heat of his hand, soaring up her arm. She pulled it away quickly. "You're welcome, Justin." She dare not look at him either. The deep intensity of his stare was more than she could stand, making her tremble slightly. There was some familiar flame in his eyes, a flicker she had seen before but could not quite place. Where had she seen it before?

Justin leaned back and picked his napkin out of his lap, throwing it down on the remains of his meal. "I'm finished so I'm going to go down to the Chateau and see if he's up yet. Do you mind if I take Beau with me?"

Surprise crawled across her features. "Why?"

Justin shrugged his thick shoulders. "He needs to get out plus he needs a little male guidance. Apparently, from what I can see, your dearly departed husband didn't pay him any mind."

She sat quietly for a moment, her heart hammering in her chest. It was true Daniel did not give any regard to Beau. Did it show that much that Beau needed male guidance? Coming back to the present, Blaze nodded as she dabbed the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "You're right, Justin. Daniel hated Beau from the moment he was born so he never even so much as looked in Beau's direction."

"What a pity," he remarked. "He is a fine boy."

* * * *

"I've been waiting here forever," Henri hissed as he stood up from his position of leaning against the post of the Chat de Noir. "Where have you been?"

"I was having breakfast if you don't mind," Justin shot back. He was tired and an ear bashing was not what he needed right now. What he wanted instead was the warm, sultry passion from Blaze's arms. Too bad he couldn't have had that dish again before he left.

Henri took one last draw from his cheroot and casually dropped it on the porch, stubbing it out with an ebony buckled shoe. "Let's go in," he said, casting a look at Beau. "What is he doing here?"

"I decided to bring him with me, Henri."

Henri's nervous gaze flicked about. "That's not a good idea, Justin. What if he hears what we're saying and accidentally says something?"

He looked to Beau who gazed up at him with adoring eyes. "Do you still remember our code?" Henri nodded. "Good. Then that's what we'll use."

* * * *

Inside the tavern teemed with people, most of them dock-workers who reeked of ale and sour body odor. From what he could tell, none of them had ever heard of strong lye soap.

Above them, weathered beams held up the roof of the establishment, the walls in the same pale wood. Heads of exotic island animals glared out from their plaques, the glassy eyes giving an empty stare. Behind the filled bar stood a harried bar keep, his apron grubby and gray hair grizzled around his head. He most certainly fit in with the lower class of patrons.

Tables made of weathered oak sat in the furthest corners, most of them occupied. Justin's gaze scanned the room until he found one in a remote corner. A single taper, covered in gluts of wax, signaled its emptiness. "That's a good one," he gestured.

"Let's get it," Henri agreed then hurried ahead and sat down, pulling two more oak chairs to it.

"Why are we here, Justin? This place is stinky," Beau commented as he wrinkled up his nose.

He picked Beau up and hoisted the boy close to his shoulder. "We're only going to be here a few minutes," he promised as his finger swiped Beau's delicate cheek, "If you're good, we'll go buy you a new toy or some candy. Does that appeal to you?"

"Can we really?"

"Yes, but you've got to be good."

"I can do that!" Beau exclaimed as he settled into an empty chair.

Justin's heart sailed to the highest of peaks. All his life, he'd never wanted a child and always considered them to be a nuisance. Now Beau was teaching him a lesson that he never thought he'd ever need to learn. That was how to be a father.

At night, when Beau went to bed, Justin would always check on him to make sure he was all right. He never felt right unless he did so. Is that what fathers did before retiring themselves?

He sat down and patted Beau on the head, noting the softness of his ebony hair. "Are you comfortable?" Beau nodded. He turned to Henry. "What is the news?"

Henri extracted a gold case from his frock coat and opened it to get another cheroot. "Well...."

"I see you've taken my supply and case," he commented, pointing to the small compact.

"I knew you wouldn't mind. Anyway...."

"What'll it be, gentlemen?" interrupted a dour looking man in a grubby apron. His scalp was clearly visible through his thin hair, pink and bright. A scraggly set of muttonchops, gray and coarse, covered his red face. He stank of sweat and stale ale.

"I'll have a pint and so will he," Justin said, flipping his fingers toward Henri. "Then he'll have a cup of water and a peppermint stick if you have one."

"I got ye pints but the peppermint might be harder to come by," the man answered, his dirty fingers scratching at his face.

"Send someone to get one and I'll make it worth your while," Justin suggested.

With that, the sour man trounced off with their orders.

Justin turned to Henri. "Now, what have you found out?"

Henri jerked his thumb in Beau's direction. Justin looked over. The boy played with the candle on the table, scraping at the bits of wax on the scarred wood, not paying a bit of attention. "What about him?"

Justin waved a dismissive hand, then leaned back, his lips drawing into a deep smile. "The code, remember."

"If you insist," Henri sighed as he leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs out. "It's been a long time. I doubt whether I'll remember."

"You will," he asserted then followed Henri's action with his own.

He looked to Beau, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. The boy absentmindedly played with the bits of wax, molding them into tiny beings that he trounced around the table. From his son's lips came some inane little tune but he enjoyed it nonetheless.

"Here is what I've found," Henri said slowly in the long forgotten code as he leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table. "Some of this might be quite unpleasant."

"What do you mean?" he replied in their own language.

"Before I tell you, just remember all of this happened before you ever came to the island."

* * * *

"Bon matin, Monsieur Le Croix," Blaze said, offering her hand to Monsieur Le Croix. The last man she expected in her foyer was the Magistrate. Her heart trembled. What if there were more taxes to pay?

She looked him over, her belly turning. He was a short man with a thick paunch and meaty jowls encased in tight blue wool. His dress was casual with the exception of the high heeled shoes on his feet. The flesh of his face burned a bright red, as if he had great trouble walking to her home.

He kissed it gingerly. "I came to pay a social visit," he said slowly as he raised his head, "and to congratulate you on your marriage."

His lips felt clammy and cold against her skin, making her recoil. This man was utterly repulsive. Inwardly, she shuddered but she managed to keep that a secret from him. "Merci, Monsieur Le Croix," she said as she withdrew her hand, fighting the urge to wipe the back of it on her dress. "Would you like some tea?"

"Only on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you call me Andre."

The use of his personal name let her guard down a little. "Of course," she said. "Please follow me to the salon."

* * * *

Ophelie poured the tea, nodded and left. Soft swishes of her skirts crossing the parquet floor broke the uneasy silence between them. "You have a beautiful home here, Madame Montgomery...."

"It's Madame Blackmore," she corrected gently, sipping her fragrant tea from the delicate Delft cup. There was something definitely odd about his visit today. Since they'd retired to the salon, he seemed more tense and edgy, like a cat about to spring. His gaze darted around too quickly, his eyes seemingly shifty. Muscles in his jaws bunched, as if some inner struggles raged in his mind. These little actions raised her guard. This man was up to something.

"I'm sorry," he apologized quickly and sat his cup down and moved over to the sofa next to her. "I am just used to referring to you as Madame Montgomery. I meant no offense."

She inched away. "That is fine, Andre. There was no offense taken," she said, her brows lifting. "Were you not at the wedding?"

He shook his wigged head, the fire in his eyes rising. "No, my good woman. Someone saw it fit not to invite me." Andre picked her hand up from the couch and lifted it to his lips, the wet clammy feel of his flesh against hers made her cringe

Blaze snatched her hand back. "I didn't make out the invitations. Justin's secretary did it and I assumed you were invited. It was not meant as an insult," she explained as Andre's bulk slipped a little closer to her. "It was merely an oversight, I assure you."

Andre's lips pulled into a tight sneer. "Oh, I can imagine it was," he stated in a low, gravely tone, "but 'tis no matter. Important business called me away and I couldn't attend. Since I couldn't make it, how about I give the bride a kiss?"

Blaze retreated to the end of the couch with no where to go. In order to ward him off, she put her hands up. "No, Andre, that wouldn't be appropriate."

"Why not?" Lust filled eyes glared at her, glassy and non-descript. His overpowering cologne washed over her, making her belly tumble. Was he trying to cover up something?

"Because I'm a married woman," she replied, slipping out from under him and getting to her feet. "I think your visit here has come to an end, Andre. I'll let Justin know that you paid your respects...."

For a man of his size, he leapt to his feet and stalked over toward her, grabbing her hard by the upper arms. "You can't get away that easily, wench. I worked hard to get you and I'm not going to be thwarted by some bloated, overblown boorish English lord!" he snarled, his hot, nauseating breath close to her face.

Her senses reeled. What was he talking about? "You are sadly mistaken, Andre. I belong to no man and never will."

Andre's sneer widened. "Yes, you do! You belong to me and always have, you little vixen! The sooner you realize...."

"That she's my wife," Justin thundered from the doorway. Andre released her quickly then stepped back.

Blaze felt a warm sense of relief flood through her. She'd never been so glad to see Justin in her life. "Justin, this is Monsieur Le Croix...."

"We've met," he said sourly as he strode in the room with Beau in tow, his gait strong and determined. "Monsieur Le Croix, it seems we can't help but run into each other," he said in a gruff tone as he stepped in front of her, pulling her against him. "Now it would please me if you left my home and refrained from calling on my wife when I'm not home."

Andre's expression darkened. "You don't understand, Blackmore. She propositioned me!"

"I would hardly believe so," Justin quipped then stepped out from behind her and clamped a hand on Andre's shoulder. "I heard most of your conversation from the doorway. My wife is a chaste woman and wouldn't go chasing after the likes of you."

Andre's murderous gaze swept up and down his form. "It seems that she has a taste for men of our girth. Why would she not fancy me?"

"Because she fancies me," Justin replied in a stern tone, his hand spinning Andre around in the direction of the door. "Now if you will kindly excuse yourself, I have some pressing business to attend to."

Andre opened his mouth in an attempt to make some stinging remark before quickly closing it. He turned on his heel and left without saying another word, jerking his hat and cloak from Ophelie's outstretched hand.

As soon as he was gone, Blaze turned to Justin, her heart pounding. "I'm glad you returned when you did, Justin, otherwise I would have been at that man's mercy."

"Think nothing of it, my dear," Justin said casually as he sank onto the sofa. Beau crawled in his lap immediately. "After all, isn't it my job to protect you from harm?"

Blaze felt a warm wash of emotion pulse up her neck, coloring her flesh with its heat.

"Why are you blushing?" Justin asked innocently.

"Be ... because I've never had anyone say something like that to me before," she said in a low tone, her gaze resting in her lap. It was true. Daniel had looked at her as some sort of trophy, a decorated object to show but not to treasure.

Justin's soft fingers graced the underside of her chin and lifted her face, turning it toward him. "I mean it, Blaze. I'm here to protect you and Beau from any harm. Don't hesitate to ask me for help. I'll always be here for you."

For a moment, she stared into the depths of his dark eyes, the ring in his voice so eerily familiar. He sounded so much like Raven despite the fact that Raven hailed from France. Would they sound identical if they spoke the same language? "Th ... thank you, Justin. You don't know how you make me feel." It was the truth. Being with Justin made her feel more alive than ever, but that paled in comparison with Raven. Only with the rogue pirate did she feel like a real woman, to be loved and touched. Sometimes, she wished she could put the best parts of both men together and come out with one ideal man.

"Good, I hope," he confessed. "You haven't asked why we're home early."

Blaze came down from her cloud. "I'm sorry, Justin. You asked the question before I could. Why are you home?"

"Henri was tired and wished to nap for a while which is where," he said, nudging Beau next to him, "I think this little one needs to be."

"Why didn't Henri come with you?"

"He'll be by later," he said and winked conspiratorially at Beau. "Aren't you tired?"

Beau sat silently for a moment and nodded, extracting a fake yawn. "Yes, Justin, I'm tired. I think I'll go to my room now," he said, hustling from Justin's lap and running up to his room.

"What's going on?" she said suspiciously. Obviously, they'd cooked something up on their trip to town.

Justin extracted a black box from his azure frock coat pocket and held it out. "I got you a little something while we were out."

His gesture stunned her. Daniel had never given her presents for no reason at all. At Christmas time or perhaps her birthday, she might get a few small ones but nothing of the magnitude of Justin's gifts to her already. "What is it?"

He patted the empty space next to him. "Come sit beside me and find out."

Blaze walked over and sat down next to him, spreading her peach hued gown out like a child, her fingers trembling. What was in it?

"You know, I've never seen hair of this magnitude," Justin remarked as he picked up a coppery curl dangling from her nape. "The color is most breathtaking."

His soft fingers traced lazy patterns on her skin, making her break out in goose flesh. It was a loving caress, making her draw in a deep breath. "Do you like that?" he asked, his voice low and husky, full of masculine promise.

"Yes," she whispered as she drowned in the sweet sensations. Daniel never touched her like this before, only Raven. It never ceased to amaze her how simple touching could weaken her.

Her cheeks heated up as small moans escaped her throat. "This feels so good, Justin," she remarked in a low tone, her head rolling as she delved into the welcome goodness.

Then, without warning, he drew away. Her head snapped up and she whirled around to face him. "Was it something I said?"

Justin shook his wigged head. "No, my dear. I have an old injury in my arm that prevents me from doing one motion for too long," he confessed, lifting the ebony box from his lap. "Here is your present."

"You didn't have to...."

"I know I didn't but I wanted to," he said, gesturing her for to get on with seeing what it was. "Go on, open it."

Eagerly she opened the lid. Suddenly, all the air escaped her lungs. Nestled in the middle of the black velvet sat a beautiful pearl necklace. It was the shape of a collar with one large pearl, about the size of a robin's egg, dangling in the middle. "Oh, Justin, this is so beautiful," she commented breathlessly as she lifted the jewelry from its casing. "You shouldn't have."

"Oh yes I should have," he confessed as he took it from her fingers. "Let me put it on you."

Blaze turned around quickly and let Justin put it on her. Her fingers danced over the smooth, round surfaces of the pearls, the richness flowing through her skin. The jewels were one luxury she thought she would never have.

She got up from the sofa and walked to the mirror over the fireplace. The necklace lay against her skin like delicate moons, pale with a hint of gold. It highlighted her skin and gave her cheeks a rosy glow.

"You look beautiful," Justin commented as he came up behind her. "The pearls were just the thing you needed." His hands rested on her shoulders, warm and gentle. She couldn't help but stare at him in the mirror. From the light behind them, Justin seemed different, almost slim in fact. His cheekbones were clear cut and apparent, unlike those of his size. What also made him unusual was the lack of extra chins. Most men of his girth always had an extra two or three. She had asked him about it one time. "It is the sickness, my dear," he had told her. "It only affects certain parts of the body." She had believed him then but now she wasn't so sure.

"Thank you, Justin. You always know what to do and say."

Their gaze locked in the mirror, strong and steady. She felt the attraction grow, almost like a budding flower struggling to bloom. It was almost as if it were there all the time, lying dormant and waiting for the proper nutrition to grow. She shuddered. Why did she feel this way all of a sudden?

Justin's mouth tugged into a generous smile, warm and inviting. His fingers danced along her jawbone, tracing slight patterns until he reached her chin. With a soft nudge, he tilted her head slightly. Before she could question what he was doing, Justin's head descended onto the delicate curve of her nape, his lips eliciting the most delicious sensations. An experienced tongue teased the tender flesh, making her nipples harden instantly.

His arms slipped around her from behind, pulling her against him hard. She closed her eyes as Justin's light nips took her to a new plane, the moisture between her legs growing.

Just as she questioned her loyalty to Raven, Justin suddenly stopped his ministrations, his eyes taking on a wild expression as he looked up. "I'm sorry, Blaze ... I didn't mean it," he stammered as he stepped away from her, his hands up.

She whirled about, her heart pounding out of control. "What is the matter, Justin? You did nothing wrong."

"I ... I ... I've got some things to go over this afternoon. If you'll excuse me," he said as he extracted himself from her company. "Please forgive me."

With that, he was gone, the clack of his heels on the rich parquet floor a distant echo. Blaze stood in her spot, stunned to no end. What happened? First, he gave her a necklace then he kissed her only to back off if she were made of poison. What was wrong with him?

She glided over to the couch and sat down hard, her elbows resting on her knees while her upturned hands cupped her chin. Was it something she had said? Blaze recalled every word that had passed between them in those heated moments. As far as she could determine, she said nothing about him or his malady....

That was it! Perhaps an awful memory flooded his mind or maybe it was the idea that he would never have intercourse again. Surely it could not be her.

Blaze leaned back, folding her hands in her lap. From now on, she would be very careful not to encourage him in any way or remind him of his illness. The last thing she ever wanted to do was to hurt Justin in any way.

Justin bolted through the study door and slammed it, locking it securely behind him. He leaned against the cool wood as the pound of his heart increased in measure, the blood in his temples beating a steady tattoo. Why did he have to kiss her neck like that? If only he could keep himself under control while around her in the Justin guise. It was all he could do to keep his hands off her most of the time.

He exhaled hard, putting a hand to his damp forehead. Blaze was a woman who exuded raw sexual power and energy but didn't know it. Thankfully, he had walked in when he did or otherwise Andre would have raped Blaze on the parlor floor.

His fury raged, making the blood pound inside his temples. How dare Andre touch his wife? Justin's fists balled at his sides. If he ever caught anyone, including his friend Henri, touching her, he'd kill them, plain and simple.

He stepped away from the door and slid into his chair behind the mahogany desk. Books of all kinds filled the room, lining every inch of the shelves. None of them interested him. He was more of a thinker, ready to discuss politics and philosophy than boorish literature. Apparently, novels lacking substance were all Montgomery had wanted to read.

Justin put his feet up and leaned back, lacing his hands behind his head. Dull yellow paint covered the walls, complemented by the deep mahogany of the woodwork and windows. He smiled. The color was something he'd definitely have to change in the coming months as well as importing his own furniture from England. The rest of this had to go, especially since Montgomery was gone, at least from Splendour.

Unfortunately, he was still alive.

Henri had found out for sure from some informants that he'd paid. From the information, the shipping company, Martinique Shipping, was half owned by Andre Le Croix. The other was a mysterious partner with no name. With Henri's penchant for finding things out, he had discovered this partner's name.

It was Daniel Montgomery.

They'd been stealing rum for quite a while and selling it in England for a profit. Since Andre was the town magistrate, all the rum makers naturally cried to him for justice. He had assured them that he would catch the perpetrators but he had had no intention of it. Instead, he'd get one of his cronies to point the finger at some poor hapless man as the criminal and he'd have that man thrown in jail. That had seemed to pacify the rum makers until the next raid. Then it would start all over again.

This he was going to have to put a stop to. Injustice was not something he'd tolerate. Especially when it came to thieves and liars, titles that Daniel held religiously.

He smiled. This thing would be cleared up long before Blaze knew anything about it.

Chapter 7

Andre twisted the paper in his hands until it was nothing more than shreds. That Blackmore bloke was fast becoming an utter nuisance. With Justin around Blaze constantly, he'd virtually had no chance of getting remotely close to her. Aye, he had to remove Blackmore and quick before the bastard discovered anything.

Dull thuds rebounded through his office, coming from the back door. He jumped and twisted his bulky body in his chair. "Come in," he growled. He was beyond irritated. The man he'd been waiting for was almost an hour late.

His heavy oak door swung open, revealing a large, dirty man in the void. The knot in his gullet turned over. Was this the bloodthirsty killer he had hired?

The stranger was perhaps six feet in height, with scraggly brown hair hanging limply on either side of his face. An equally grizzled beard covered his chin. Scars criss-crossed the stranger's face adding to his ominous appearance. "You Le Croix?"

Andre nodded then waved him in frantically. "Yes, Yes! Now come in before anyone sees you!" Thankfully, night had fallen and there was really no one about. Still, he didn't want to be implicated in Justin's 'accident'. "You're the man Arco sent to meet me?"

He nodded. "Name's Maggard." The man swaggered in and flopped down in the chair opposite Andre. His leather-clad feet went up on the edge of the desk, the holes decorating the worn hide ventilated a raw, sour odor and gave him a glimpse of dirty flesh. "Most people call me Maggot," he said proudly, his grimy hands sitting on his thick belly.

His brow rose. "Maggot?"

Maggot pulled out a wicked looking knife and proceeded to clean the dirt from his fingernails with the tip. "Have a problem with that?"

Andre shook his head. "No, no, I don't." He rose to the sideboard where he proceeded to pour some brandy. Perhaps this would cool this man's menacing nature. "Would you care for a brandy?"

Maggot shook his filthy head. "Never touch the stuff. Ale's me drink." He finished cleaning his nails and shoved the dagger back into the sheath clasped to his side. "So who is it you want me to kill?" His gray eyes glittered with a strange kind of glee as if he couldn't wait to kill Justin. Good. That was what he was looking for.

His hands shook as he poured the amber liquid into the cut crystal glass. "Kill is such an ugly term," he said shakily as he returned to his seat. This man scared him down to his very bones but he wasn't about to show it. "I prefer 'eliminate' in a situation such as this."

"What's the difference? Either way, the bastard's as good as dead," Maggot announced assuredly just before a loud burp escaped his mouth.

Andre spun around, his belly curling in a tight knot. He'd never had someone killed before so this was a new and exciting proposition. "True, but in this case, I can't be implicated in any way. You've got to do it in such a way that no one knows who did it."

Maggot's dirty fingernails scratched at his blackened teeth. "Aye, I can do that but it'll cost ye." With that, the man leaned to the side and allowed the collected gas to escape his anus. The stench was terrible, making his belly lurch even more. When would this evening end?

"How much?" He knew it was going to cost him plenty but there was something in Maggot's eyes that told him this little adventure would more than likely cost twice what he had allotted for it.

Maggot rooted around in his nose with a dirty finger. "Twenty pounds to start with."

His rage boiled, mingled with the disgust he already felt. "Twenty pounds? What in God's green earth do you need twenty pounds for?"

"My stealth, speed and supplies. There'll be another twenty when the task is complete," Maggot replied nonchalantly as he cleaned the finger that had been in his nose with his mouth.

Andre felt the bile rise in his throat at this, his suspicions confirmed. "You are mad! I won't pay you an extra twenty pounds when the Blackmore is dead!"

Maggot rose to his full height, towering nearly to the ceiling and making him feel like a trapped animal. "If you don't, I'll turn my gun on you," he gestured to the pistol strapped to his other hip. "It wouldn't do for the town magistrate to be hanging up in town by his privates would it? Slit from belly to manhood like a hog?"

Andre felt the blood drain from his face and he swallowed hard. No, if things were going to work the way he wanted them to, then he'd have to do it Maggot's way. After all, he was a man with a reputation. "All right," he stepped back out of Maggot's reach. "You'll get your twenty pounds initially then get another when Blackmore is dead. Agreed?"

Maggot nodded. "Aye. Within a few days, this fellow will be a distant memory."

"A few days? Why not tomorrow?" he demanded. Why couldn't Arco have chosen a more anxious man?

Maggot sank back into his chair and shot him a hardened glare. "Because you need to give me his description so I can track him. I need to know his movements so I can garner a good time to kill him."

His fury mounted higher but he quelled it. Maggot was right. Justin and his movements needed to be monitored and watched carefully or else it would all be in vain. "Quite right, my good man," he resumed his seat. "Let me give you all the necessary information."

* * * *

"Can we go to town, Justin?"

Justin stared into the mirror over the fireplace and adjusted his white silk cravat. Sometimes he even amazed himself. With the powder and wig, no one would ever know he and Raven were one in the same. "Of course, my little man," he replied, turning to Beau. "Where would you like to go?"

Beau shrugged, pushing his errant black curls from his shoulders. "I don't know."

He stared at his son for one hard moment. All this time, he didn't know Beau existed yet somehow, it didn't seem like a day had passed between them.

His heart swelled to near bursting with the love and pride he felt. Children had never given him this thrill and zest for living. It seemed as though he couldn't wait to hear Beau's tales every day or just watch him play. All his life, he had never wanted children. After all, they did nothing but interfere with one's life....

Henri's blond head poked in the door, his face a mask of urgency. "Justin, can I speak to you?"

Justin looked up. "What is it?"

"I've got some interesting news for you."

Justin crouched down and lifted Beau's chin with a powdered finger. "I've got to go for a little while but I'll be back. When I do, I'll take you to town and buy you anything that you want. How is that?"

Beau kicked at the imaginary dirt in front of him. Angelique's hands held him protectively against her, preventing his son's escape. "I wanna go now!" He flung himself into Justin's arms. "I don't want you to leave!"

He gave the boy a hard embrace then pulled away. "I won't be long, I promise," he looked to Angelique. "Where's Madame Blackmore?"

"She went to town, sir for a while but promised to be back before supper."

"Fine," he turned to Beau, his heart breaking at the thought of departing from the sweet child. "Will you be good?"

Beau wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve. "I suppose I can be."

"Beau, don't wipe your nose with your sleeve! I thought I taught you better...." Angelique started to chastise but he cut her off with a hard glare.

"I guess you forgot your handkerchief," he pulled the one from his pocket and held it to Beau's nose. "Now blow."

Beau did as he asked. Justin wiped it and stuck the cloth in the boy's pocket. "Now hang onto this so if you need it there it is. You really don't want to use your sleeve, do you?" Beau shook his head. "That's what I thought," he stood up. He turned to Angelique. "It's a gorgeous day outside to let him play until his mother gets home."

She tilted her dark head. "Aye, sir."

He spun to Henri who was already mounted on his horse. "Are you ready?"

Henri's gaze swept over Angelique's lithe frame, moving slowly and hungrily. "Perhaps."

Justin mounted his steed. "Then let's ride!"

* * * *

Twilight set over St. Pierre, disappearing over the edges of the snow-capped mountains. She watched them sweep by as the carriage moved along the dirt road. Shrouds of mist covered their white tops, blurring all of the hard lines.

Bits of brilliant color, ranging from reds to blues to yellows, dotted the meadows lying at the base, peppering the air with their heady scent. She inhaled deeply, noting the deep earthy smell mingled with it. That aroma would always remind her of Raven, reminding her of their nights of lovemaking....

Her carriage ground to a halt, lurching forward slightly. Blaze looked to her right and noticed they were at the front of Splendour. Tall, familiar columns framed the tall doorway while beautiful porches wrapped the first and second stories. The wood, whitewashed and pale, had made the house seem more ethereal.

Green shutters framed each window, ready to protect the house from any forthcoming storm. Well-tended beds of flowers, mixtures of exotic hues, hugged the perimeter of the house entirely. She sighed. This was a beautiful home even if it wasn't filled with the passion she so constantly craved.

"Good ta see ya, miss," Old Peter, her plantation foreman, commented as he helped her from the carriage.

She stepped from the carriage. "I'm glad to be home, Peter. How is the harvest going?" Her entire afternoon had been spent with Madame Willoughby after the elegant woman had sent a note for Blaze to see her. At first, she was apprehensive but Gabrielle only wanted to know how things were going with Justin. After their conversation, she made a dear friend of the spectacular woman.

"Real well, Miss. We should be...."

Angelique's frantic frame running down the tall stairs of Splendour with her arms flailing cut off Old Peter's words. "I'm sorry, ma'am! I tried ... I ... tried." Ragged gasps echoed from her lips as her chest heaved. Blaze's heart skipped a beat. What was wrong?

"Slow down," she gripped Angelique hard by the upper arms. "What is the matter?"

"I ... he must have ... I ... not...."

Her anxiety mounted. What was the girl trying to tell her? "You're not making any sense, Angelique. Start at the beginning."

Angelique's chest heaved hard, her breath hitching in her chest. This went on for several minutes until she could form proper words. "Beau is gone."

Blaze's panic soared as the stark terror screamed along her veins. "What do you mean?" Her temples pounded as anxiety and fear mounded within her. Where was her son?

"I took Beau out to play as Lord Blackmore had requested. I only turned my back for a mere moment then he was gone."

She grabbed Angelique hard, shaking the girl vigorously. "Why didn't you watch him more closely?"

"I did, ma'am but he was so quick...."

"You have one job to do, girl and it seems you can't even do that," she screamed, her fear rising higher than she could contain it. "Have you searched all of his hiding places?"

"I can't believe he's gone," Angelique sobbed. "Why couldn't he have...?"

"Get a hold of yourself, Angelique," she cried, fighting back the tears of worry while trying to rein in her anger. "Answer my question. HAVE YOU SEARCHED ALL OF HIS HIDING PLACES?"

She nodded weakly. "Aye, I did, ma'am but he wasn't in any of them," Angelique wailed.

Instead of comforting the girl, she flew into the house, her gown flapping at her ankles. "Beau, where are you?" she called quickly, the echo of her own frantic voice rising through the air. "Momma's not angry, baby, that you're hiding. Just come out and let me know you're all right." Her heart pounded against the inside of her chest as she stepped in the luscious foyer bathed in the golden light of the lit chandelier. Her anxious gaze searched around the room, waiting for any sign of movement.

Nothing moved.

Lumps of fear gathered in her throat as she stormed upstairs, calling his name frantically, searching every possible crevice for him. He was nowhere to be found.

Blaze tore down the stairs to the waiting crowd outside. "Why are all of you standing here!" she screamed, her hands tearing at her hair. "I want someone to go out and find him!"

Quiet murmurs erupted around the crowd as she sank to her knees in the soft, dewy grass, her hands clutching either side of her head, crying. Where had Beau gone?

"What in the hell is going on?"

Justin's voice broke through the logjam of soft voices surrounding her. She looked up to see him and his blond friend dismounting quickly from their horses with Justin rushing over to her side. His bright daffodil hued coat gleamed pale in the moonlight as well as his high polished shoes. The white wig enhanced the ashy pallor of his face but it didn't cover the concern stamped on his features.

His hands grabbed her upper arms tightly. "What is wrong, Blaze?"

"B ... Beau ... is gone," she wailed as she launched herself into his thick, protective arms. "I don't know if someone kidnapped him or he just wandered off." Sobs racked her body as she clutched onto Justin hard.

He rocked with her a little in the grass for a moment then pulled her away, staring straight into her eyes. "How did this happen?" She could say nothing as her fear choked her throat. His worried gaze flicked to Angelique. "How did he come up missing when you were supposed to be watching him?"

"I was watching him, my lord," Angelique offered as she dabbed at the corners of her brown eyes. "I only turned for a moment...."

His eyes darkened. "You are never to turn your back on that child, Angelique. If something happens to him, I am holding you personally responsible."

Blaze looked to Beau's nanny and sensed the fear riding behind Angelique's eyes. "We will find him, my lord," Angelique said as she stepped away from the circle followed by several of the other workers of the plantation. "Fan out and start searching," she ordered.

Justin looked back to her and pulled her back to the safety of his arms, calming her a little. "We will find him, my dear. I feel it in my heart that he's unharmed."

She searched those deep blue depths and found confidence radiating from them. "Do you think so?"

He nodded. "Aye, that I do, Blaze. Now I want you to go back to the house and wait for me. Henri and I will find him."

Her worried stare flicked to his physician who tipped his hat to her. "Thank ... you," she whimpered as her fear mounted. "Please find him, Justin. He's all I have."

Justin's soft lips brushed her forehead. "I will find him, my dear. Perhaps one day you will have to include me in your possessions but until then I will be glad to wait," he promised and he turned to his friend. "Henri, I need you to come with me to find my wife's son."

"Of course," Henri replied without hesitation.

He whirled around and cupped her wet cheeks in his hands. "I will find him, Blaze. You do believe me, don't you?" She nodded as the storm of tears abated. For some reason, his calm assurance made her believe that it wouldn't be any other way. "Good."

"Let me come with you," she begged as she clutched onto his sleeve. "I want to be sure he's all right."

"No," he said sternly as he drew her to her feet. "I want you to wait in the house until I return. There's no place for you to be wandering in the woods."

"I'd be with you," she pleaded. "Please. Beau's my son and I need to find him." Moisture tracked its way down her cheeks again and fell on the tops of her exposed breasts, her heart pounding out of control. She needed to see Beau again and touch his sweet face....

"No, Blaze. Now stay here," he ordered harshly and gestured for the remaining women servants to take her to the house. "Make her comfortable," he said as they gathered around her and supported her crying form. "I'll be back soon."

With that, Justin stepped quickly over to his horse and swung himself up in the saddle with amazing speed. "Rest assured, my dear, I'll bring him back safe and sound."

As those words died in the air, Justin and his friend turned toward the copse of trees forming a line behind the house and sped off at top speed.

She watched for a moment, her heart breaking in two. For the first time in her life, she had to rely on a man she didn't completely trust. Her life's blood lay in his hands. Would he be able to find Beau and bring him home safely?

* * * *

Justin and Henri patrolled the forest on horseback calling out Beau's name. Nothing returned their cry.

All around them, the forest grew thicker as night fell. Trees, standing tall and menacing, danced with black shadows as if the forest had a secret hidden. Dried autumn leaves crunched under the horses' hooves, mingling with the cries of the night creatures prowling the forest floor for food. His ire rose. Where in the hell was Beau? Had someone kidnapped his son? He growled low. If anyone had dared to kidnap the boy, they wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

Henri pulled up alongside of him, his blond brows knitted in question. "Where do you think the lad could be?"

Justin's heart pounded in his chest as fear took over. His child was out here somewhere and he would find him, no matter how long it took. "I don't know but I'm going to find him."

They pushed on a little further, up a small lush incline. Without warning, Henri stopped his horse.

Justin halted and spun his horse around, his anxiety rising. "Why are you stopping? My son is out here, utterly defenseless and you're stopping!"

Henri's gaze drew to something beside his steed. "Come here."

He pushed his horse over. "What are you looking at...?" Scathing words died on his lips as he looked down. Deep, dark wood, shrouded by vegetation, glared up at him, highlighted by the rising moon. Yellow silk, the same shade as his coat, peeped out from underneath. His heart stopped. It was his handkerchief.

Justin swept down from his horse and grabbed it, noting his son's scent on the cloth. "I gave this to Beau before I left," he said slowly as his gaze drew to the familiar beaten path through the brush. "He must have come through here!" To his left resided a small path leading to a larger one. The beginnings of a grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was entirely possible Beau had taken the larger path to his lair. His grin faded as the sober reality set in. If Beau had followed them to the lair, the boy would know about Raven and perhaps expose him unintentionally. He mounted his horse and pushed those thoughts from his mind, tucking the precious fabric back into his pocket. The important thing was to find Beau unharmed. "Follow me, Henri,"

"Where are we going that way?"

"Just follow me!"

* * * *

Henri's shoes crunched the bits of rock as he followed behind, mumbling about the cave incessantly. "You certainly don't think he could have found his way here, do you?"

Justin pushed the torch ahead, lighting the narrow passageway. Bits of crystal glowed in the rock like tiny diamonds where the light struck it. "I'm not sure but I want to see if he has." He was almost near the opening. His heart pounded hard, his mouth dry as the fear overtook him.

What if he was wrong and Beau was defenseless and alone in the forest? What kind of father would leave his child like that?

Frustrated breaths escaped Henri's lips. "How much more?"

Before he could answer, Justin heard the footsteps stop then the sound of silk tearing. Henri swore softly then started behind him. "I've just ruined one of my best coats, you know," his friend said through gritted teeth. "I didn't agree to this."

Out of rage, Justin turned around. "You can be so pompous, Henri. If it were your child we were looking for, the last thing I'd worry about was my coat!"

He watched Henri pale and grow quiet before spinning around to continue his journey. Good. The less meaningless prattle he had to listen to, the better.

At the opening, he thrust the torch through. Golden light swept over the cavern walls, highlighting the quartz embedded in the stone as well as the moisture running down the walls. Sounds of the sea echoed through, mingling with the salty tang of the air. Distant drips echoed, each plop irritating him no end.

He stepped in and looked around. So far, nothing was out of place. His coffer containing his clothes were intact except for one. He stormed over to it and looked in. His clothes were disarray but amazingly his cuirass was still there along with his pistols.

Out of fear, he stalked around the cavern with Henri in tow until he found a small bundle near the back of the cave. Was it Beau? His heart pounded out of control. It simply had to be.

Anxiously, he knelt next to the bundle and pulled the heap of clothing over it. Sleeping angelically under all of it was Beau with his thumb tucked firmly into his mouth. Justin let out a sigh of relief as well as a deep growl. His son was certainly going to get his hide tanned for this little adventure.

"Is it him?" Henri questioned over his shoulder.

Justin laid a hand to Beau's cheek and felt the warmth radiating from it. "Aye, it is," he said quietly as he picked the boy up. "I think I'm going to have to whip him for this. I swear if he ever does this again...."

Beau's eyes flew open at the sound of his voice. "Why are you going to whip me, Justin?"

Justin was taken aback. "What are you doing here?"

His son's arms wound around his neck. "Because I wanted to be with you so I followed."

"You shouldn't have, Beau," he said sternly, his brows furrowing. "Do you know how worried your mother and I were about you?"

"No," he answered in a quiet tone. "Don't whip me, Justin."

He let out a soft chuckle and swiped the boy's chin. "I won't if you promise never to do this again."

"I won't," he promised then lifted up the mask in his hand. "Why do you wear this?"

His blood fell to his feet. "What makes you think I wear that?"

Beau shrugged. "That funny book in Mama's drawer says that some man wears this and is my real papa."

Justin remained quiet for a moment as the air escaped his chest. Part of him wanted to tell Beau the truth but he couldn't trust a five-year-old to keep a secret. From what little time he had known his son, the boy told everything. "That isn't me, Beau. Sadly, it's another man."

"Then why did you come here?"

His mind quickly spun a lie. "Because the King of England asked me to find out where the pirate hides out. So, now, I'm supposed to write the King and tell him what I've found."

Beau's large blue eyes widened. "You know the King of England?"

"I certainly do," he said, noticing that the conversation was thankfully shifting. "Perhaps someday I can take you and your mother to England to meet him."

"Does he have a palace and horses?"

He nodded. "Aye, that he does, Beau. How about if I tell you all about him once we get home? Your mother is very worried about you."

"Will you please?" Beau cried as he wrestled himself out of Justin's grip. "I want to know about all him!"

"If you're good then I'll tell you all about the King."

"Goody!" he said triumphantly but his glee suddenly turned. "I lost my shoe coming here, Justin."

He looked down at Beau's stocking covered feet, noting the holes in the hose. "Don't worry. We'll get you another pair and some new hose." His gaze trailed to the left foot with the missing shoe and started counting toes. One, two, three, four, five, six. It was all he needed for confirmation. Beau was truly his son.

"Please don't tell my momma," Beau said quietly in a fear filled voice. "She will be very angry with me."

"No, she won't, Beau. She will be very happy to see you."

His eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really."

* * * *

Pale moonlight streamed through the forest filtered by the trees and showered the gray earth below. Muffled hoof beats from the horses rose in the still air, mingling with the solitary calls of the forest around them. In the distance, the sound of the sea pounding the sand indicated they weren't far from Splendour.

"That was quick thinking, my friend," Henri commented softly so as not to wake a sleeping Beau lolling against his chest.

"Aye, it was. I wasn't about to have my son carry the burden of my secret for me despite the fact five-year-olds are notorious gossips." His free hand stroked Beau's soft mane, his heart swelling to a new height with pride. Fatherhood was something he didn't know he'd missed.

Henri let out gentle laughter. "I will have to agree my friend. Why, it was my four-year-old cousin who told my father what I was up to."

His brow rose. "What do you mean?"

Henri leaned back in his saddle a little, letting his chest puff out with pride. "Well, it had to do with the Countess Du Bois, I'm afraid. You see, he walked into the bedroom while she and I were playing games and so...."

"You didn't," he said in a mockingly shocked tone. It was one of their games because nothing Henri did ever surprised him.

His friend nodded. "Aye, I did. At first, her husband challenged me to a duel but when he found out who I was, he thoughtfully declined."

"I'm not surprised," he offered. "After all, he didn't want to be accused of killing the Dauphin of France, did he?"

"No," Henri confessed. "Father told me not to play with things that weren't mine," he quipped ruefully. "Still, as I always say, things are always much better when they belong to someone else."

His laughter echoed through the forest. "I know that all too well. After all, who is always smoking my cheroots but never seems to smoke any of his own?"

"They taste better that way."

"I should send you a bill for all the cheroots...." His words died as a searing pain ripped through his left shoulder amidst the hard pop echoing through the air. He slumped forward slightly as warm blood poured from his shoulder.

Henri rushed to his side. "Someone's taken a shot at you," he said quickly, his hand clamping over the wound. "We need to get you back to Splendour as quickly as possible."

"Is Beau all right?" he managed to choke out despite the shards of pain rippling through his left side.

Beau wiggled in his grip as he came out of the depths of sleep. "What's the matter, Justin?"

"I think he's fine but you're the one who concerns me," Henri stated in a low tone as he grabbed the reins of Justin's horse. "I don't want you losing a lot of blood."

"I do not care," he answered sourly, his teeth grinding against the pain. "Just so long as Beau is all right."

"I told you he is," Henri stated and looked to Beau. "You aren't hurt, are you, little one?"

"N ... no ... sir," he stammered and looked up to Justin. "What happened?"

"We're taking you back to Splendour," Justin groaned as the pain made his head swim, his eyes watering. "Your mother is waiting to see you."

"She's waiting to see you too, Justin," Beau said in his childish voice.

If it were only true, he thought bitterly. "Of course. Shall we move on?"

Beau nodded. "Hold on to Justin, little one," Henri ordered. "Because it's going to be a bumpy ride."

* * * *

Sharp clops of horses' hooves brought her from the sorrowful haze clouding her mind as well as the many fingers of brandy. What was that? She flew to the window and ripped the curtain back, her heart rising to her throat. In the distance, she saw Justin sitting on his horse with a tiny being in front of him. Her fingers slipped to her mouth. Beau was home!

Blaze leapt from her seat and ran out the front door, down the steps. She picked up her skirts and hurried across the lawn, toward them. "Justin!" she cried, waving her hands. As she approached them, she noticed Justin's head hung low, his body slightly limp. What had happened to him?

She stopped short of his horse, the fear rising again. Was there something wrong with Beau as well?

Justin's physician thankfully had the reins and guided them both to the blank meadow, halting in front of her. "Justin," she said as she rushed to his side. "Are you all right?"

"He's been shot," Henri offered as he swung down from his horse and stormed over to Justin. "Let me take the boy, Justin."

Reluctantly Justin released his grip on Beau and Henri scooped him out of his limp hands.

Blaze took him greedily, hugging Beau close to her. "Oh, my baby, you're safe, you're safe," she repeated, "I'll never let you go again." She looked to Justin as Henri helped him down, the worry over him mounting inside of her. "How badly are you hurt, Justin?"

"Bad enough," he snarled as he took a step toward the house.

"Where did it hit him?" she directed her question to Henri despite the groans of agony from Justin. She handed Beau reluctantly to one of the servants and slipped under his free arm to support him

"In the shoulder," Henri replied roughly as he propelled Justin a little further. "I'll need bandages as well as some hot water--is there someone who is skilled in herbs?"

"Aye, I have several including the cook," she answered quickly, trying not to groan under Justin's weight. "Tell them what you need and I will see to it that they get it."

"Good," he stated as they approached the steps of the luscious mansion. "You won't be able to help him up the steps so get one of the men to help me."

She quickly gestured to Old Peter who hurried over and took her place. "Will he be all right?" Her hands clasped together nervously as she waited for his answer. Was Justin going to live through this?

"He's lost a lot of blood so I don't know at this point."

Blaze paled as the tears filled her eyes. Justin went out and found her son, putting his own life on the line for her. No other man would have ever done that, including Raven. She put her fingers to her lips as the silent tears slipped down. Please let him live, she cried silently.

* * * *

She bit her lip as she paced outside of Justin's door, waiting for Henri to emerge. He'd been in there for about half an hour trying to control the bleeding in Justin's shoulder, the mild curses echoing through the gilded door. What was happening? Blaze wanted so badly to break through the door and comfort Justin but Henri warned her not to come in unless he allowed her to. Part of her wanted to ignore Henri's order but she kept her promise. After all, she wanted Justin well again.

Creaks resounded to her left and she spun around to see the door open and Justin's physician emerge, his tailored blond hair falling from his queue into his eyes. The edges of his white shirt sleeves had turned crimson, no doubt colored from Justin's blood. "I'm sorry it has taken this long but I have the bleeding under control and have taken out the musket ball."

Her nervous fingers clutched his wrists tightly. "Is he going to live?"

"I think so though it will be a short while before he is up and about again."

"Thank you," she said breathlessly as sighs of relief escaped her lips. "Thank you so much." She sank into the chair in the hallway, her gown billowing around her. Justin was going to be all right.

"I take it you really care for him, Lady Blackmore," Henri observed calmly, his steely eyes filled with concern.

"Aye, that I do," she remarked as she lifted her head. "When may I see him?"

"Soon. Right now, he is asleep because I've given him something for pain as well as his bleeding. There's no reason why you can't see him tomorrow."

"Was the bullet hard to find?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head slowly. "It wasn't far into the wound but it missed one of his major veins thankfully otherwise I would have grim news for you."

He's going to be all right, she kept telling herself. "Thank you for all you've done, Dr...?"

He held his hand up. "Henri, please."

"Then thank you, Henri, for all you've done for Justin, Beau and I," she said, clasping his hand warmly. "You are welcome in this house anytime."

"Oui, ma cherie," he said crisply.

Her brows rose at the lilt of his voice, the pace of her heart quickening. "What did you call me?"

Henri bowed his head apologetically. "Forgive me, Madame. I sometimes forget I am not in France and I should not be addressing other men's wives in that manner, especially the wife of so close a friend."

Blaze's mind whirled on his words, as if trying to match those very sounds to Raven's. Could it be that she was face to face with Beau's father? Nay, it could not be! "There is nothing to forgive," she said coolly as she studied the lines and planes of his face, trying to determine if they matched Raven's. "I'm sure that Justin would understand."

"Perhaps," he said, putting his hand on the knob of Justin's door. "I will be with him all night so if there are any changes, you will be the first to know."

"Thank you," she murmured as Henri opened the door and slipped in quickly, blocking any possible chance for her to look into the room. The only thing she glimpsed was the golden light from the whale oil lamp near the bed.

Once the door closed, she heard the sharp, tell tale clicks of the lock falling into place. Her heart beat rapidly as she turned and walked down the lonely hallway toward her own room. Was it possible she was face to face with Raven just now? Though it seemed impossible, it could be likely. Henri had blond hair where Raven's was a deep black though dye existed to change one's hair color. No, Henri could not be Raven. Though she'd only seen Raven in the deep dark, his body was different than Henri's. Raven had more breadth and width to his chest while Henri was much more slender....

Her slippered heels clacked on the parquet floor as her gait slowed, the chaotic thoughts in her mind spinning. If Henri were Raven, he certainly kept his desire hidden from her.

Suddenly, her thoughts turned to Justin. Even if Henri were Raven, she would still keep Justin and his welfare at the forefront. Nothing else mattered but him.

Bright reams of morning sun streamed through the open portieres, stinging his eyes. Justin shut his lids tighter against the burn of the light and threw his arm over his face to block it out. He felt dizzy and sore, as if someone had beaten him with a sturdy piece of wood.

Soft shuffles came from his left proving that he was not alone, close to the crackling fire roaring in the fireplace. "It's time to get up, Justin."

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes. His opulent room at Splendour greeted him, brighter than usual. He looked over to see Henri casually lounging against the ornate tester of the bed with his arms folded over one another, his shirt-sleeves tinged with blood. What in the hell happened?

The last thing he remembered was finding Beau then suddenly... Sharp aches ripped through his shoulder to remind him of what had occurred. On the previous night, anonymous shots had rung out in the darkness and he had felt the explosive pain tearing through his arm. Without warning, his thoughts turned to Beau. Had he protected his son as he had vowed?

Justin licked his cracked lips, his mouth dry as linen hung outside. "Is ... Beau ... all right?" He could hardly form words, his throat as parched as his lips.

Henri fiddled with the end of his bloody sleeves, tilting his head in agreement. "Of course. Would he be anything else?"

"I suppose not," he quipped as he pulled the blanket up a little further. "Can you bring me some water?"

Henri said nothing as he retrieved a delicate china cup and filled it, bringing it over to him. The cool porcelain against his lips felt like a welcome change, a barrier against the hotness of his flesh. Refreshing water slipped down his throat like the finest wine and he gulped it greedily, his body feeling as though it thirsted far longer than a night. "Where's Blaze?"

His friend set the cup and saucer on the walnut nightstand with a clink. "Waiting to see you," Henri replied as he sauntered over to the basin and began washing his hands, the sound of the water splashing against the porcelain ringing through the room. "I've had a devil of a time keeping her out of here," he commented over his shoulder as he finished his cleaning. "She was driving me to the point of madness with all of her questions." He turned and wiped his wet fingers on a cloth. "I finally told her that I would bring her up here the moment you had awakened." Henri threw the cloth next to the basin. "Perhaps she will leave me alone now."

"I see that you take your physician duties quite literally," he stated slowly as the pounding in his head increased. Still, it was nothing compared to the fact that he had protected Beau from harm.

"Aye, that I do. Actually, it was quite fun. If I didn't have the last name of Bourbon, I could more than likely be happy being a physician," Henri confessed lightly as he swaggered over to a damask covered chair embroidered with large roses.

"True," he agreed as he shifted slightly in bed, grimacing at the pain in his shoulder. "I owe you one, Henri. You've saved me yet again." Justin raised his hand to scratch at the intolerable itching on his scalp when he discovered the hair on his head was not his own. "Why am I still wearing the wig?"

Henri, noting his surprise, let a warm smile cascade across his lips, so generous that it made his blue eyes crinkle. "I had to keep that on you in case your beautiful bride came wandering in here," he confessed as he picked up a round object from the table. "Here's what I dug out of you."

His friend tossed the small object to him and it landed a short distance from his hand on the bed. Justin picked it up and twirled it in his long fingers. The musket ball was large, all the more likely that his near assassin had fired it from a long barreled rifle. "Somebody really wanted me dead," he said disgustedly as he stared at the obscene object, his anger rising. If he died, that would leave Blaze and Beau open to all sorts of malcontents all too willing to hurt them both. That was something he would never let happen.

"Somebody with a bad aim," Henri offered as he stood up and straightened his black waistcoat. "How are you feeling?"

"If my head would stop spinning, I'd feel a lot better."

Henri pulled out the gold pocket watch and stared at it blankly. "That's to be expected with all the blood loss," he said mildly as he closed the case and slipped it back into his pocket. "I've mixed up a potion for you to help your body to replace the lost blood as well as a pain potion." He smoothed the stray blond tendrils back from his high, aristocratic forehead, smoothing them toward the queue at the back of his head. "You'll feel better in no time."

Justin stared at his friend hard, his brows furrowing. "Where did you learn to be a physician?"

Henri shrugged casually and lounged against the tester, his arms crossed over his chest. "I've always been interested in medicine," he confessed, his face slightly dreamy as if he remembered some forgotten childhood dream. "So I followed the royal physician around, taking instruction from him. He was an Arab man who was quite learned."

"Interesting." Justin's head slowed its spinning nature, his hands itching to fly to either side to stop it. "Is Blaze still waiting?"

"Aye. She hasn't left the house all day in case you called for her."

Justin adjusted the wig on his head, making sure no black strands escaped its confines. "How do I look?" His spirits rose. Despite his appearance, it seemed as though Blaze harbored feelings for him. Would they last once she knew his real identity?

"You need padding," Henri observed as he pushed back to a standing position. "I had to burn your other pads because they were soaked in blood." He took a few steps forward, his hand on his chin in a pensive gesture. "I think if we stuff some pillows under

your nightshirt and a few leftover bits of padding around your arms, she won't notice the difference."

"I hope not, at least until I'm ready for her to."

"While she's with you, I'll make a small trip to town and see about getting you some more padding but until then, I want you to rest. You've got a big day ahead of you at the end of next week."

Justin leaned into the goose-down pillows, his mind whirling. At the end of the next week, there was going to be a raid at one of the rum makers, planned carefully down to the last minute detail. He was damn determined to pay Daniel a little visit. "I'll be back to normal, never you mind."

"Good because we're going to need you," Henri worked quickly to pad him up. "Once I'm finished and have changed my clothes, I'll get Blaze to come and sit with you. Is there anything else you need from town?"

His lips pulled in a friendly grin. "I wouldn't mind a restocking of the cheroots that you can't seem to keep your hands off of. While you're at it, get some for yourself."

Henri's deep laughter echoed through the room, ringing from the high molded ceiling. "You know they taste better when they belong to someone else."

* * * *

Blaze waited anxiously in the salon, trying to keep her mind on her sewing but she couldn't. Thoughts of Justin ran rampant through her mind. Was he all right? Did the bullet hit anything vital and do more damage than Henri suspected?

Sudden, searing pain traveled up from her index finger. She looked down to see a bright red pearl of blood form at the site. "Damn," she cursed as she put the bleeding digit in her mouth. With her absent mind, she'd managed to stab herself. Why couldn't she keep her mind straight?

"Lady Blackmore."

The deep masculine voice made her jump, making her knock over her hoop stand and send it crashing to the floor. Hollow clanks resounded through the room as she whirled around to see Henri standing behind her, dressed in a conservative black wool suit. "Yes?" she replied quickly as she bent over to pick up the hoop.

With several of his long strides, he was by her side in a minute and helped her pick it up. "I'm going into town for a while," he announced as he handed her the hoop, "so I'm leaving Justin in your capable hands."

Blaze looked into his face, studying it for a moment. Little nuances and gestures indicated that he might be Raven but then again it may be her imagination running away from her. If she could run her hands over him, she could be sure ... "Thank you," she uttered then stood up. "Does he need anything?"

Henri shook his blond head, allowing the stray tendrils to sweep across his high brow. "Nay. All he asked for was you." He bowed low to her. "I shall be back before the noon meal. If you have need for me, send someone to town."

"Yes, Dr. ... I mean Henri."

He tilted his head as a warm generous smile crossed his lips. "You are most welcome, Lady Blackmore," he said softly as he picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. All through this action, she felt nothing. Normally her skin would burn where Raven kissed it but this time it didn't. She found it very strange because she knew Raven's touch and if this man were Raven, he certainly hid his identity well.

Her brows furrowed. "Did you plan on walking?" He nodded. "Please, take my carriage. It will be much quicker."

"Now it is my turn to thank you, dear lady," he remarked in a subtly sensual tone. "It is a pleasure being in your company."

The trembling increased, her hands fluttering within the folds of her gown. Why was he making those advances to her when her husband was upstairs badly injured? Was he that much of a cad? "If you will pardon me, Henri, I really must tend to Justin." Her sudden fear of him spurred her up the stairs amid Henri's soft laughter. Perhaps she read too much into Henri's words but it was better to be safe than to be sorry for it later.

* * * *

She knocked on the door and called out to him. "Justin?"

"Come in," he answered weakly.

Blaze turned the gilded knob and entered the room. Sheer curtains danced with the salty sea breeze drifting in, adding coolness. Brilliant morning light threaded through the clouds, brightening the room immensely, the golden glow landing on Justin and highlighting his features. She gulped a breath and held it, listening to the crackle and hiss of the fire on the hearth. In this light, Justin looked, well, very handsome despite his powdered face. His angular planes were more defined and aristocratic, the fullness of his lips even more evident than before.

She felt strange and awkward, as if she had never seen Justin before. Actually, she hadn't, at least not this way.

Justin turned his wigged head toward the sound of her voice. "Blaze," he groaned gently. "You came to see me." He sounded as though he assumed she would never see him. She smiled. He was totally wrong on that point.

"Of course, Justin," she answered softly "Not even that ogre of a physician could keep me away." She walked quietly to the chair next to his bed and sat down, her hand immediately going for his. His fingers curled around hers, soft and warm. She strengthened her hold. Her expectations that they would be cold and clammy were unfounded. "How are you feeling?"

"Not bad. Whatever Henri gave me has worked beautifully for the pain," he confessed as he licked his parched looking lips.

"Would you like some water?"

He nodded and she retrieved the pitcher and cup, filling the china to the rim. With her left hand, she lifted his head while her right supported his head. He drank a little,

spilling some on his nightshirt. Blaze set his head down and quickly mopped up the spill with a lap cloth. "Better?"

Justin nodded slightly. "Thank you, Blaze."

Blaze bent down and attempted to brush a kiss across his forehead but a lock of wig hair got in the way. "You don't look comfortable with that wig on," she said as she swiped the white tendrils away.

Her hand went to remove it before he could answer but the manacle of his hand on her wrist stopped her. "No, Blaze. I can't let you see me this way." Concern filled the azure colored orbs, mixing with another unknown emotion.

She crossed her arms over her bosom, staring at him through hard eyes "Why not?"

Justin's features twisted into an expression of pain as well as shame as he looked away. "Because my hair is almost gone. The illness has robbed me of all my best features."

Blaze's heart melted. Didn't he realize that she did not care? "Oh, Justin," she said in a soft, solemn tone. "I'm so sorry about your illness. I didn't know that it affected your hair as well."

He nodded slowly. "Aye, it did. All of my body hair is gone, including my hair around ... you know...."

"I know." She patted his hand as the sorrow filled her heart. Would he never be free of this mysterious illness?

"So that's why I wear this dreaded wig all the time," he confessed, his eyes turning watery. "As for the powder, it covers the terrible blotches that remained after the illness passed. I don't want anyone to see them."

"What illness was it?"

"There was no name for it. My old physician couldn't find out what it was. When Henri came along, he said he'd treated it before and was successful. So, I turned myself over to his capable hands. Since then, not only is he my physician, he is almost my closest friend."

Tears pricked the inside of her eyelids. Solemn tones escaped his lips, making her heart ache for him. Justin was so caring and good that he deserved better than she could give. He deserved a wife who could be a nursemaid, not one that ran to the arms of another man.

Deep sighs escaped her at the thought of Raven. She regretted her indiscretion for Justin's sake yet she could not deny the passion she had hungered for since their last time together. She wasn't in love with Justin but still felt an obligation to him as his wife. Why must this be so hard? "I'm glad you met Henri," she agreed. "He's done his job well."

Strong, intense cobalt blue eyes glared out from beneath his hooded brow. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," she uttered then abruptly stood up. She had to be strong for Justin's sake. "Beau would like to see you. Is it all right?"

Justin nodded. "Of course it is. I'm anxious to see him as well. Is he all right?"

His sacrifice in protecting her son from danger warmed her heart. She knew he would have searched all night if he had to. Justin treasured the young child just as he would have if Beau were his son. "Aye, that he is. Where ever did you find him?"

He blinked hard as if he were trying to recall the previous events. "In the forest. He must have huddled under an old oak tree and fell asleep. I would have missed him had it not been for the edge of his red coat."

"Oh. Thankfully, he was wearing it or otherwise you wouldn't have seen him," she said, rising from her seat, her mind whirling on his words. "I'm going to get Beau. Is there anything you need?"

"Nay."

Blaze brushed a kiss across his forehead, ignoring the pasty mess on her lips. "I'll be back in a moment."

She swept out of the room and closed the door behind her, leaning hard against it. Something about Justin's story didn't make sense. Beau had been wearing his blue suit when he disappeared, not his crimson one.

Deep furrows knitted as her brows drew in. Why would Justin have cause to lie? She shrugged. Perhaps, his pain caused him to remember incorrectly. Aye, that was it.

Blaze pushed away, her hands clasped in front of her. Beau had been anxiously waiting all morning, just as she had, to see Justin. He was finally going to get his wish.

* * * *

Night safely hid his presence as he paced the expanse of the wooded area just beyond the cave where they stored the contraband rum before shipping it to England. His head pounded ferociously as one of his constant headaches plagued him. Laudanum no longer had the effect it had before despite the fact he used it several times a day to relieve his tension. He'd even switched to apothecary Thomas Sydenham's recipe but that still didn't work. It was supposed to be the best, smuggled from England aboard one of Daniel's ships. Obviously it wasn't.

Anxiety stormed through his veins but it wasn't the usual dose. Beautifully fiery Blaze was his for the taking, made utterly possible by his plan. Mild chuckles escaped his throat. Aye, she may not need saving with Blackmore's money that would be his, making him far richer....

"Le Croix," a familiar voice whispered hoarsely.

He whipped around, his hand on the butt of his pistol, his brows rising.

"Montgomery?"

Daniel melted out the forest reeking of ale and women. His clothes were rumpled, spotted with bits of unsavory stains. "Aye, it's me."

Andre let go of his pistol, allowing it to fall back into the holster. "You idiot! I was going to shoot you!"

"It's not like that hasn't been done before," Daniel quipped bitterly as he strode down the incline toward Andre, his feet slipping blindly on the rocks.

His brows furrowed as his arms crossed over each other. "So what news have you brought with you?"

Daniel halted in front of him and took a deep swig from the jug in his hand. He elicited a loud burp and wiped the back of his mouth with his sleeve. "Your plans are foiled," he announced, his body swaying from too much drink.

Andre's blood turned cold, his heart pounding harder in his chest. "Whatever do you mean?"

Daniel's face took on a mask of seriousness. "Blackmore still lives."

His thick hands bunched at his sides as fury mounted like never before. He had just paid right before he got here, assuming the blackguard had done his job. "Are you sure?" His teeth clenched tightly together, making his jaw ache. Maggot had assured him that Justin would be dead before the sun rose that morning. It seems that Maggot had failed.

Daniel's head bobbed, the raggedly blond hair sweeping across his cowardly brow. "Aye, I am. One of my men overheard Blackmore's servants telling the barkeep at Le Chat Noir that his master was still alive by the grace of the physician's skills."

Damn it! Anger thrummed up his spine. Blackmore was still alive! No, this could not be! "Here's what we're going to do," he said as his fists released a little only to curl into tight balls again, "First, I'm going to take care of Maggot. Second, Blackmore will die only this time, it's going to be a slow, torturous death. After that, your former wife is mine."

Daniel lifted his flask to him and offered a toast. "To you and that whore," he congratulated and swigged from the flask, wiping his mouth in the same manner as before. "May she prove to be the hellcat you want."

"Now, now, Daniel," he mocked as the corners of his lips pulled into his most malicious smile. "Is that any way to talk about your wife?"

"Former wife," Daniel corrected and proceeded to take another swig out of the flagon of ale. "I hate her with all that's in me."

He scowled. Why would a man who had such a beautiful wife hate her so? He knew that Daniel married her because of the codicil in his father's will but something much deeper ran true. "What is it about her that makes you hate her so?"

Daniel burped loudly and exhaled a long stream of flatulence. "Ah, that's better," he exclaimed as his chest puffed outward. "There's nothing like relieving one's self of excess air."

Strong, pungent aromas filled the air, forcing Andre to wave away the offensive odor. His mouth twisted into a grimace as he held his nose with a free hand. "You never answered my question."

"I hate her because that brat isn't mine. He's the bastard son of the man she took to her bed before I married her."

"Do you know who it is?"

Daniel shook his disheveled golden head. "Aye, that I do. I read her diary once when she went to town. She gave the name of the brat's father."

"Who is it?"

"Some pirate called Raven. When she went riding out that day, she had struck her head and he held her captive. He had seduced her and got her with child. She married me to pass the boy off as mine." Daniel's words ran together as the ale filled his brain.

"Stupid vixen. Didn't she realize I would have found it out?"

Raven.

He'd heard that name many times in crossing the ocean. Fear was evident in those who had spoken that pirate's dreaded name. Some said he killed just for fun while others called him the son of the Devil because he had yet to be caught. Somehow, that bastard always managed to escape the hangman's noose.

Andre's fingers went to his chin. This shed a new light on things and perhaps he could put this information to good use. If Raven somehow heard of their little operation, it could lure him to Martinique for capture. There was no doubt as to whom would reap the reward from that.

The beginnings of a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. That would show the King of France that he was utterly capable of being more than the magistrate. "Post extra men on the rum and the ship," he ordered. If he were not mistaken, Raven may have already heard about everything and may be in Martinique, waiting for the right time. After all, Blaze would be an available widow soon....

Daniel's curious blond brow lifted. "Why?"

Andre's hands clapped together, rubbing nervously. "Don't ask any questions. Do as you're told."

Rage swept across Daniel's plain face. "How dare you talk to me in that fashion...?"

Andre's fist swept across the impudent sot's cheek, sending him spiraling to the ground. "Don't ever question me, Montgomery," he snarled as he shook his fist in the man's direction. "I'm in charge of everything now and don't you ever forget it."

"I never agreed...." Daniel howled from his spot on the ground, his fingers dabbing at the corner of his mouth.

"It doesn't matter if you agree or not. Up until this point, you have managed to nearly get caught several times. I can't have that happening because I don't intend for my neck to stretch for any reason." His brow lifted. "Any other questions?"

Daniel shook his sorry head. "No."

"Good. Now, I'm going to take my leave of you because you sicken me. Why I ever decided to do business with you is a mystery to me." Andre pushed away from the thicket and started to make his way up the slight incline. Mud resided here, not making it easy for his high buckled shoes to find purchase. For some reason, his sense about Raven coming to Martinique started to itch. Was it because of their little operation or did it have to do with Blaze? Had he found her and decided to come for her?

He shook his head as he burst through the dense mesh of undergrowth, the leaves crunching under his feet. His thinking was utterly illogical! Raven sailed the high seas and probably had no idea where Blaze was or even that she bore him a son. He shouldn't worry about that outlaw because in all probability, Raven didn't even know where Martinique was.

Andre found his way to the beaten path with the silvery pall of the moon serving as his guide. Still, if Raven did come to Martinique, he would most assuredly ferret out Daniel's little operation. He never thought of it as his. It was better because if someone was going to be implicated in wrong doing, it certainly wasn't going to be him.

He pushed the thoughts of Raven from his mind, settling on a more pressing issue. The fact that Blackmore was alive still plagued him. How was he going to dispose of the bastard now?

Bits of gravel crunched under his dusty feet as he took the back pathway to his home, his thoughts pressing on and adding to his tension. Maggot had failed him. There was no doubt about that. No one had ever failed him and gotten away with it.

His thin lips curled into a wide smile. Oh, yes, he was going to take care of Maggot but not before he found someone to dispose of Justin first. Then, when the task was complete, Maggot would be the next item of business.

* * * *

Gentle tones of the morning birds drifted through the salon window, lightening her heart. Justin survived his ordeal greatly and improved with each passing moment. She was relieved. Pain was not something she ever wanted to him to endure.

"Is there anything else you would like to include in Lord Blackmore's breakfast?" Sally, the scullery maid questioned as she held out the silver tray for inspection.

Blaze lifted several of the silver domes, checking their contents. Rolls with hot, melted butter and honey sat off to the side. Eggs with a bit of ham as well as tea and water were in abundance. "It smells delicious, Sally," she said, plucking the tray from the girl's hand, "I'll take it to him now."

She left the salon, carefully padding up the stairs. Justin must be starving by now. Previously, he had not been able to eat anything because of the medication Henri had given him. With the renewal of the morning, perhaps he could eat just a little.

Justin's door, painted white and gilded with gold, stared at her. She put her hand on the golden knob and turned it. Much to her dismay it was locked. "Justin?"

Silence answered her.

This was sheer and utter madness. She was locked out from her husband's own room!

Despite the confusion and anger, Blaze went to her room and tried the adjoining room. The lock would not budge, indicating someone on the other side had engaged it.

Her hands shook. What was going on?

Blaze set the tray down on the cherry table and opened her window, leaning out as far as she could. Justin's window was too far away from hers so it would be of no use in climbing over to it.

She looked down. White slats composing the trellis rested next to his window, intertwined with scores of beautiful red roses, their green leaves practically covering the wood. Her eyes narrowed. It should be able to hold her weight. If she climbed up, she might be able to get in through Justin's window. Her lips curved into a smile. Aye, that was what she was going to do.

* * * *

Blaze put a foot on the first available slat and moved up to the next level. This wasn't so hard, despite the fact she had on her voluminous peach colored gown. Just as she was going for the next row, she felt a hand at the band of her silken waist.

In a hard motion, the hand jerked her backwards, making her lose her balance and fall to the ground heavily on her backside. Thankfully, the ground was slightly damp or otherwise there would be clouds of dust.

"What are you doing?" the heavily French accented voice demanded.

She looked up to see Justin's physician, Henri, standing there with his hands on his hips, his legs splayed out in a gesture of great annoyance. His aristocratic features twisted into a mask of fury. "I was going to see my husband," she hissed, rising from the ground angrily and brushing the slight clots of dirt from her dress, "as if I need permission from you."

"Aye, you do," Henri's arms crossed over his chest, reminding her of Raven. She stared hard at him for a moment, her mind drumming up the image of Raven and superimposing it over Henri's face. No, their noses were different as well as their builds. Also, the way they stood was different, with Henri shifting from foot to foot as if he couldn't bear to stand still. Yet there still seemed a possibility she stood before the father of her son.

She took a deep breath to break her hard glare and turned to brush past him. "Not in my own house, I don't."

Henri caught her upper arm in a tight grip, his eyes taking on an expression of utter seriousness. "Your husband is a sick man and you're willing to jeopardize his life because you have no desire to do as you're told?"

"I want to make him better," she snarled as she twisted out of his grip. "You have tended him this far. Let me tend him the rest of the way."

Before she could completely escape him, Henri took several steps forward while she retreated. He backed her against the house, putting both hands on either side of her face to prevent her escape. "You don't to understand, Lady Blackmore, that your husband could die if he does not have his rest. Why do you persist in doing this?"

Blaze lifted her chin higher, refusing to be intimidated by this bully. "Because he is my husband and I wish to take care of him."

"Perhaps it is you who needs taking care of, ma cherie," he murmured in a low tone that reminded of her warm brandy as it passed over her lips. His hand caressed the side of her cheek softly, meant to inflame her desire. Instead, it flared her anger. No one called her that except Raven. "I can give you what your husband obviously can not."

"Release me, Henri, or I will have to take drastic measures to ensure that you do."

His blond brow lifted. "Such as?"

"This."

She lifted her knee and drove it straight into Henri's groin. He let out a loud yelp, his hands going to his privates as he fell to the ground groaning in pain. She was not an easy woman, ready to fall in bed with any man. "That's for taking liberties that you shouldn't be. As for my husband, I care for him far more deeply than you know."

Blaze stalked away toward the beach, her hands balled at her sides as the confusion reigned within her like the tides during a turbulent storm. She cared for Justin but was in love with Raven, ripping her heart in half. Why was her loyalty ripped between two men? This would be so easy if she could take them both and make them one.

* * * *

Justin pushed deeper into the bed, his laughter erupting through the room. Blaze was certainly an imaginative minx. The trellis outside his window is the last thing he thought she would use to get into the room but she did. His mouth drooped. He was going to have to start locking the windows as well.

His smile returned when he thought of poor Henri lying on the ground, holding his hands to his manhood after Blaze delivered a hard knee there. It served Henri right. After all, he was going after another man's wife. His fists balled at his sides as the mild anger shot through him. Henri shouldn't have done that but if he knew his friend at all, there had better be a damn good reason for it.

Sharp clicks echoed through the room as Henri unlocked the door. He emerged, his face completely red with strands of his blond hair spilling from his queue. "I see you're no worse for the wear," Justin announced as the corner of his lips tugged in a semi grin. He wanted to laugh but Henri still felt the pain.

Henri limped over to the settee and sat down, putting a pillow over his privates. "Your wife can pack a wallop," he observed as he threw his head back on the embroidered headrest of the chair. "I never expected that out of her."

Justin's light laughter spilled through the room. "You got what you deserved, Henri. If I had been there, you might have gotten worse."

Henri's head snapped up, his gentle eyes blazing. "Are you threatening me?"

"If you touch Blaze again," he said a touch angrily. "I can't be responsible for my actions."

His friend's lips pulled into a wide, devilish grin as he threw his head back and laughed. "Now there is the Justin I know! It's been a long time since a woman's affected you this badly." He threw his head back and let out an agonized sigh. "Ah, the pain is finally dying down. As for what I did, I had to for a reason."

Justin's curiosity rose as well as one eyebrow. "Do tell."

"I have to get her to think I'm an impudent lech. I'll stare at her with hungry eyes while she's around and make her uncomfortable so that she won't dare venture in here when I'm present."

Justin stared hard at his friend. "Do you think it will work?"

"It has to," Henri brought his head up, the pain slowly disappearing from his pale face, "because this entire thing depends on it. I need to get you well before that raid or else we're all doomed. I can't do that if she's constantly poking her nose around here."

"Good point," he added, "though I didn't appreciate you touching my wife before."

Henri's pale brow lifted in question. "Getting jealous?"

He stared hard at Henri for a moment, his friend sitting smugly on the settee with his hands folded over his belly in a judgmental manner. "Perhaps," he said a touch slowly. For the first time, he could admit Blaze got under his skin far more than he should have ever allowed and not feel a bit of remorse.

"Good. I think it will do you a world of good to get a little jealous," Henri stated then threw the pillow down before getting up. "Because if you think other men are going to be chasing your woman, it might make you heal a little faster."

Chapter 9

Darkness pervaded the area around the little cove, blanketing the world in a ghostly gray. All was quiet except for the loud crashing of the sea against the rocks, relentless and hard. Silvery palls of moonlight fell from the slip of moon, showering the world below in a pale glow. Dry leaves rustled on the black trees as the winds blew, piercing the veil of night. Gentle whitecaps, turned even paler by the night, rolled against

the hull of his ship, a dull thudding sound. Not a cloud crossed the deep dark sky, allowing the stars to twinkle like tiny lights.

Justin breathed hard to quell his anxiety. Normally, ships of this magnitude ripe for the taking excited him but tonight, it did nothing but aggravate him. He snickered slightly. It wasn't the ship that bothered him, it was Blaze. The way her silken hair draped over his arm like a floating flame, sensuously soft and sweet....

He shook his head in an effort to remove her image but it was to no avail. She burned deeper in his memory far more than he wanted her to, something he never wanted to lose. Up until now, he was completely in control of the situation but he knew he was steadily losing it. His resolve weakened that much more when she was around no matter in what guise he resided.

"They should be around the very soon," Henri commented low, piercing his wall of thought. "From what I understand, it's full." His friend adjusted the black wig and hat, pulling on the edges of his gloves expertly. "So we should make a tidy profit this trip."

His onyx gloved hand tightened on the hilt of his cuirass. "Good. After I sell it in England, that should give me a good amount to distribute to the poor here and in the colonies."

Henri drew a sharp breath, gasping hard as an ebony clad hand flew to his chest in mocking disgust. "You're going to do what?"

"Give it to the poor. I've all the money I need so why not give it those who are truly in need?"

Henri shook his head as he brought down his mask, adjusting it slightly. "I'm glad I'm not in your place because I'd keep it all for myself."

"That's where you and I differ, my friend," he commented sourly as his right hand went to the pistol grip of gun strapped to his left side. "I'm the son of a nobleman not the pampered prince...."

Sudden calls from the mast cut off his words. "The ship's coming 'round the corner!"

"Cut the lines!" he ordered. A few swift slices of the rope holding them to shore parted, allowing them to sail out of the safety of the harbor. Then, as if on cue, the wind picked up, filling the gray canvas sails of his lugger. It pushed his ship quickly past the jagged crags of rock, allowing it pick up speed behind the other vessel. His quarry sailed along quietly as if they had no knowledge that anyone was behind them. His heart pounded out of control while the deepest recesses of his mind remained on one thing. That was Daniel Montgomery. If Henri's information proved correct, Daniel would be aboard the ship, allowing him to get his vengeance without anyone ever knowing the truth.

The bow of his expertly built ship cut through the waves like a hot knife through butter, pushing through the rough expanse of the sea. Wild tufts of wind ruffled his shirt,

lifting tendrils of his dark hair from his shoulders. The moon had gratefully sunken slightly below the horizon, darkening the water and hiding them a little better.

Henri leaned against the bow next to him, dressed in similar colored silk. "At this rate, we should be on them in no time."

He nodded, his gloved hands gripped the weather battered bow as the excitement, mingled with anger, hammered his veins. "Aye, that we should." His voice was low and even as thoughts of revenge tore through his mind. The reasons why he wanted it were no longer the same anymore. During his convalescence, Beau had spent quite a lot of time with him, chatting like any normal five-year-old. It had been just the two of them, getting to know each other. Blaze had wanted to join in but Beau asked her if they could talk alone because he had some 'big boy' things to talk about. He had seen the pain in her face but she cheerfully left them.

Beau had enlightened him with stories of what life was like before he had come to Martinique. At first, they were cheerful and childish but then the stories had taken a darker twist. His son had confessed that Daniel did things to him, disgusting acts that no adult should do to a child.

Justin's hold tightened to the point pain soared through his arms, his muscles feeling as though they were tearing away from the bone. Daniel had a lot to answer for if he was still alive and Justin was damned sure that he would. No one would hurt his son and get away with it.

His heart pounded faster, drumming in his ears with a steady staccato beat. They were coming around Daniel's slip of a vessel, the boat no match for his fast lugger. His ship pulled up along side, the ropes slinging over the weather beaten rails with ease. His men swung over in vast numbers, using their pistols as they scrambled on deck. Gunshots rang out, shattering the night with their ear-splitting cracks.

Justin leapt from his ship to the other with a fair amount of ease, landing on the other side, facing the stern. Blood flew all around him while men on both sides crumpled, the bullets whizzing past his ears and ripping through their flesh. He drew his cuirass and methodically cut down anyone in front of him not from his crew. Gore stained his clothes but it didn't matter. He was on the hunt for one man and one man only.

Grunts abounded, mingled with shouts of pain, filling the night air. Justin moved with the stealth of a cat to avoid any blows, only inflicting his own along with way. Great slicks of blood covered the deck, making it difficult to keep his feet planted as he matched swords, the sound of metal against metal mingling with the eerie cries.

This continued for what seemed like an eternity until all of the opposite crew had been subdued. Justin had all the captives kneel on the deck, hands on heads in the ancient symbol of submission.

He stood before them, his cuirass dripping with blood. "Where is Daniel Montgomery?" he demanded as he paced back and forth in front of them, his anger boiling to a point almost beyond his control.

No one stirred.

Justin halted and gestured to the first man's neck with the tip of his sword. "If no one tells me where he is, I'll kill one of you for every moment I don't know."

One dirty face looked at another as if they needed silent consent from the other to speak.

His blade dug a little deeper into the pulsating vein, causing a small trickle of blood to form. "This is your last chance."

"He's not with us," answered the curly haired man close to the end.

Justin pulled away and stormed down to him, his rapier glistening in the moonlight. "Where is he?"

"More than likely drunk or tugging some young slave girl," he shifted uneasily on his knees, "because he didn't show up tonight."

Justin put the point of his sword against the deck and leaned against it, his eyes narrowing. "So he's alive?" He used his first question to test the crew. Not one of them offered the excuse that he was dead, confirming all the rumors.

Curly nodded. "Aye, he is though with the way he drinks, he should be dead."

Justin's rage mounted to a new height, his limbs thrumming with anger. The bastard had hurt his son. Daniel would wish for death by the time he was finished. "Where does he usually take his women?"

Ragged, blood splattered shoulders shrugged. "We don't know. He comes and goes." The man's voice filled with venom as he spoke, making Justin's anger rise higher.

"Who else knows about Daniel?"

"Some fat man that has a very important position in St. Pierre."

"How do you know this?" He shook his blade hard as he laid it against the boy's throat. "Tell me now or I will have to kill you."

"The fat man comes and goes, shouting orders. Montgomery said something about that man being a partner and whatever he says, we're to do."

Justin's mind turned quickly. There were no fat men with important positions in St. Pierre with the exception of him in his alter ego ... Wait a moment, there was one other person who fit the description! It was Andre Le Croix!

Nay, it could not be, he told himself. Justin frowned. Why would Andre have business with a blackguard like Montgomery? Then, like a forgotten memory, Henri's explanation as to why Andre was in St. Pierre in the first place, rose and reminded him. Aye, Andre would have more of a reason than most to side with Montgomery. Suddenly, it all made sense. As the magistrate of the town, he could let Daniel's business grow without interruption and skimming his money from the top. Andre could blame other men and jail them accordingly.

Henri's footsteps beside him drew his attention but not his stare. "What are we going to do with these men?"

"Leave it all to me."

* * * *

Blaze paced around the salon endlessly, her hands clasped in front of her. There was only silence, pierced by the occasional pop and hiss of the fire blazing on the hearth. Justin was asleep, aided by the medication Henri had so thoughtfully provided. Beau was also asleep, leaving her to her own devices.

Thoughts whirled chaotically in her head. Now that Justin was getting better, he demanded that she stay away from him, at least until he was completely recovered. His doors remained locked with that overblown oaf of a physician constantly watching him. She frowned. That French tart was always leering at her, making her utterly uncomfortable. Her previous thoughts that he was Raven slowly disappeared. Henri's build just wasn't the same nor were his mannerisms. Also, his scent differed. It wasn't the same deep, masculine smell as Raven.

She stopped, her heart beating out of control. Raven. That's what she needed right now. To be held in his arms and caressed, carried to paradise by the expertise of his hands.

Blaze stepped out into the hall, casting a glance up the darkened staircase toward the dim hallway. Justin didn't seem to care for her though his treatment was kind beyond words. He pushed her away at every given opportunity so why should she deny herself the privilege of Raven?

Guilt ripped at her soul. She cared for Justin even if he wanted nothing to do with her. She wanted to be the dutiful wife to him but without the passion she craved, it was impossible. He knew that. That's why he offered to turn a blind eye to her indiscretions so long as she was discreet.

Still, that didn't free her from the guilt she felt.

Soft sighs escaped her lips. She was thinking entirely too much. Her head was aching. What she needed was a long ride through the plantation and around her part of the island. That would do her some good.

* * * *

Blaze slowed the horse to a trot as she led it onto the path leading to the woods. Trees, dark and mysterious, lined the dirt road and formed a canopy, hovering as if to protect it. Emerald blades of grass, lush and verdant by day, turned to a grayish blue at night and waved in the gentle breezes. Salt tinged air circled her head, telling her that the sea was not far off. She inhaled deeply. It always reminded her of Raven, so deep and sensual....

"What are you doing here, ma cherie?"

She looked up. Raven sat on his horse in the dim light, looking as dashing as ever. Next to him sat a smaller man with the same jet colored hair and clothing. Raven said something in French to the man and he turned his horse away and rode off quickly. She would have loved to know what transpired but she never could master French, not even a little bit. "I ... I...."

Raven pulled forward and reached down to grab the reins of her horse. He drew her near, his heady scent overwhelming her. "You never answered my question," he said in a low tone, the husky tone of his voice already encouraging her heart to pound out of control. His scent was cloying and intoxicating, making her thighs tremble at the thought of having him inside of her again, igniting her senses.

"I was just riding," she stammered as her knees weakened. She clamped her thighs together against her horse in an effort to keep her privates from throbbing at the sound of his sensual tones.

Raven's full lips curled up into a mischievous smile. "I guess you couldn't stick to your promise of not trying to find me," he said softly as his hand reached out and cupped the back of her head, pulling her close, "could you, ma chérie?" His lips, just a fraction of an inch from hers, were too tempting to ignore.

"No, I couldn't," she whispered as his lips took possession of hers, soft and feathery. She felt him restrain himself so she took the initiative. Blaze let her tongue dance on his lips, begging for entry. Surprise wrinkled his face a little bit as muscles jumped in his jaw. She took delight in that fact, even more so when he granted her entry. His velvety muscle danced with hers, making her burn hotter than she ever had. She nipped at his lower lip a little, making him moan a little.

Raven pulled away reluctantly though he still held onto her. Dark eyes, fathomless in nature, glittered with seriousness. "I meant what I said, Blaze. You can't come find me. I'll find you."

She caressed his clean-shaven cheek, its smoothness adding to her excitement. "It was the truth. I was just riding because Justin...."

His expression darkened to a black scowl. "Has that Blackmore bastard touched you?"

Blaze shook her head, her red curls floating around her like a fiery halo. "No, Raven. He's been the perfect husband and father to Beau. You see, someone shot him a few weeks ago...."

Raven sat up straight, crossing his arms angrily. "And he survived I assume?"

"Aye, that he did. Thankfully he had his physician with him or he would have died."

"It's a pity," he snarled. "That bastard should have died."

Something about Raven's voice bothered her. "Why do you say that? He's done nothing to you."

"Except marry the mother of my son."

Her fury mounted at his accusation. "If you felt that way, why didn't you step forward and marry me instead of him?"

Silence pervaded them, the tension mounting. He said nothing, as if he was at a loss for words. Muscles quivered in his jaw. "I ... I ... couldn't, Blaze. You know that. If I did, I wouldn't be here right now."

"Is that the only reason?"

His gloved hands tightened on his reins as he shifted uneasily on his saddle. "I have other reasons."

"Then what are they?"

Before he could answer, shots rang out of the wood, whizzing past her ears. With the stealth of a cat, Raven ripped her from her horse and fell to the ground with her. Their mounts, thoroughly frightened by the snap of bullets, bolted into the night.

Raven tucked her body under his, keeping her safe. "Lay still, Blaze, and don't say a word," he ordered as he pulled his pistol from its holster, holding it out protectively. "Whoever it is, they might just pass us by."

She did as he said, noticing the sharp stings traveling up her arm. Blaze looked at her exposed arm to see a thick trickle of blood coursing down her sleeve. "I've been shot," she moaned quietly, his weight keeping her quiet.

Raven looked down, his eyes widening. "What?"

"My ... arm," she shifted a little so that he could see. "I think it just grazed me."

His hand pulled apart the tattered edges of the tear. Blood trickled even more when he did this, making the pain worse. She wanted to cry out but she bit her lip instead. The last thing she wanted was for the assassins to find them

"You're right, it just grazed your arm," he rose slowly, his gaze darting around the forest. "Come with me."

"Wh ... where are we going?"

"You'll see."

* * * *

Now that her horse more than likely had found its way back to Splendour, Blaze found herself next to a stream with Raven next to her, bathing the wound. "It doesn't appear too bad, my dear," he daubed at it a little more and threw the bloody piece of her gown away. "It should stop shortly."

Heat from his fingers seared up her arm, teasing her senses. "Are you going to bandage it?"

"I'm going to put on a temporary one until you get home, my dear. When you get there, perhaps that sloth of a husband of yours can do a better job."

Her fury mounted, heating her cheeks. "Just a moment! Justin has done nothing to you but marry me so why do you despise him so? He's saved me from a life of selling myself to the highest bidder. You should be grateful I've not turned into a pampered courtesan like Madame Willoughby."

Raven turned and leaned back on his haunches, his face taking on an expression as though he was deep in thought. "I suppose you're right, my dear," he tore a piece of her gown off and wrapped it around her upper arm. "I owe him that much at least. How's your pain?"

Blaze looked down as he tied it. Bits of blood seeped through but not much. Her flesh burned around the edges of the wound but it was tolerable. "Not too bad, I suppose."

He urged her to lie back down on the tall dewy grass. Bright beams of moonlight streamed down, highlighting the slow moving creek, adding to the ambiance of the night.

Raven's hands seared the skin of her legs as he pushed the remnants of her gown higher, encouraging the flames to lick her inside and threaten to consume her. "What are you doing?"

"Making you forget about your pain."

She wanted to resist him but the hot trail his lips burned up the inside of her thighs broke her defenses. Her body reacted, almost utterly beyond her control.

Experienced hands traced patterns on her flesh, demanding her utter submission. She quivered the moment his lips pressed against the moist apex of her womanhood, searching and probing in an effort to find her core. Finally, she could take no more. Blaze abandoned herself to his touch, delving into the sweet sea of desire.

* * * *

Andre sat in his office with his feet perched on the edge of the desk and smoked his pipe. He blew lazy smoke rings toward the ceiling, his mind awash with thoughts. Blaze was soon going to be in his bed every night, those red ringlets flying around her as he struck terror in her. He hardened slightly. She was going to cower before him, begging for mercy before he was through.

He'd learned a long time ago, women must be made to serve men through any means possible. Sometimes, he chose women who weren't much up to punishment. He figured that out when they died by his hand. Andre snickered. His position as Magistrate afforded him opportunities that would otherwise be denied him. It was simple enough. Place the body where it would be found easily enough and place a free man or slave in the area so that someone would think they had committed the heinous act. People in Martinique weren't partial to a slave or free man killing a white person so they hung the 'offender' quite quickly enough, sometimes within minutes. All he had to do was act as though he arrived too late to save the 'innocent' man.

It had worked so far. His groin tightened even more as memories of his previous victims wafted through his head. Perhaps if he found....

Furious pounding at his door shattered the serenity of his dreams. "Come in!" His feet pounded the floor in fury, his fists curling. Whoever was bothering him at this time of night had better have a damn good reason for doing it.

Sam Jeffers, first mate of the ship, stumbled in. Tattered bits of what was left of his clothes clung to his body, bloody and torn. "The shipment is gone." Sam's breath was as ragged as his garments and just as worn.

Andre's hands clutched both sides of the desktop, the sharp edges digging into his palms. "What do you mean?"

"That bastard Raven swooped down on us and took it," Sam informed him, slumping into a chair. "His crew was too big and we couldn't handle 'em." His thick, dirty blood splattered fingers rubbed the equally grimy temples.

Andre's brows lifted as the heat of his fury crept into his cheeks. "How many dead?"

"Half the crew."

He leapt from his chair and stormed around the room, the heels of his buckled shoes clattering against the floorboards. "When did this happen?" His fists clenched at his sides. The apprehension he had felt a few weeks before now had merit.

"Not more than an hour ago."

Spears of pain rippled up his arms as his nails tore into the soft flesh of his palms. He knew this was going to happen if he left Montgomery in charge but he had no choice. If anyone knew he was in league with the bastard, his political career was over. "You incompetent fool," he hissed as spittle flew from his lips, landing on Sam's face. "Do you not understand what you've cost us?"

Sam's hands splayed out to the sides. "I did nothing! The Raven swooped down on us with his ship and overtook us quickly. We had no time to prepare let alone fight."

"Where's Montgomery?"

"Tupping a slave girl, I suppose."

Andre walked around the desk and slid his large backside against the edge. His arms crossed over his chest in order to better hide the rage he felt. He had to be in control. All had not been lost. "Did you see where Raven's ship went?"

Sam slumped into a nearby chair, running his hands through his nest of brown curls. Sweat, mingled with blood rolled from his body, making Andre nearly ill. "No," he replied weakly and looked up, his beard ragged, "we were all tied up and blindfolded."

He took a deep breath. "You mean that every last man was tied up and blindfolded?" Sam nodded. "Then how did you escape?"

"The Raven left a candle burning beneath my ropes. By the time it burned through, he was nowhere to be found."

Andre tapped his chin with a pensive finger. "That means he's hidden here in Martinique, somewhere that no one goes," he pushed up from the desk and resumed his pacing. "There are so many places along the shore that he could be hiding." Andre looked up and halted his pacing. "Someplace that no one would ever look," he looked to Sam. "Am I right?"

Sam shrugged his rugged shoulders. "I suppose so, guvnor, but where?"

Andre walked around to his desk and opened the top drawer, extracting a small bag of gold. "See this bag of gold?" Sam nodded. "This goes to the first man who discovers the Raven's lair. A double amount goes to the man who unmasks his identity."

* * * *

Darkness swept around them like an ebony blanket, enhancing the urgency with which they rode. "How is your arm?" Raven questioned as they pushed through the thicket of night shadows bathing the woods. Leaves and twigs crunched under the stallion's hooves, adding to the ambiance of the night. Strange calls, made by the native birds, abounded around them.

Blaze looked down at it. Blood seeped through the thick layer of material, intensifying the throbbing. "All ... all right, I suppose," she answered in a low tone. Dizziness started to overtake her a little but she hadn't lost that much blood, had she?

Raven pulled his horse to a stop as they stepped onto the path leading to Splendour. "I have to put you here, my love."

She clutched onto his arm with a weak hand. "Why? I am injured and need to be taken to my house for treatment!" This man claimed to love her yet he could not take care of her when she needed him to. Why was he so cold at times?

His lips nibbled at her neck, warm and soft. Despite the barrage on her senses, her anger didn't abate. "I'm waiting for an answer, Raven."

"I can't because I can't afford to be seen, my love. If I'm discovered, then I'll be hanged. Is that what you want? Do you want all the passion I can give you," he stated in a low, husky tone as his hand cupped her breast, stroking the nipple through the tattered fabric until it hardened to marble, "to die with me?"

Soft moans escaped her throat as his other hand came up to cup her neglected mound. "N ... no," she gasped, her hips moving. "I do not." Raven, sensing her desire, put his gloved hands on her legs stroked them slowly, moving them until they were at her privates. Her body re-created the needed moisture at just the feel of his hands brushing against the soft flesh of her inner thighs. Sensing her readiness, he slipped two gloved fingers inside of her, stroking all the while his thumb manipulated her button of ecstasy. Her hips picked up his rhythm as his motions slowed, becoming purposeful as he readied her for the overwhelming wash of heady desire. In and out, he stroked with those textured fingers, touching her so intimately that her hips rose and begged for more of him. Blaze's muscles clamped on his fingers, holding him hostage for a few moments, making him gasp. She let go and felt that familiar gush of intoxicating headiness douse her, holding the air in her chest so she could keep the feeling going.

Raven withdrew from her, the aroma of her passion mingling with the salty sea air around them. "Then you must trust me, my love," he whispered into her ear, his breath warm and inviting. "Though I cannot tend to you now, there will come a time when I can."

"B ... but ... when?" she gasped as the resonance of the climax left. She felt weak and tired, attributing that to the wound and not the vigorous tantalizing by Raven.

Raven withdrew his hands from underneath her gown. "Soon," he whispered and dismounted, holding his arms out. "Come down, ma chérie."

Blaze slid into his arms, her body pressed against his, feeling the hardness in his mid-section. "I don't want to leave you, Raven," she confessed as she wrapped her arms around him as best as she could. "I know you don't want to leave me."

"I must," he repeated, pulling her hands up and kissing the backs of them tenderly. "There will come a time when we will all be together." He mounted his black steed and gripped the reins in a tight fist, staring at her as if he waited for her last words.

"I must know when this will be, Raven," she demanded, her hand on one high-polished gleaming boot. "I must make arrangements."

His glare darkened, the glittering orbs demanding an answer. "What sort of arrangements?"

"I must tell Justin and allow him to divorce me quietly...."

"Pah! It's all about that Blackmore sot, isn't it? He has all of your time while I must steal it here and there. What is this Blackmore to you?"

"My husband, Raven, nothing more."

"Is he a friend?"

Blaze felt like he interrogated for a crime she never committed. "Yes, he is a very dear friend to me, Raven, but not in the way you think. My heart belongs to you but Justin holds a special place in my heart as a very dear friend."

Raven's demeanor softened. "Well, as long as that's all he is, then I can rest easier."

"Take me home, Raven," she begged as light waves of dizziness overtook her.

"I can't, Blaze. I can't run the risk of someone seeing us together."

"I'm not sure I can make it," she said as a lightheaded feeling washed over her.

"Yes, you can," he encouraged. "I'll be following you in the woods out of sight. If something should happen, I'll be there."

"But...."

The pressure of his finger against her lips silenced her. "No, Blaze, you must go alone." With that, he turned his black steed around and sped off for the woods, presumably to follow her until she reached home.

Sudden swatches of anger swept through her at his callousness. Why couldn't he tend to her properly? Dizziness invaded her again as she made her way to the house, blood dripping from her wound now. She hadn't lost that much blood had she?

Slow, mincing steps took her closer until she was almost next to the porch. "Justin," she half mumbled, half cried, her voice drifting through the night hard and strong. Blaze looked up to his window and noticed the quick snap of light as he lit a lamp. Good. He had heard her cry.

Blaze slumped down onto the porch steps, her head hanging. Wild red hair framed her face, dotted with bits of leaves and twigs. She looked down. Her dress, a beautiful shade of lavender, was a tattered mess. Justin was going to know that she'd been out with another man. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt him.

Justin emerged from the house, a whale oil lamp in his hand. Long red and white striped satin covered him, his toes barely peeping out from under the hem. His powdered brows knitted in confusion. "What's the matter, Blaze?"

"I'm hurt," she groaned, showing him the blood laden wound on her arm. "I need help."

Her head swam. Suddenly, the world turned dark and she felt herself falling into the howling blackness.

* * * *

Blaze opened her eyes to see she was in her bed, neatly tucked underneath the silk coverlet. Her hair was devoid of leaves, her face clean. Cool, cotton wrapped around her, a brilliant design of pearls and silk ribbon. It was her favorite. She looked over. Justin was by her side, bathing her wounds.

"The bullet just grazed you," he replied with a soft and solemn voice, "or otherwise you'd be dead."

"Why ... why ... are you tending me? Where is your physician?"

"In town," he said curtly as he rinsed the bloody cloth and continued to clean the clotted gore away. "I've already sent for him."

She sank deeper into the pillows. Justin had never asked why she was shot or why leaves were embedded in her hair. "I ... I ... suppose you want to know...."

Justin dropped the cloth in the bloody water with a plop and set it aside. "I already know," he stated, his brows knitted in a mask of anger, "Henri saw you sneaking off with that rogue."

She struggled to sit up but couldn't so she lay back against the soft pillows. "If he's in town, how did he see me?"

Justin's hands disappeared in the folds of his nightshirt. "He took a small jaunt around the plantation before he went. That's when he saw you," he confessed as heavy sighs escaped his lips. "Honestly, I thought you'd have better taste."

His jab stung her. She said nothing, merely staring at him in disbelief. "How can you believe Henri? If he were your friend, would he tell you such vicious lies?" She felt trapped, as if in a game of cat and mouse. Justin wasn't going to back her into a corner.

"Because Henri is there when I need him," Justin wrapped her upper arm tightly with the bandage. "There, that should hold you until Henri returns."

Guilt plagued her. Justin was willing to take care of her when Raven was not. How could she lie to him? "I ... I'm sorry, Justin. It was no lie. I went riding but not with the intention of finding Raven. He found me."

"I see," he said slowly with an irritated ring in his voice. "So you ran off with him then came back to me when you were hurt. I'm glad I serve in some capacity in this marriage."

"It's not like that, Justin! I care for you deeply...."

Justin stood up and walked over to the fire, placing both of his surprisingly slender hands on it. "Don't play the caring wife, Blaze. I know you hunger for the passion the rogue provides you. I'm not begrudging it to you." Justin took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "As I told you when we were married, you could take as many lovers as you want so long as you were discreet." He stared hard into the flames, refusing to even glance in her direction.

She felt his pain stab her, making her own guilt stronger than before. "I'm trying to be discreet, Justin. Somehow, it just doesn't seem to work out that way."

He chuckled deeply, as if mocking her words. "Some discreet. You're seen going to him then you come home with a bullet wound. How many times are you going to do this? This bastard will get you killed."

Her anger bubbled under the surface where she could keep control of it. "It's not what you think, Justin. There's a reason I'm tied to Raven, perhaps forever."

Justin whirled around, his arms crossed over his chest. "I guess you're going to tell me that he's Beau's father?"

Blaze looked down, her guilt riding her harder. "Yes, he is."

"That's what I thought," he announced as he sat down on the settee and put a blanket over his legs. "How did this happen?"

Blaze was shocked. She'd never told anyone this story, not even Madame Willoughby, with whom she'd cultivated a close relationship. "Why do you want to know?"

"Let's call it curiosity."

"Why does it matter?"

Justin shrugged. "I would like to know a little bit of my wife's past, that's all. What is wrong with that?"

She didn't want to tell him because of the ease of her seduction. Soft words and caresses were enough to melt her completely. "Nothing. It's just that I don't want you to form a bad judgment of me."

"I won't. So tell me."

* * * *

Blaze finished her story, waiting for the inevitable label of 'whore' to be put on her. Instead, Justin sat there, his fingers tented in front of him, partially hiding his white wig but not his concern. "So does Beau know?"

She shook her head. "No, and he won't know either until the time is right," she sniffed. "Thank you for being the father to him that Daniel couldn't be."

"Daniel was a snake and a bastard," he remarked as he rose from the chair and sat next to her on the bed. "I'll make you a promise," he said softly as he took her hand. "I'll always turn a blind eye to your indiscretions so long as they remain discreet. As for Beau, I'll always treat him like the son I've never had."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"That is quite all right, my dear. You've been through enough in your young life to be denied passion."

"You are so kind to me, Justin," she confessed honestly with no intent to please. "No husband could have been better to me."

Blaze intertwined his fingers with hers and stared into the cobalt depths of his eyes. For the first time, she felt a bite of lust for Justin, as if he were Raven, sitting here, tending to her wounds. Deeply intense feelings passed between them, her heart picking up in speed. Why was she feeling this way for Justin?

Before Blaze could think any further on it, Justin lowered his head, his lips just inches from hers. His breath was warm and exciting, making her feel wanted and desirable, just as Raven made her feel.

He touched her lips with his tongue as if to tease, sending spirals of delight through her. Justin's strokes were soft and feathery as his tongue danced across her lips, begging for entry. Instinctively, her hips wanted to move but she managed to keep them still.

His hand came up and cupped her face gently, his thumb caressing her cheek all the while he dove into her mouth, exploring the cavernous region with infinite expertise. Blaze felt the quiver begin from her toes and work its way up to her brain where it exploded in a fury. Why did she feel this way? Justin was her husband but not the man who brought that passion out in her. She should feel nothing yet she did. What was wrong with her?

He invited her out to play and she acquiesced, dancing to the tune that only they could hear. Blaze wrapped her arm around his shoulder and attempted to draw him closer but he pulled away quickly.

"I'm sorry," he apologized as he leapt to his feet. "I shouldn't have done that."

"There's no need...."

"I'm sorry," he repeated as he turned on his heel and left but not before grabbing the basin on the stand next to her bed.

Blaze sank back into her pillows, pulling the sheets close to her neck. Why was she always teasing poor Justin? He may have initiated the kiss but she could have stopped it had she wanted to. Her selfish ways were going to get her into trouble miserably.

* * * *

Justin leaned against the cool wood of his door, banging his head lightly against it. Why was he torturing himself this way? He had her by the river, tasted her and loved it. Perhaps that was why he kissed her again. He had not had enough. With Blaze, he doubted whether that was possible.

His nether regions strained under the padding. He hadn't been able to satiate himself with her tonight but at least, she got some pleasure out of the pain. Justin smiled. The way her hips had moved with each ministrations hung in his mind like a well loved

memory. He had not only brought her into the blossom of womanhood but taught her what it was like to be a woman.

Justin strode over to his settee and threw the contents of the basin out the window before slumping down. He'd felt like he had been split in two beings. Whichever guise he was in, he had to downgrade the other, making her think they were two separate entities. Now he was slightly jealous of Raven. Raven had her love while he had her caring. His grin widened. When she came home tonight, she called for him, no one else. That in itself was a good sign.

His mind reflected back to their conversation. Blaze hadn't wanted to tell him about Raven because she was afraid that he would think her a whore. Regret filled him. If he had not set out on revenge against Daniel, then he would not have taken her....

Justin's heart lurched forward, a lump forming. If he had not done what he had, then Beau would not be here. He treasured his son utterly and found a side of him he didn't know existed. What made the boy extra special was the fact that Blaze bore him and kept the fact a secret all these years. It didn't thrill him in the least that she had to marry Montgomery. She had done so only to protect their son's reputation.

He laid his head back and massaged his temples. This was getting harder and harder by day. Blaze was so near, utterly beautiful and luscious....

Justin's organ hardened even more at the thought of her. No, this had to end and soon.

He raised his head, blinking hard. Since he hadn't caught Montgomery this time, he was going to have to catch him some other way. Perhaps if he posed a partnership with Le Croix, he'd know about Montgomery's comings and goings as well as shipments that were scheduled to depart.

Pensive fingers went to his chin. This just might have merit.

Chapter 10

Early morning found Andre seated behind his desk, going over his ledgers. His figures added up nicely with one small exception. With Raven's capture of the last shipment, the staggering losses ate deeply into his profit. That was something he would not tolerate, especially if it was because of that nitwit Montgomery.

His fingers tightened around the quill, nearly breaking it in two. If only he'd found Montgomery! So far, the little weasel hid somewhere most of the time but he didn't know where or else he would have strangled the bastard to within an inch of his life. The only time he saw Montgomery is when the cad asked to see him and it was always in the cove, never anywhere else.

Dull thuds echoed from his door. "Just a moment," he snapped, slamming shut his ledgers and hiding them in the secret compartment in the desk. He quickly shuffled a few papers in front of him as if he were intent on them. "Come in."

Heavy oak swung open to reveal Justin Blackmore in his full glory. Yellow satin, embroidered with red and blue lover's knots, clung to his bulk. His white wig overwhelmed his nearly white face, topped by a blue tri corn hat outfitted with a white plume. "I'm glad to see you're in your office this morning, Monsieur Le Croix."

Andre leapt to his feet and crossed the distance, extending his hand. "Lord Blackmore, 'tis good to see you up and about. I heard about that nasty incident and prayed that you survived." Inwardly, he had done nothing of the sort. The only thing he prayed for was Blackmore's death.

Justin accepted his hand and pumped it vigorously. "Thank you, Monsieur Le Croix."

"Please call me Andre," he said, walking away from Blackmore and striding toward his desk. At the chair, he whirled about and gestured to the chair opposite, his gaze sweeping over his formidable guest, sizing him up. "Do sit down."

"Thank you, Monsieur Le Croix," Blackmore said in an arrogant huff as he slid his large body into the chair. "But I must insist on not using your first name."

His brow rose in astonishment. "Why?"

"Because I like to keep formalities in place," he announced as he waved an arrogant hand. "Do you not agree?"

He studied the satin lump before him with a quizzical eye. "Of course," he acknowledged quickly then waited for the nobleman sit down. "Comfortable?"

"Very."

Andre slid uneasily into his chair, sizing up Blackmore again. The man was here for something. This was not a social call. "What can I do for you, Lord Blackmore?"

Blackmore leaned back in his chair casually, crossing one pudgy leg over another. "Is that any way to greet a potential business partner," he quipped, drawing a solid gold compact from his frock coat pocket. He opened it with a flourish. Drifts of sweet cherry aroma rose the moment the small sticks of tobacco were exposed. Lord Blackmore thrust it in his direction. "Cheroot?"

He shook his head. "They are not to my liking. What do you mean by business partner?"

Small chuckles escaped Lord Blackmore's throat as he clipped off the end of the cheroot and extracted a match. He scraped the end of the match against his shoe, making

the end alight. Brilliant flame flickered as he brought it the end of the small cigar and he inhaled deeply, lighting it. "Exactly what I said," he remarked as he flicked his wrist, putting out the flame.

"What sort of business do you speak of?"

Lord Blackmore took a deep draw and pulled it away, leaning forward. His eyes conveyed nothing but seriousness. "You know what I mean."

"No, I certainly do not."

He took another lengthy puff. "Of course you do. Stealing rum from the makers and selling it in England. I must admit it is a nasty business but I would guess it must be a very lucrative deal indeed."

Fear and panic rose in him like a fierce storm, making his heart pound out of control. Somehow, Blackmore found out about his dealings with Montgomery from some source. "I don't know what you mean."

"You do, Monsieur Le Croix. You see, I pay people quite well in every city I stay in to bring me information about everyone. Nothing escapes my attention," he mused, blowing solid smoke rings toward the ceiling. "That is why I've come to you. I'm interested in making a business arrangement that could be very lucrative to both of us."

"But I still...."

Lord Blackmore flicked his ashes angrily into the glass bowl. "There's no use in playing the fool, Monsieur Le Croix. I know your comings and goings better than you do. I know you retire around ten o'clock at night, mostly with your favorite mulatto mistress. You like to play games with her, sometimes, sick depraved games...."

"Stop!" he shouted, holding his hand up. His private life was nothing he wanted exposed. "Enough! I want you to get out of here!"

Blackmore, with all the grace of a lazy cat after a bowl of cream, leaned back against his chair, throwing his fat arm over the back. "Now, you don't want me to do that, do you? It wouldn't do for the King of France to find out what kind of dealings you've got going on here."

Andre's chest tightened, his breathing labored "What do you want?" he said calmly, his hands on the edge of the desk. Whatever the price, he'd gladly pay it to keep King Louis from finding out.

"That's much better," Blackmore grinned, showing two rows of perfect white teeth, "I knew I could do business with you."

"How much will it cost me?"

"Nothing," he conjectured, "absolutely nothing at all. What will happen is that I intend to become your partner. I will look at the books at least twice a week to make sure that everything is in line though with a man of your honesty, it may hardly be necessary."

His guard was still up but he was intrigued. "Do continue," he asked, leaning forward, intertwining his pudgy fingers. "I would like to hear more."

* * * *

"Blaze."

Rich timbered tones drifted in and out of her dream, calling to her softly, as if to entice her into his arms. "Raven," she called into the depths of the darkness. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. Where did he call her from?

"Blaze, it's time to wake up."

She opened her eyes to see Justin sitting next to her on the bed, dressed in canary yellow satin. His powdered face was paler than usual but still filled with the same concern. She blinked hard. Had it been his voice she had heard in her dream state, making her think of Raven? "Good morning, Justin," she murmured and struggled to sit up. Searing pain shot up her arm, making her cry out. "Ouch!"

"You mean late afternoon," he quipped. "Just lay back, Blaze." He pushed her gently back down on the goose feather pillows. "I don't want you to waste your strength trying to get up. Are you hungry?"

"A little." She shifted, her gaze searching the room. "Where's Beau?"

"I told him that I'd bring him in later to see you."

She sank deeper into the bed. "Good." Blaze looked up into Justin's eyes. Certain weariness resided there, as if he waged war with some internal demons. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, covering her hand with his own. "Aye, that I am. What would you like to eat?"

Blaze shrugged slightly, wincing at the pain searing up her arm. "Something light, perhaps."

"Then that's what it shall be." He rose from the bed and rang for the servant. "Oh, before I forget," he said, extracting a small note from his pocket. "A small boy handed this to me in town and asked me to give it to you."

"Who is it from?"

"I don't know." Justin replied off handedly and gave it to her. "I guess you'll find out when you open it."

Blaze looked at the curious handwriting on the front bearing her name. "Thank ... thank you, Justin," she murmured. "You didn't read it?"

He turned away and looked into the mirror over her fireplace, flicking at the errant white curls on his shoulders. "No, I didn't. It wasn't addressed to me." Justin's fingers tugged at the hem of his embroidered waistcoat as he turned this way and that, admiring himself. "I don't make a habit of reading another's letters."

Blaze could do nothing but stare at Justin. In the short time they'd been married, he had shown her that all men were not tyrants lording over each and every move their wives' made. She kept her independence and dignity, not sacrificing what most women did when they married. For that, she would always be grateful. "Why were you in town?"

Before he could answer, sharp knocks drew his attention. "Enter."

Easter, one of the kitchen servants walked in and curtsied. "What can I do for you, milord?"

"Please fix Lady Blackmore a small morning meal and bring it up."

"Will she need help in eating?"

Justin's surprisingly full lips curved into a smile. "I'll feed her."

* * * *

When she awoke next, darkness prevailed. Shadows danced, long and lithe, created by the crackling fire in the hearth. How long had she been asleep?

"You've been asleep for the last five hours," he said quietly, as if to answer her thoughts.

Blaze looked to the end of the bed where his voice came from. Justin sat in a chair next to the fireplace, reading a book with his round, wire framed spectacles perched on his nose. White strands of his powdered wig decorated his head while a red and white striped caftan covered him. Silken blankets covered his legs to keep them warm. "I'm sorry, Justin...."

"There's no need to be sorry." He slammed his book shut and glared at her over the upper rim of his spectacles. "You've been injured and it's going to take a while for your body to heal so that's why you've been sleeping a lot."

"Where is my baby?" she murmured, her dry lips brushing against each other and giving a new meaning to the word pain. Beau was supposed to see her earlier in the day but apparently, she couldn't stay awake for him.

"Look next to you."

She turned her head. Beau lay next to her, his thumb firmly planted in his mouth. Her lips tugged into a smile. Her beautiful son that was the epitome of her love for Raven slept next to her, safe and sound. "When did he come in?"

"An hour or so ago. He asked me to read him a story and I did. The little moppet fell asleep with his head against me so I put him next to you." Justin pushed his glasses up. "I hope you don't mind."

Blaze stroked Beau's black silky strands. "Of course not. He's one of the beacons of my life."

Justin's nose wrinkled in surprise, his white brows lifting. "You've got others?"

"Aye, of course I do."

He turned his head back to his book and picked it up, rapidly turning the pages as if he was irritated. "Raven is the other one, I presume."

"I have more than two you know."

He stopped turning, his fingers toying with the edges of the printed page. "Who might be your other beacon?"

"You."

Justin looked toward the fire, staring intently into the flames, his fingers supporting his chin. "What are you saying, Blaze?" His voice was flat and uneven, as if he had no reaction to what she said.

She swallowed the hard lump forming at the base of her throat, making it possible for her to speak. "I care for you, Justin, far more than you know."

His brows shot up, his fingers tenting over his ponderous belly. "I will admit this is a pleasant surprise, Blaze. I never expected it." His rich, warm timbered voice floated over to her, sounding more surprised than flattered.

Heat from her embarrassment flooded her cheeks, surely turning them red. "I ... I ... sorry if I offended you."

"No, you haven't. Just surprised me that's all," he said, getting up from the settee and striding over to the fire. He poked at the flames mindlessly, encouraging the embers to shoot up chimney. "I am truly flattered."

She waited for him to say something more, perhaps return the sentiment but he merely kept working the fire. "You're welcome, Justin," she muttered, pulling the covers up with her good arm. So much for being honest, she sighed inwardly.

"I care for you too, Blaze," he said stiffly then replaced the poker in the stand with a soft clang. "I don't ever want you to think I don't." He walked around to Beau's side of the bed and stroked the tot's head amid the sharp crackles from the fire. "I can't tell you how much I care about this little one, too. He's brought so much joy to my life, much more than I could have ever imagined." Sincerity collided with twinges of regret, as if he wondered what it would be like if Beau were really his own son.

"So have you." Her hand covered his, squeezing gently.

Blaze stared into his dark eyes as they locked with hers. Emotion roiled behind those orbs, a confused mix. "I ... I ... think I need to retire now," he said quickly, brushing a kiss across Beau's forehead and stepping away. "If you have need of me, then call for me."

With that, Justin slipped through his door and closed it fast, its hollow thud ringing through the air. Sharp clicks pierced the air, indicating he had locked the door securely.

Tears pricked her eyes, hot and moist. She had to do better at hiding her feelings because it always upset Justin somehow. He was a man in every sense of the word except one. She could not seem to remember that and hurt him every single time.

Blaze glanced at where he had sat, staring at the rumpled cover on the floor. How long had he been there before she woke up? Surely, he had not been there the entire time she was asleep?

Out of the corner of her eye, a flash of white caught her attention. She turned to find the letter that Justin had given her sitting on the stand next to her bed. Who had sent it?

She picked up and turned it over. Red wax sealed the edges, unbroken and intact, indicating Justin had not tampered with it at all.

Blaze turned to toward the fire, letting her fingers dance over it. Raised relief patterns criss crossed over it. The image was some sort of bat or winged animal ... wait it was a bird! Raven! It was from him!

Anxious fingers tore open the envelope and pulled it from its packet. Thick, creamy parchment, filled with spiky lettering, stared back at her. She blinked hard and started to read.

My dearest love,

I hope you are doing well and forgive me for letting that ignorant sot of a husband take care of you but I had no other choice. You see, there is a hefty price on my head now, offered by the gracious Spanish and English governments. Though I'm safe in Martinique, there are undoubtedly many who would love to turn me in for the reward money. I'm sure you would not like to see that happen to me.

If you're wondering where I am, do not fear. I'm always around, watching you and my son. The only thing that angers me is that my son considers that bastard his father. I wish I could correct everything but I cannot, at least not yet.

Oh, how I crave the warmth of your arms and the passionate taste of your kiss as well as the feeling of making love to you. I hunger each day, waiting for the chance to have you again. Now that chance has come. Meet me at the crossing of the paths in a week if you can. Tell no one where you are going, especially that blackguard Blackmore. I promise that I will make it worth your while.

After you have read this, destroy it. I want nothing to connect you to me.

R.

Blaze held the letter to her chest where her heart thumped hard under it. Raven. He wanted her and wanted her badly. Unfortunately, this confession tore her mind as well as her soul in half. New feelings grew inside of her for Justin, mingling with guilt and remorse she had already felt. Justin could not enjoy that one aspect of marriage most people did yet she managed to with a different man.

A man that was the father of her son.

Moisture flowed from her eyes, making her sniff hard. Why did she feel so guilty? Justin knew about her indiscretions yet it tore at her soul that he did. Perhaps it was the fact that he did not stop her or ask her to quit seeing Raven. Almost as if he didn't care. Yet, he said he cared for her.

Confusion slipped in like an unwanted presence, making her head hurt. Her internal battle raged night and day as guilty passion consumed her soul. How was she going to get out of this one?

* * * *

Justin leaned his ear against the door and listened. He heard her crying softly, his heart breaking in half. Part of him wanted to go in and tell her exactly who he was and what he was but he knew he couldn't. That wasn't part of the bargain, at least not yet.

He sighed wearily as the need to have her soon arose. Why must she be like a potion to keep his blood flowing? It was almost as if he would die if he didn't taste her lips once a day or hold her as he drove deep inside of her....

Stepping away from the door, he allowed a thin smile to cover his lips. It was pure brilliance on his part to dream up the letter and give it to her. It was just as much for her sake as it was for his. She drove him insane with lust every time he looked at her, from the way her body curved to the fabulous yards of fiery hair he loved to run his hands through....

His groin stiffened. So much for being unable to consummate a marriage, he thought miserably as he listened a little more. Curved and molded wood, cool under his ear, muffled the sounds. She continued to cry for a few more moments before quieting down.

Justin unlocked the door quietly and opened it just a crack. Blaze's head turned toward Beau, the outline of her delicate jaw looking particularly luscious. He held his breath. Clutched to her chest was the note he had written to her as the Raven. She hadn't destroyed it like he said but she was still weak from her injury. She could do it in the morning.

He stepped out with a light foot and went to her bed. Her hair rimmed her head like a red halo, giving her an ethereal appearance while ruby lips parted slightly as soft breaths echoed in and out. Justin groaned silently. He longed to nibble at her lower one and work his way to inside her mouth to taste of her sweet breath....

Stop! He couldn't do this anymore. It was pure torture.

Before he could stop himself, Justin bent down and kissed her forehead gently. "I love you, Blaze," he whispered then stepped back. Her chest, covered by the silky dressing gown outlining her ripe nipples and bountiful breasts, rose and fell with regularity. He ached in the worst way. Thankfully, his release was just a week away.

Justin turned and slipped out, letting his breath out. It was going to be one hell of a long night.

* * * *

Blaze waited impatiently at the crossroads, her arms folded over each other. Her wound had healed though it ached a little now. Justin has been so kind all week, taking sweet care of her and making sure that she got out and exercised a little. Thanks to him, she healed quite quickly.

Guilt swept over her. She should be home with him. He had gone to bed complaining of a headache and that he should not be disturbed. She had wanted to go with him and tend to him the way he had her, but Justin told her what he needed was sleep. It was no use following him. He always locked the door at night.

"Blaze."

She jumped at the husky sounding voice and dropped the reins of her horse. "Raven," she whispered as his horse pushed through the dark thicket. "Oh, how I've missed you."

"As have I have missed you, ma cherie." His warm, dulcet French accented tones swept over her, reminding her of the finest sherry. "Come with me."

"Of course," she answered, running to his horse. Without any effort at all, Raven brought her up and adjusted her in the saddle. She kissed him fervently, delving into his velvety mouth without hesitation.

He obliged, returning her ardor. Suddenly, he pulled away. "You have missed me, ma cherie," he stated in a surprised tone, his hands capturing each side of her face. "I'm glad to see that ignorant sot has not touched you."

Blaze felt the color drain from her face. "Please do not mention Justin again," she asked stiffly. More guilt was not what she needed right now.

His full lips pulled into a smile. "Are you growing feelings for him?"

"Please, Raven, do not make me feel worse than I already do."

"Aye, you must be," he mused, his mirth turning to slow anger, "or else why would you feel so guilty at being with me?"

Blaze pushed away from him. "I don't think this is a good idea...."

"It's too late to say no, ma cherie," he stated in a sensuously low growl and pulled her close. "I've been too long without you as you have been without me. We both need each other right now, more than ever." His mouth descended onto her neck, teasing and tantalizing, the skin burning where he touched.

"No...."

"Yes, Blaze, you will go with me right now and not feel the guilt and remorse that you carry around with you like a bag of stones. You are doing nothing wrong."

"Except adultery."

His hands turned her head up roughly, making her stare into his eyes. "Do you want to live like a nun the rest of your life? No passion or tenderness? I know Blackmore can't make love to you and he doesn't begrudge you the pleasure of my arms so why torture yourself about it?" Dark emotion swam in his eyes, a mixture of lust and confusion as well as anger.

Blaze laid her head against the cool black silk of his shirt, nuzzling her cheek against silky, masculine filled softness. "You're right, Raven. I am deeply fond of Justin but it's not the same as with you," she murmured into his chest, "but still, I can't help but feel like I'm cheating him out of a wife."

"That sot's lucky that you agreed to be his wife."

"I wouldn't say that...."

"I just did," he replied savagely, his dark eyes glittering behind the mask.

She jerked her head and glared at him. "Why are you so hateful of Justin? What's he done to you?"

Raven kissed her forehead with the gentlest of caresses. "Because he has you."

"You could have stepped forward and claimed me. We do have a son together."

"You know I couldn't have, Blaze. What I do is dangerous and I couldn't endanger you and--"

"Beau."

"Beau, that's right. I couldn't endanger either one of you," he whispered as he held close, his gloved hands wrapped around her waist like a vise, "not while there's a breath left in my body."

That fact he didn't remember Beau's name wasn't lost on her. It's just that he's getting used to the idea, she told herself. That's all. Anger boiled a little beneath her surface but she pushed it away. It was just a mistake.

"Come with me now, ma cherie. Let me free you from all this guilt."

"I--I want that more than anything, Raven," she moaned, holding into him tightly. "For you to make love to me."

His right hand withdrew from its place on her waist and pulled a silken black scarf from his breast pocket. "A blindfold again?"

He nodded. "There are all kinds of things one can do with a scarf my dear. A blindfold is only one of them. Tonight, I'm going to show you some other tricks."

Shivers of anticipation soared up her spine, her brow lifting. "As in?"

"You'll find out."

* * * *

Blaze greeted the morning with exuberant aplomb. She threw open the window of her bedroom and let the sunshine in. It was a particularly wonderful morning because she had spent the night in the arms of Raven. True to his word, he drove the guilt from her mind with his expert hands and sweet words. She'd never felt more safe in her life than she had last night.

Brilliant white powdery sands lay along the shoreline, glistening in the sun. Emerald palm fronds waved in the salty sea breeze. Coconuts, ripe and dark, hung from the tops, ready for harvest. Men, both light and dark, worked to empty the incoming ships, their skin glistening with sweat from the hot sun. Blaze watched for a moment, memorizing the serene scene. Life was pleasant in Martinique with Justin but part of her hungered to be with Raven, wherever his home was.

"Good morning, Blaze."

She whirled around at Justin's voice. "Go ... good morning, Justin," she stammered.

"I see there's a pleasant bit of color in your cheeks," he said mildly as he walked over to the mirror over the fireplace and patted the underside of his chin with the back of his hand. "It seems your nocturnal visit has benefited you well."

Her blood fell from her face as fear pounded her veins. "Wh ... what do you mean? I was here all last night."

"No you weren't," he conjectured as his fingers fixed his neck stock and straightened the ruffles. "I checked on you last night and you weren't in bed."

Blaze's mouth dried as the guilt that Raven had promised to free her from swept over her again. She swallowed hard. "How do you know where I went?"

"Easy." He pulled the Raven's letter from his pocket and held it from his long fingers like a damning piece of evidence. "When you weren't here, I poked my nose around and found this under your pillow."

She angrily snatched it from his fingers. "How dare you snoop around my room, Justin! This is private!" Her heart pounded harder than before. She should have destroyed the note the night before but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was her link to Raven until she could see him again. By not doing that, it was a fatal mistake.

"Not when it concerns me as well."

Her face twisted into a mask of confusion mingled with slight anger. "What do you mean?"

"I am your husband and whatever you do reflects on me. Now, while I don't care what you do with that bastard, I won't have you harming Beau's reputation."

"I'm not harming anyone's reputation, Justin. What concern is it of yours about Beau? He isn't your son...." She immediately regretted those words as they fell from her lips, unable to stop them. Guilt that Raven had taken from her ripped at her soul and tore a giant gash out of it. Why could she not stop herself? That last thing in the world she wanted to do was to hurt Justin yet she couldn't stop. Why?

Pain and raw emotion rippled across Justin's face, muscles tensing in his jaw. "I cannot help but remember because you always remind me of that fact. However, I am not a man who is cruel and bitter so I will let you continue on your little escapades so long as I don't know about it. If I find out again about him, you're to sever all ties with him. Am I understood?"

Justin was right. She did nothing about hiding her affair with Raven and it could possibly put Justin and Beau in danger if someone found out. "Yes, Justin, I understand perfectly," she answered quietly.

* * * *

He watched her standing there, her wild red ringlets flying about her head like a fiery halo. Blaze was a dish best not tasted but it was too late for him. He wanted more, much more than he could take right now. As Justin, he could taste nothing while as Raven, he enjoyed her to the fullest. He hated the fact that he played her for a dupe but it was too dangerous to tell her the truth. Once he got Andre and Daniel taken care of, it would be time. Hopefully, she wouldn't hate him by then.

His gaze lowered. Blaze's body floated beneath her diaphanous nightgown, creamy and rose colored. High splashes of crimson colored her cheeks, remnants of the

everlasting love-making session the night before. His lips pulled into a light half-grin. Oh how she drowned in his kisses, murmuring her everlasting love. He wanted that and wanted it badly only he wanted it as Justin.

Ripe nipples teased him as they brushed against the rich fabric and stiffened, making him harder than he'd ever been in his life. Between his lips, they had become taut and turned to a delicious marble, making him want to suckle them forever. He groaned softly and watched confusion slip over her face.

"What's wrong, Justin?" Her fiery brows knitted in concern. If she knew the truth, she'd have her legs wrapped around his waist while he buried himself inside of her.

"Nothing," he snapped quickly, turning away. Thankfully, he'd padded his groin pretty heavily so that when he became aroused, no one would know except him. "I'm going into town with Henri. Would you care to join us?"

"Why Henri?" Her voice contained a ring of wariness to it.

He remembered the way Henri accosted her when he was recovering from his bullet wound and threw back his head, laughing. "I see you're still petrified of him."

"I am not," she sniffed, "'tis just that he makes me uncomfortable is all."

Justin slipped an arm around her delicious shoulders and pulled her close, knowing full well how dangerous this was. "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe from the big bad French wolf."

Chapter 11

"Are you sure?"

Henri dipped his blond head as he took a deep draw from his cheroot. "Positive," he said as he blew smoke rings to the ceiling. "My spies told me Andre's had someone following you around since you've seen him, trying to see if he can find anything out about you."

They sat in the remotest corner of Chat de Noir, far enough from the thick throng of drunken men crowded in the front. He had left Blaze and Beau at Madame Woodfield's pastry shop on the pretext that he and Henri needed to visit the apothecary for new medicines. "I thought he might resort to something like this."

"Of course he did," Henri conjectured as he puffed on his cigar. "My father questioned his ministers about what to do with Le Croix. They came up with a solution

and my father implemented it." He leaned forward. "You don't think it was chance that he became magistrate on Martinique, do you?"

"No," he answered slowly. "What crimes did he commit in France?"

"More than I can tell you." Henri confessed as he leaned his long body back and stretched. "How long until you have to meet Blaze?"

Justin pulled his gold watch from his satin lined pocket and stared at it. It was almost noon. "Another hour, perhaps so that gives me time to hear some of Andre's 'exploits'"

"Why?"

"I need to get inside of his head and find what makes him tick. When I do, I'll be able to beat him at his own game."

* * * *

"Thank you, Madame Woodfield," she said in a quiet tone as the woman wrapped up the beef pastries as well as the cake for tonight's dessert. Justin's quick departure from her side bothered her but not as much as their argument this morning. Her harsh words rang through her mind, sounding like ice. Why was she always so venomous? Justin had done nothing to her except to demand that she keep her affair with Raven a secret.

Beau tugged on the embroidered hem of her gown, garnering her attention. "Mama, can I have a cookie? I've been a good boy all day." His eyes, a deep blue, reminded her of the night sky on those evenings she had spent with Raven.

"Of course, my pet," she said, picking him up so he could see the displayed treats neatly arranged on the Delft plates behind Madame Woodfield. "What would you like?"

"One with lots of sugar!"

"A sugar one, please," she said, ruffling Beau's pitch-black hair as he laid his head against her shoulder. "Thank you for being a good boy all day, Beau." She handed him the cookie proffered by Madame Woodfield. "Where shall we go next?"

His small shoulders shrugged. "Let's just walk, Mama."

* * * *

Blaze walked down the street with the pastries and cake in the basket on her right arm while her left clasped Beau's as they walked to the town square. Normally, the area was devoid of people at this time of day but this morning was different. Groups of men gathered outside of Magistrate Le Croix's office staring at a piece of paper tacked on the wooden support column.

"I knew that no account Raven was behind this," muttered one man who leaned on his cane for support.

"Aye, if we're lucky, he'll swing for all the rum that he's taken!" shouted another.

"For a thousand pieces of silver, I'll hunt the blackguard down myself!"

Blaze's heart froze, forming a heavy lump in her chest. What were they talking about?

"Mama, what are those men saying?" Beau chimed in, the curiosity riding his face in waves.

She gave him a bright smile to erase the nervousness flooding her vein. "Nothing, my sweet."

Beau asked no other questions as he munched on his cookie but by the look on his face, he was intrigued with the goings on. That is your father, she said silently, and I want you to meet him someday.

Blaze turned her attention back to the poster. Its edges fluttered in the breeze, yellow and tattered. She stepped closer, her hand going to her mouth. Scrawled on it was the crudest drawing of a man with a black tri corn hat and mask with the words WANTED written underneath in both French and English. It stated not only his name but how much money the government offered for his capture. Her heart nearly stopped. Raven had a price on his head.

One of the men turned and stared at her, tipping his hat. "Sorry, missus, we didn't know you was there."

"That's all right," she murmured, moving closer to the poster through the parted crowd. "Who is this man?"

"The one whosa been a stealin' da rum of da island," one man slurred as he raised his tankard to his lips. "And I'ma gonna find him."

Her stomach curled in tight knots as fear took over. "It seems to me that if the government can't find this man that it will be highly unlikely that any of you will."

Angry hisses rumbled through the crowd. "What makes you think so, lass?" inquired an Irish fellow.

"It makes logical sense," she insisted.

"Well, lass, you need to keep yer nose outta men's business," the man said a touch angrily. "The best place for you is the kitchen," he said lecherously, "or the bedroom. Take yer pick."

"I'm sorry if my opinion bothers you but that is the way I see it," she replied with a sharp tongue and gripped onto her son's hand. "Come along, Beau." With that, she spun on her heel and left the crowd amid the insults hurled in her direction.

Blaze's heart pounded like never before as the fear for Raven rose. He probably didn't know there was a price on his head and was still going about his raiding as though nothing was wrong. Someone had to tell him and keep him informed of what was going on ... Aye, she would do it! But she couldn't do it alone, she'd need help.

There was only one woman she'd trust to help her, a woman who knew every important man in town one way or another.

She leaned down to Beau and patted his head. "Would you like to visit Madame Willoughby today?"

Beau nodded. "Can we, Mama? She's got cats I can play with!" He clapped his hands together excitedly, his lengthening fingers twining together.

"Yes, my dear. Let's go see what the cats are up to."

* * * *

Madame Willoughby's salon was the epitome of voluptuousness. Red velvet portieres adorned the windows, letting light through the sheer, gauzy curtains. Furniture, made from the finest cherry, decorated the corners while embroidered chairs set off the entire ensemble.

"So how do you want me to help you?" Gabrielle inquired softly as she sipped her tea through elegant lips. Her unpowdered blonde hair, swept up into a tight chignon, made her seem younger than she actually was. Rich black velvet clung to her svelte figure and highlighted her porcelain skin. Blaze always felt a little intimidated in the woman's presence because of her style and sophistication. Madame Willoughby always knew the right things to say or do, making her a lady down to her bare bones despite her chosen profession. Blaze always wished she could say the same for herself.

"If you could keep me informed of the Magistrate's comings and goings as well as any other developments, I would be most grateful."

"Ah, what a woman would not do for love," Gabrielle quipped and set her cup and saucer back down, shoving it from the far edge of the elegantly manicured table. Her pale eyes glowed "So, has Raven told you that he wants you to help?"

"No," she said, shaking her head and taking a deep drink of tea to calm her nerves. "He knows nothing about what is happening so that's why I need to do this."

She looked to Beau who played happily in the corner with the two nearly grown cats, teasing them with a feather on a stick. He seemed so happy.

"He is certainly beautiful, Blaze. Does Raven know about him?"

Blaze nodded. "Aye, he does and he is proud. At first, I thought he'd deny Beau was his but he has accepted him fully."

"Surprising," Gabrielle remarked mildly. "Most men deny children. At least both of my husbands did."

"They did?"

Gabrielle nodded. "Aye, even though they were born within our marriage, they both denied my daughter and son. Oh, well, it is probably better that both men are buried." Her eyes glazed over as if the memories were too painful to bear. She blinked hard and turned to Blaze. "So what is this plan that you've devised?"

"I've only got part of it but I hoped that you could help me with the rest of it."

Gabrielle's smile lit up the room. "Aye, I will, Blaze. I'll do whatever it takes to see that Raven comes through this alive."

* * * *

It was one thirty and still no Blaze. Justin fumed outside of the pastry shop, his hand gripping the silver head of his cane tightly as he paced back and forth. Where in the devil was she?

"I see your beloved bride has skipped off somewhere," Henri jibed next to his elbow.

"No doubt planning something dubious," he remarked in an angry tone. With this price on his head, surely she was cooking up something to help him.

"Aye, she may be," Henri conjectured as he stepped from beyond the shadow of the porch. "If you will excuse me, I think I'll pay a visit to your aunt."

He smiled crookedly. "You mean to one of her girls," he corrected gently.

"Of course. I am a man, aren't I?" Henri offered and left his side. "I will give your aunt your respects."

He watched Henri walk jauntily down the street, tipping his hat to all the pretty girls crossing his path. Once he'd been that carefree but since he'd had Blaze, all other women paled on comparison. Her fiery hair captivated him the most, resembling fire as it trailed down her back in wild curls....

"Where's Henri going?"

He turned to see Blaze standing behind him with Beau at her side. Slight moans escaped his throat. She dressed in an ivory gown, cut low to expose the tops of her creamy breasts. Red curls peeped out from under her pale straw hat, framing her porcelain face. It was all he could do to keep from taking her home and burying himself deep inside of her.

"Is there something wrong, Justin?"

He shook his head quickly. "No, my dear. I've just a twinge of pain is all." His eyes narrowed. "Where have you been?" he demanded, leaning on his cane. "I told you I'd meet you at one o'clock."

She shifted the full basket on her arm. "I did some shopping and I guess I lost track of time is all." Blaze frowned. "Why are you so worried?"

"I just am," he said sourly as he gripped her elbow. "After all, I can't have Raven coming down and sweeping you away," he whispered into her ear.

Blaze pulled back as the look of utter shock and anger crossed her features. "You really are getting awful about this, Justin," she snapped and pulled Beau close to her. "This type of behavior is really below you. If you don't mind, I'll see you at home later when you've had time to settle down."

She walked away from him, her hips sashaying underneath the fabric of her gown, turning his loins on fire. Blaze was right. He was utterly jealous of Raven and it was suddenly getting out of hand. After all, he was Raven and it wouldn't do for him to get jealous of himself, would it?

* * * *

The invitation arrived shortly after three in the afternoon. Her butler laid it in her hands and she read it quickly. There was to be ball at the Magistrate's home in a fortnight to celebrate his birthday. She and Justin were invited, thanks in part to Madame Willoughby. She smiled. If anyone knew about the comings and goings of the rum ships,

it would be the Monsieur Le Croix. Her plan was to have Madame Willoughby keep Andre distracted while she checked into his library and find out anything about those ships along with other useful information that would aid Raven. With any amount of luck, Justin would be distracted as well, along with that boorish oaf of a physician because Justin never left home without him.

Her lips pulled into a frown at the thought of Justin's friend. She didn't like Henri, especially when he leered at her so many times when she had visited Justin after he had been shot. She stayed away from him as far as possible.

Distant clicks coming down the hallway told her that Justin was up and coming to the salon. Her hands tightened around the invitation. Justin didn't want her helping Raven in any way but she had no choice. She was too far in love with Raven to turn back now.

His footsteps stopped at the door. "Good afternoon, Blaze."

"Good afternoon, Justin," she chirped happily then spun around, holding out the invitation. "This just came for us."

Justin swaggered in and ripped the invitation from her hands. "It seems that Monsieur Le Croix is celebrating his birthday," he said sourly and handed it back to her. "Send our regards that we will be unable to attend."

Her brow lifted. "Why not?"

He shrugged his thick shoulders. "I'm not in the mood for any parties."

"It's two weeks away. "

"I won't be in the mood in two weeks from now either," he snapped as he turned toward the stairs

She stared at him hard, her eyes narrowing. Why was he acting so strangely? His wound had healed and he'd had no trouble. "That's fine, Justin. If you're not in the mood, I'll let them know you won't be attending but that Beau and I will be." She was not about to let him bully her into not attending. Nothing would stand in her way of helping Raven.

"No, you're not going either," he stated in a flat, demanding tone. "There is no reason for you to go without me."

"I'm going," she said staunchly as she moved over to the cherry finished writing desk in the corner, "and so is Beau."

Justin's hand gripped her upper arm, jerking her toward him. "I said you're not going either." Muscles bunched in his jaw, indicating his fierce anger but she ignored it. He had not acted like her husband up to this point so why should he choose to now?

Her eyes widened as she lifted her chin defiantly. "I am going, Justin, and there is nothing you can do to stop me. I may be your wife but you will never order me around like a child or a servant so let go of me."

He let go surprisingly, though anger still rippled over his face as he flipped his hand in her direction. "Fine. Do what you like, Blaze," he snapped back, "You always do. If you get yourself into trouble, don't expect me to save you."

Justin stormed off, his furious steps pounding through the salon before they echoed through hallway.

Blaze slammed herself into the chair of her desk, her gown puffing up all around her. To hell with Justin! She didn't need him saving her or doing anything for her. As far as she was concerned, she could take care of herself.

* * * *

Justin's mind reeled. He hadn't expected an invitation to Le Croix's party but he had gotten one anyway. Damn that man! He had planned to hire an expert thief to stage a raid on Le Croix's house and gather all pertinent information while the stupid bastard dandled with his mistress. Now that was completely out of the question.

That wasn't the only thing that worried him. Posters in town declared a high price for anyone turning him in. He had laughed at the prospect until he heard the murmuring of the gathered crowd below one. The situation was getting far too dangerous for him now, making extra precautions necessary.

If he had seen it, Blaze had surely seen it. He grunted. There were times the woman could be utterly exasperating while at other times, he'd craved her body like nothing else.

He was simply going to have to appear at the party. That was all there was to it. Blaze was more than likely going because she had in her head that she was going to do some snooping while the party raged on.

His lips pulled into a tight smile at the thought of Blaze rummaging around Andre's office, looking for something to help him. When he got a hold of her as Raven, he'd have to punish her most pleasurably...

* * * *

"I don't want to go to any dumb party, Mama," Beau said sullenly. He sat next to her in the carriage as they rode to the Magistrate's house for the soiree. His lower lip protruded in a defiant pout as he kicked his legs, banging his heels against the wooden back of the seat.

She laid her hand on his knee to stop him. "Don't you want to play with Chastity Graham? She always likes seeing you."

"She always wants to hug and kiss me, Mama, and I don't like it."

"It's because you're so handsome, my pet. All the little girls want to do that to you."

He shrugged his black wool clad shoulders. "I still don't like."

Blaze chuckled lightly. "When you get older, you'll come to adore it."

"I don't think I ever will." His words were so solemn that she let out a tiny yelp of laughter. If he were anything like his father, he'd be enjoying that sort of attention to the fullest extent.

Her carriage stopped hard and they lurched forward slightly. "We're here," she announced then gripped Beau's hand.

"I wish I could have stayed home with Justin."

She glared at him. "Justin's not feeling well, Beau, and you wouldn't want to stay with him. All he was going to do was sleep."

"I don't care," he mumbled as he continued to kick the seat with his heels, the thump resounding through the carriage. "I want to go home."

"We're not going home, love, so make the best of the situation," she ordered, peering out of the carriage window to look at the Magistrate's house. It was a beautiful house built in the Georgian style with tall columns and wide porches. Black shutters enclosed the windows and highlighted the candles sitting in them. She drew a deep breath in an effort to control her erratic heartbeat. This was something she had to do to save Raven.

"All right, Mama," he sighed wearily, "I'll play with Chastity if you want me to."

"Good. I think she would like that," she said softly as the carriage door opened. Her footman helped Beau out and returned to aid her.

Throngs of people milled around the porches in their finest gowns and powdered hair. Compared to them, she was as dowdy as a schoolmistress. Her gown was of plain emerald velvet with only tiny bits of embroidery on it. She had only used a small dab of rouge on her cheeks, nothing more. Her hair, unpowdered and shining a bright copper, wound around her head in tiny braids with bits of pearl interwoven with a few stray ringlets on either side of her face. As she mounted the steps, their stares turned to her. The men all glared at her with their mouths hanging open while the women stared daggers.

Let them look, she said silently as she pushed past them. They acted as if they hadn't seen a woman before.

Blaze entered the elegant home and handed her cloak to the waiting valet along with Beau's. The foyer was tall with a large chandelier hanging from the tall ceiling. Stairs yawned before her, wide and curving as they went up. Women of all ages went up and down, more than likely getting up from their naps or refreshing themselves. She took a deep breath to calm her erratic nerves in order to block out their evil glares. Who were they to judge her?

Blaze swept into the room after the butler announced her, staring at everyone in attendance. Almost immediately, all conversation stopped and powdered heads turned to her, their stares contemptuous. Her heart pounded while the moisture dried up in her mouth. It was very intimidating being in a crowd of people who did not like her but she had to make the best of the situation for Raven's sake.

Venomous women glared in her direction, looking at her and grimacing, as if she were some social disease come to call. What was the matter with the old pea hens anyway? Her gown possessed a modest neckline. Even its deep emerald hue was within decorum. Why did they still treat her like a harlot?

She swallowed hard and ignored them all, sweeping into the room and nodding to everyone. There was Jeremiah Cunningham who owned the shipyards as well as Josiah Woodward and Benjamin Smith. "Good evening, Lady Blackmore," Jeremiah said, nodding in her direction.

"Good evening, Monsieur Cunningham," she replied, holding her hand out for him. "How good it is to see you again."

He kissed her gloved hand and nodded. "As well as you." He gestured to the dour, fat woman next to him. "My wife, Victoria."

Blaze extended her hand for Victoria. "Madame Cunningham."

Victoria's cold eyes drifted up and down her form, her red-slashed mouth twisting into a snarl. "Lady Blackmore," she remarked as she stiffly shook Blaze's hand.

She felt the hatred roll from Victoria in waves but she ignored it. She'd done nothing to her or any of the women in town yet they were all insanely jealous of her.

"Where is Lord Blackmore?" Jeremiah questioned. He was a tall reed-thin man with crinkled blue eyes and a warm expression, a sharp contrast to his short, fat wife. How he ever married Victoria was beyond her.

"Resting. Justin, I'm afraid, has a dreadful headache and is unable to attend. I'll make his excuses to Monsieur Le Croix when I see him."

"'Tis a royal shame that a woman such as yourself is at this party unattended...." Victoria's fat elbow stabbed his gut, halting his words. That left little doubt as to who ruled that household.

"Thank you, Monsieur Cunningham. I'll be sure to relay that to Justin," she said, her gaze scanning the room. Andre was in deep conversation with several men, smoking a rather large cigar. She frowned. She would have preferred to speak to him alone "Oh, I think I see the guest of honor standing there. If you will excuse me, I need to extend my husband's regrets at not being able to be here."

Jeremiah tipped his wiggled head as she departed their company.

She drifted toward the entourage. People surrounded Andre, laughing at all of his witty stories, hanging on every word. More than likely, they were just being kind or at least that was what was whispered in each conversation that she had passed.

Just as she reached Andre's side, the butler's announcement stick pounded the floor. "Lord Justin Blackmore, Earl of Sexton."

All words stopped and stared at Justin as he made his entrance, discarding his coat and hat, handing both to the waiting valet. He was dressed in his black suit, lined with red silk and crimson waistcoat decorated with gold embroidery. Out of all his clothes, that suit was the least offensive.

Justin's gaze met hers, dark and murderous as the muscles bunched in his jaw. Her slight smile dropped. Why was Justin angry?

Andre stepped through his throng of admirers and picked up her limp hand, bringing it his fleshy lips. "My dear Lady Blackmore, how good of you to come to my

party," he murmured, raising his eyes to stare at Justin. "I see your dear husband has decided to come after all." Maliciousness rang through his voice, making her a little frightened.

Blaze pulled her hand away quickly, flashing Andre a smile. "I see that he is feeling better, Monsieur Le Croix...."

Justin's warm, gloved hand descended on her shoulder, holding her in place while he planted a chaste kiss on her cheek. "Aye, that I am so I have decided not to let such a delightful party and my beautiful wife go to waste," he remarked casually as his thick arm slid around her waist, drawing her closer to him. Undercurrents of anger abounded in his tone but somehow he managed to keep everything on a pleasant level.

Andre's lecherous glare swept over her. "Aye, and a beautiful wife she is."

Justin eased between her and Andre, placing a friendly hand on Andre's shoulder. "Shall we step outside, Monsieur Le Croix?"

Andre's brows rose. "Why ever for?"

"Come with me and I will teach you how to respect another man's wife."

* * * *

Cool night air swept over the nearly empty balcony. Shades of red, blue and yellow turned silvery by the moon, swayed beneath, encouraged by the soft breeze. Their heady scents peppered the air, a mixture of honeysuckle, roses and lilac, all mixed together in one delightful scent. Except for the murmur of voices in the distance, all was silent except for the soft trickle of the fountain in the middle of the well-tended garden.

Justin casually extracted a cheroot from his pocket and lit it. He drew a deep breath in order to calm his erratic nerves. Andre was going too far by staring at Blaze like that. Instead of talking to the blackguard, Justin wanted to kill him.

"What is all this nonsense, Lord Blackmore? I was simply agreeing with you."

Justin whirled around, glaring at him. "Nonetheless, I don't care for how you're talking about her."

Andre clamped a meaty hand on his shoulder. "Come, now, Blackmore, we are men," he whispered quietly. "Besides, you care nothing for the girl."

He took another deep drag then blew the smoke in Andre's face, leaving the older man coughing. "That is where you are wrong, Le Croix. I do care for the girl and even if I didn't, I'd still be angry at the way you're leering at her."

"Come now...."

Justin gripped him by the silken neck stock, holding on tightly. "She is still my wife and belongs to me. Any man who puts any advance on her will pay dearly. I know you have already tried so I will forgive that first transgression but I will not tolerate a second. Am I understood?"

Andre's fingers clawed at his frantically, only able to choke out a weak 'yes'.

Justin released the man and he fell to the floor, gasping. "Do not think for one moment that our little business arrangement will continue," he croaked as he pushed his bulky body up to a sitting position. "I'm severing it here and now."

He crouched next to Andre easily and leaned close to the older man's ear. "You can't do that, Le Croix because you forget I hold all the cards now. It seems that you've been keeping two ledgers. One for you and one for the solicitor. That's not good, Andre, but I do have to admire your ingenuity. In any case, our partnership will never be severed unless you want the governor to find out. Do you understand me?"

"This is blackmail," Andre snarled as he backed up the stone railing into a standing position. "I will not tolerate it."

"You will tolerate it," he reiterated, as he backed away from Andre. He looked around quickly, waiting for someone to approach but most people were too engaged with one another to notice. "Now, is there any information for me?"

Andre's thick pudgy fingers rubbed his throat as slight coughs escaped his lips. "Yes, but I'm not giving it to you tonight. If you hadn't guessed, there is a party going on in my honor...."

"One that you threw yourself," Justin retorted then shoved Andre toward the French doors. "Show me your information."

Chapter 12

Blaze stepped lightly down the upstairs hallway, her feet gliding over the red velvety carpet running through the middle. Beautiful furniture rivaling the French King's palace, decorated the walls on each side of her. Rich, gilded tables, created in Louis XIV style, stood guard patiently under mirrors framed by golden wood. Thin porcelain vases held newly cut flowers, presumably from the garden in back, peppering the air with their heady scent. If she were not so intent on her mission, she would have stopped and admired the beauty but not now.

Her slippered feet moved down the hall, peering into each open door. Each one seemed like an exquisite suite but none of them seemed as though they would be some sort of study. She continued until she spied a closed door at the end of the hallway. That must be it.

Blaze picked up her skirts and hurried down toward the door. It was as gilded as the rest of the doors but seemed more ornate. Perhaps it was Andre's private suite and if she were truly lucky, he would keep all of his private papers here.

She laid her hand on the cold, intricately carved knob and turned. Soft clicks echoed through the passage, the door refusing to budge. Blaze leaned against it, the wood cool against her hot forehead. She should have known it wouldn't be anything else.

Weary sighs escaped her lips. Without the key, she wouldn't be able ... wait a moment! She reached into her hair and extracted a pin as her lips pulled into a smile. Thankfully, she'd worn her hair up this evening or else she'd have no other way of getting into the room.

* * * *

Justin and Andre entered the ballroom, his gaze immediately searching for Blaze among the dancers. Through the throng of costumed bodies, she wasn't anywhere to be found. Damn that woman. She was going to get the best of him.

More than likely, she was wandering around the house trying to find Andre's study. Well, he was going to have to stop her before she got in over her head.

"My word, if it is not Monsieur Le Croix," a masked woman crooned, grabbing Andre by the arm. "And Lord Blackmore, what a wonderful surprise!"

He stared at her hard for a moment before she pulled down her mask and winked at him conspiratorially. Relief escaped his lungs. It was Gabrielle. "Madame Willoughby," he remarked as he picked up her gloved hand and kissed the back of it. "It is wonderful to see you."

She clutched onto Andre's arm as if it were a lifeline in a turbulent sea. "Thank you, Lord Blackmore," she cooed then turned to Andre. "What a wonderful party, Monsieur Le Croix. I was hoping that you would have asked me for a waltz by now."

"I haven't...."

"Oh, you do not know how long I have waited for this moment," Gabrielle commented then whisked Andre to the middle of the floor before he could finish his sentence, winking again before she left his presence.

Thank God for Aunt Gabrielle. This was not the first time she had gotten him out of a sticky situation but it was the first time she did it to help his wife. With that sly wink, he knew Gabrielle was in league with Blaze. No other woman had more charm, other than Blaze so naturally both women had sown a kindred friendship.

He growled low and slipped away to the steps, casting one look to the dance floor. Gabrielle had Andre completely enthralled so that left him to his own devices. Good. Now he had plenty of time to find his renegade wife.

* * * *

Blaze moved around the room quietly, trying to make sure that she didn't bump into anything or knock anything over. The last thing she wanted was for Andre to find her prowling around his bedroom/study.

She moved past the massive tester bed covered with silk, her gown rustling against the edge of the covers. A large roll top desk stood neatly in the corner with its beveled cover drawn. Her slippered feet rustled across the carpet as she moved toward it, the sounds of merriment drifting up from the ballroom directly below. Hopefully, Andre would be engaged for a while.

Blaze glanced at the clock as her heart pounded even harder. It was well after nine and that meant Gabrielle was here, distracting Andre with her charm. Her lips tugged into a weak smile as her nerves spun out of control. With Gabrielle's aid, she was going to help Raven!

Her fingers connected with the cold brass knobs of the cover. She tugged upward. It remained locked as well. Taking the pin in her fingers, she worked at the lock until she heard the faint click split the air. Just as she was about to open it, she heard faint sounds in the hallway. With a quick thought, she dove under the bed, drawing all her skirts under it, her heart out of control. Had Andre left the party to retire?

Blaze held her breath. The door opened, revealing a pair of shiny black buckled shoes, highlighted by the moonlight filtering through the window. They moved about the room, stopping once, as if the owner heard her. Then they moved toward the desk. She heard the unmistakable slide of wood against wood as the cover pushed up. Whoever was in here with her shuffled through papers for a moment then closed the cover.

Moisture in her mouth dried up, her lungs screaming for fresh air. Just leave, she begged silently.

Footsteps moved around the bed, toward the window. They stopped. She watched them for a moment then they turned and moved a retreat around in the direction of the foot-board. Good. Whoever it was would leave then she could come out ... Strong hands gripped her ankles and dragged her from beneath, flipping her over on her back. Her eyes widened. It was Justin kneeling on one knee beside her.

"My, what do I have here? Could it be my wayward wife up to something devious?"

Her breath let out, allowing the burning sensation in her lungs to cease. "Help me up, Justin," she demanded quietly, putting her hand out. He took it and helped her to her feet. "What are you doing in Andre's room?"

"The same could be said for you," he snapped bitterly. "Why were you in here?"

"I ... I ... was looking for the powder room...."

"Liar," he snarled then gripped her upper arm painfully. "You're in here helping your lover, aren't you?"

"No...."

"Blaaaaze."

She wrested herself free from his grip and smoothed down her skirts, the pounding of her heart finally calming down. "All right, Justin, I was trying to gather information for him, that's all."

"What you're going to do is get yourself hung as well as your rebel lover," he said, his shoulders stiffening. "I won't see that happen. If you're so determined to keep that damned rogue from being hung," he sighed wearily, "I'll help you."

Her eyes widened. "Why?"

"Because he means that much to you," he answered in a curt tone. "I will not have you hang as well as that bastard and leave Beau motherless."

She turned to him. His eyes glowed with something much deeper than anger, some emotion she couldn't identify. "Do you mean that, Justin?"

"Aye."

She held onto his arm tightly. "I can't believe you're doing this for me."

"Neither will Andre if he finds us here. Let's get back to the party."

* * * *

Their carriage lurched along the road, her head resting against Justin's shoulder. His arm wound protectively around her shoulders, his free hand resting on Beau's head lying in her lap. "Did you really mean what you said?"

Blaze's words broke through his logjam of thought and he turned his head toward her. "Of course." With her little escapade, he had been able to find the necessary correspondence between Andre and Daniel as well as when the next bout of rum to be stolen was and where it was to be shipped.

"Why are you doing this?"

He sighed heavily, as if he was defeated in some way. "Because I care for you, Blaze. It is obvious this rogue means very much to you and I want to see you happy."

She snuggled deeper into the crook of his arm, nuzzling her cheek against his neck where it was dangerous territory. "Thank you, Justin. No other husband would do what you are doing." His manhood stiffened at the softness in her voice. More than anything else, he was going to have her again, perhaps tonight. Aye, that was it. Raven was going to have to start paying visits to her in her bedroom.

He shifted, trying to alleviate the discomfort growing between his legs. "There are no thanks needed, Blaze. I'm sure you would do the same if the situation had been reversed."

* * * *

Blaze remained silent. She couldn't answer. Would she be able to do the same? Knowingly save Justin's mistress from the noose? Jealousy rose in her like a tide, washing over her, consuming every bit of her soul. No, she couldn't bear the thought of sharing Justin with another woman. "Perhaps," she murmured. "Are you tired, my dear?"

"No," he whispered. "I think I'm going for a night ride to help relax me."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

His powdered brows furrowed in anger. "Because I want to go alone, Blaze. I need some time to myself."

She slumped against him, fighting the tears in her eyes. All she wanted to do was spend some more time with him, perhaps understand his mind a little better. It seemed that every time she asked, he grew angry and snapped at her. Did his illness affect his mind as well?

* * * *

Sleep eluded her for the most part, drifting in and out of dreams that were hazy and elusive. Why could she not sleep?

"Blaze."

His melodious voice drifted over to her, driving through the misty dream. "Raven," she whispered softly. It was only a dream. The only noise in the room was the popping and hissing of the fire as it licked up the sides of the hearth.

"Blaze," he called again. It was stronger, more urgent this time.

She opened her eyes and held her breath. Raven sat in the window, his left leg crooked with his elbow resting on his knee. High polished jackboots gleamed in the moonlight highlighting his magnificent jet hair and clothes.

"Raven," she barely whispered, holding the cover up to her chest.

"Aye, ma cherie, I am here," he murmured as he moved out of the window, striding toward her quickly.

She gulped and sat up quickly, pointing to the door. "Justin's in the other room...."

His finger silenced her as he sank to the bed next to her, his fingers casually unbuttoning his shirt and exposing the silky softness of his skin. Out of hunger, her fingers sought the soft skin covering his muscular torso. Under her digits, his flesh quivered, coming instantly alive. "I know, ma cherie but I care not. I cannot go another moment without tasting the honeyed essence of your lips nor the sweet tang...."

"You shouldn't be here," she said breathlessly as his masculine scent overwhelmed her, making her senses reel.

"Shouldn't I?" His hand slipped beneath the edge of her coverlet, trailing sensuously up her leg underneath her silken dressing gown, making her quiver. Instinctively, she parted her legs, allowing him instant access. "We'll see what you say about it in a few moments."

Raven's hand crept further up her leg until his fingers found what they searched for. Her core was at his disposal, already blossoming and wet with his approach. He deftly peeled back the hood protecting it so that his gloved thumb could tease it while his free, textured fingers slid in and out of her crevice, making the chasm moist with desire. Her inner muscles quivered, clamping down hard. "I see you've been waiting for me," he murmured huskily as his strokes became hungrier, more demanding with each movement.

Blaze's hips moved, her muscles contracting to pull him in further. "Oh yes, Raven, I have been...." She trailed off as the delicious throbbing became worse with each passing moment.

"As I have been for you, ma cherie." He withdrew his hand and stripped his shirt as well as his gloves away, throwing it on the floor casually. "I have something new to teach you tonight."

"What is that?"

"You will see."

With that, Raven slid his arms under her hips and drew her moist abyss to him. His tongue pierced her folds and lapped at her core, teasing it and making the ache worse. It mingled with the softness of his mask scraping against her lips, heightening her senses. Gasps escaped her throat as her hips rose and fell with each stroke, pressing herself into his face so that he could consume her even more. Her chest heaved, the air hitching in her chest as his tongue darted back and forth between her nub and the folds of her womanhood, making the juices flow even faster.

Great washes of headiness swept over her and she wanted to cry out loud but she stifled her ecstasy with the back of her hand.

Raven kissed the inside of her thigh sending out of control spirals of heat throughout her body. "You grow sweeter with time, Blaze. Every time with you is better than the last."

"I ... I...."

"There's no need for words, my dear," he whispered as he drew away from her. His clothes followed his shirt to the floor until there was nothing left but his mask.

"Can ... you ... take ... off ... your ... mask?"

He shook his blue-black head and took the queue out of it, allowing the dark tendrils to spill down his muscled shoulders. "No, my dear, you know I cannot. That is not part of the bargain," he said, his gaze trailing up and down her. "That nightgown must go, Blaze, it doesn't do you justice. From now on, you won't wear anything to bed."

"Why?"

"Because I want you ready for me when I visit."

With that, Raven's arms locked around her, pulling her close to him as he laid himself on top of her. His rigid manhood pressed against her folds ready for entry. "I want you so much, Blaze," he murmured against her neck, his lips burning a hot trail down her chest to her nipples. "From what I can tell, you want me just as much," he whispered as he took a ripened nipple into his mouth.

Her hands twined in his hair, feeling the silky strands thread through her fingers. "Aye, I do, Raven." Fierce pounding entered her head, a combination of desire and delicious anticipation. Why must this be so much torture?

Justin looked into her eyes, feeling his love for her grow. The days he'd spent with her were the happiest he'd known in a long while despite her devious dealings. He

expected nothing less from her. "I think I'm going to tease you a little more, ma cherie, before I make love to you."

"I don't think so, Raven." With that, Blaze lifted her hips, capturing his manhood and holding him with tight, internal muscles. She flexed them slightly, teasing him a little. "I think I'll torture you instead."

He moaned as she closed around him, holding him captive. This is all he wanted, all he dreamed of when he was around her in his other ego. He longed to touch her and make her gasp with ecstasy....

She locked her thighs around his waist and urged him over on his back all the while keeping his manhood firmly inside, making him go deeper.

Surprise crawled across his face as his lips spread into a wide grin. "My, aren't we turning into the wanton wench."

"I am simply using what you've taught me," she whispered huskily as she started to move. Her luscious limbs swept underneath her hair and fanned it out so that it burned like a voracious fire, giving an ethereal luminescence to her pearl like skin.

It was utter torture for him. She moved with grace and ease, with strokes rivaling those of the most seasoned courtesans. He moaned as she drew up enough that he was almost out of her moist chasm then took him in deeply, holding him hostage with her developed muscles. "Oh, Blaze, you are so beautiful," he murmured, reaching up to touch those achingly ripe nipples before him.

She slapped his hands away. "We're playing this little game my way, Raven. You can't touch me until it becomes too much."

It was steadily becoming too much. The silky feel of her crevice as he slipped in and out heightened his arousal, making it extraordinarily hard to keep from approaching climax. He loved the intimate feel of being so deep inside of her, something he knew she'd never shared with anyone else.

"Enough, Blaze, I've got to touch you!" His hands descended on her hips, pushing her down while he thrust up hard, satisfying both of them. Blaze stifled her cries with the back of her hand while he didn't bother to contain his. After all, he wasn't sleeping in the next room, was he?

She covered his mouth quickly. "Justin's in the next room!" Fear rippled through her like a flood, her emotions almost out of control.

"He'll not hear a thing," Raven gasped, still buried deep inside of her, rotating his hips slightly as to elicit more ecstasy. "I am certain he's taken an extra dose of sleeping potion so the likelihood of him coming in here is nil."

"Still, it worries me," she said breathlessly, her gaze drawing to Justin's door. "What shall we do if he should come in?"

"I'd show that sot how to make love to a woman," he said huskily, his hips grinding against her slowly. "He may learn something."

"Don't say that about Justin, Raven. He's been very good to both Beau and I," she chastised, falling to his side, limp and well-sated. She snuggled up to his warm body.

"How do you feel?"

His chest heaved and fell quickly. "Better now."

Her fingers traced lazy patterns on his moist chest. "Why did you come here?" she questioned breathlessly, her voice piercing the quiet stillness of the room. "It is dangerous for you as well as for me."

Raven's scented fingers traced lazy patterns down the side of her face, making the skin quiver. "I had to come, ma cherie."

Blaze leaned up on her elbow and stared into his face, her heart pounding. His features composed a mask of serenity and complete satisfaction. Beneath the black of his mask, his eyes glittered with emotion. "Take me away with you, Raven. I want to be with you and Beau. I don't care where we go. All I want is to be with you."

He was silent for a moment, the sound of their breathing breaking the uneasy quiet, his fingers drumming lightly against her shoulder.

"Why aren't you saying anything, Raven? I thought you'd be happy for Beau and me to come with you."

His arm pulled her closer, the warmth of his body delicious. "I can't, ma cherie. You have many responsibilities here as do I on the sea. What about that beloved husband of yours?"

Blaze stared at the wall covered in pale flowers, enhanced by the matching portieres glowing silver in the moonlight. She didn't want to hurt Justin but at the same time, the thought of leaving him saddened her. Her dependency on him had grown as well as affection. Yet, somehow, she couldn't continue to live a lie. "I'll give Justin Splendour. He's been so good to me and I'll get an annulment so that he can be free to find a woman who will love him as he should be loved," she murmured, turning his face, staring straight into his eyes. "We can be a family, Raven. We'll get married in Europe...."

Raven sighed softly in the darkness, interrupting her. "I can't take you and Beau with me."

"Why not?" Her heart pounded fiercely, hammering at the inner wall of her chest. Why was he not taking her and Beau away? With all that passed between them, surely he wanted her.

"Because, I have my own reasons why I can't."

Now it was becoming all too clear. He was married. She looked down on him hard, daring him not to answer the next question truthfully. "Do you have a wife already?"

Raven swallowed hard and she read the indecision in his eyes. He stared at her for a moment as if to summon up courage before he answered. "Yes."

Fury ripped through her. Why was she so blind? If he had been free, he would have taken her with him long before now. She leapt out of bed, covering herself with her

sheet. "Get out of here," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I never want to see you again."

He swung around in the bed, glaring at her. "What do you mean, ma cherie?"

"Exactly what I said," she raised her voice a little higher. "Now get out."

Raven got to his feet and strode toward her, his arms extended. "Come now, ma cherie, you are distraught. Sleep tonight and think about it in the morning."

"I gave you everything, Raven, including a son. I gave you my heart, my love and my soul and this is what you are doing with it? Why did you not tell me before that you were married?"

"It was not the right time...."

"Do you love her?" She had to know the answer to that question. It wouldn't change anything but she knew it was something she needed to know. He remained silent. "Do you love her?" she repeated.

His lips were silent for a moment before they formed the dreaded answer. "Yes."

Fury rippled through her like never before, encouraging her fingers to clench at the silken sheet still permeated with the exotic scent of their lovemaking. "Get out of my sight, you bastard! I never want to see you again."

His arms fell to his sides. "If you would only listen...."

"I'm not listening to anymore of your lies, Raven. I'm tired of men like you, using me as you wish until you have everything then crush me like this. If you want to know the truth, I'm beginning to prefer Justin over you anyway."

Raven stalked over to her, gripping her arms hard, his eyes cold and black. "What did you say?"

She lifted her chin higher. His reaction to her request changed it all for her. There was nothing left between them and nothing left to say. "I said I prefer Justin over you because he's more reliable than you and has been there when I needed him, which is much more than I can say for you."

Fury scorched his features as he pulled her to the hard musculature of his nude body, the limp manhood beginning to spring to life again. "What are you going to do say in a week, Blaze, when that ache grows in you, the ache that makes you hunger for me? Tell me, what will you do when that sot Blackmore can't satisfy you?"

Blaze pulled free, stepping out of his reach. "I can live without you, Raven. I have for the past five years so it will be no different." She stormed around the bed, the sheet trailing out behind her. Her fingers latched onto his shirt. She picked it up and threw it at his astonished face. Silky black material hit him squarely in the chest and fell to the floor in an inky puddle. "Get out." She sounded cold and hard but she didn't care. Raven did the one thing he'd promised her long ago that he'd never do.

He said nothing as he stormed to the other side of the bed and proceeded to pull on his breeches. "You'll regret this, Blaze," he hissed as he put his shirt on, his long, dexterous fingers flying as they tied the laces, "but to show you I'm a forgiving man, I'll

be back in a week." Raven jammed his feet into his boots angrily. "We'll see what sort of state you're in by then." He slapped on his hat and strode around the bed, attempting to kiss her lips. She turned her head so that all he caught was her cheek. He smirked. "Just as I thought. Let me give you something to think about before I go."

His lips slid over hers and with a great amount of effort, she didn't respond. The kiss was magical and would give her something to think about ordinarily but she refused to give into his charms. She pulled away. "We'll see how you'll be in a week."

Sensuous lips pulled into a maniacal grin as he escaped into the night through the open window.

Once he was gone, Blaze sank down on the bed hard, rocking back and forth a little. Silence grew at an uneasy pace, broken only by the popping and hissing of the fire. Aye, she could live without Raven. She'd done so for the last five years, left only with a reminder of his caresses. This time it was no different.

* * * *

"Lily, you are most exquisite," Andre huffed as Lily took him into her mouth again. He felt her revulsion but he didn't care. She was here for his pleasure, not hers. "If you are truly good, I'll take it easy on you when I whip you later."

He knew she hated the things he made her do but she had no choice if she wanted to live the good life as one of his servants. She'd been a poor mulatto servant to a wicked woman just outside of St. Pierre when he convinced her to join his household. It wasn't long before he'd coerced her into his bed.

"But, my lord...."

Ferocious banging on his door cut off the last of her words. "Who in the hell is disturbing me at this hour?" He felt Lily's teeth nip on the tip of his manhood out of fright. For her indiscretion, he slapped her away. "You'll pay for that, vixen."

"I'm sorry...."

His open hand slapped her again. "Don't say another word."

Andre slipped from his bed, leaving the stunned Lily stare at him. Putting on a dressing gown and slippers, he stormed to the door and flung it open. One of his men stood beyond its confines, reeking of ale and used women. "What do you want?" Andre demanded. How in the hell had this man gotten into his house when he had left strict instructions that they never come here?

"I've got grave news, guv'ner," his sailor stuttered in a cockney accented voice.

"I thought I told you never to come here," he growled through clenched teeth. Why were these men such dolts?

"I had no choice."

His hands flew to his hips as he shifted his weight uneasily. "What sort of news?"

The mate's gaze flicked to Lily, demurely covered in the bed, then back to him. "I think I'd betta not say in front of the lady," he stated, tipping his hat to her as his lecherous stare moved over her olive toned body. "ma'am"

"This had better be good," he growled and shoved his man into the hall with a rough hand, carefully closing the door behind him. He was not used to being disturbed, especially during his 'exercise' time.

He spun on his heel, facing the intruder, hands on his hips. Heat from his anger flooded his face, making his fury mount higher. "What is it?" he demanded, shifting from foot to foot as he waited for his answer.

"We've discovered the identity of the Raven."

Chapter 13

"If you don't stop brushing that poor animal like that, Blackmore, it won't have a coat left," Henri quipped as he leaned back against the stone wall of the makeshift stable, his legs casually crossed at the ankles. Wafts of cherry flavored tobacco smoke circled his head as he drew on the pipe holding it.

"I can't believe she treated me like that! How dare that wench...?" he trailed off, clenching his teeth instead. The less he said in anger, the better. He continued to brush his stallion, stripping to the waist to allow the cool sea air to stream in and cool his burning body.

Henri snorted his reply. "What did you expect? You wanted her to love the fat Justin and not the sensual Raven so why are you so upset?"

Justin stopped his ministrations, keeping the brush in position. Henri was right. He wanted her to love him as Justin, not Raven. Frustrated grunts erupted from his lips as he threw the brush down to the straw laden floor where it landed with a dull clank.

"You're right, Henri. That's what I wanted and now I'm jealous of myself. What man in his right mind would be jealous of himself?" He raked his hands through his free hair, making the strands wilder than before. The situation was fast becoming far more complicated than he had ever anticipated.

Raucous laughter erupted from the corner. He turned to see Henri doubled in half, holding his sides. "Only you, Justin," he said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Only you would get yourself in a situation such as this."

"This isn't a funny situation, Henri," he growled as he paced the makeshift stable restlessly. "I've got to tell her. That's all there is to it."

Seriousness replaced Henri's mirth, his face becoming suddenly stoic. "You can't, Justin. There's another shipment coming in the next week and we've got to get it. As a matter of fact, there've been a few men snooping around and trying to find out some things about you."

"Like who?"

"I don't know but I'll find out. In the mean time, you can't say a word to her. Once I find out who it is, then we'll figure out the best time to tell her."

Justin let out a relieved sigh, throwing his hands up. "How in the world did I get involved with this?"

Henri laced his fingers together and then behind his head, cradling his skull as he leaned back against the wall. "Love is what involved you in this. First, it was your family honor until it evolved into your woman. Now that you know she had given you a son, it's making the situation far deeper than you ever anticipated."

Justin sank down onto a pile of clean hay, settling his bare sweaty arms over his ebony clad knees. Henri was right again. Now came the bigger question. How was he going to get out of it? "Your words are true, Henri, as usual. When the time's right, I'll tell her but until then, I'll have to suffer," he stretched then cast a sideways glance at his friend. "Who has been asking about me?"

Henri studied his manicured fingernails intently. "I think I know but I'm not going to say until I'm absolutely sure. My spies right now are digging for me and I should know in a few days," he mused, looking around the cavernous room. "Thankfully this is so far away from anywhere otherwise we'd have all kinds of people poking around it."

Justin agreed. The stable, constructed of weathered stone and thatch, was located on a small jut of rock extending out into sea. He'd found it a few days after his arrival, making it a perfect spot to keep his stallion.

Open windows sat in the middle of each wall, allowing the salty tang of the ocean to drift in, mingling with the wild jasmine and honeysuckle growing in the lush meadows. It was more of one large room and not really a stable but it would serve its purpose. According to local legend, the ghost of a young girl, raped and murdered not far from the stable, haunted the area, searching for her murderer. That alone kept the people away, giving him the perfect hiding place.

Justin leaned back on his elbows, ignoring the hard stalks of hay scratching his back. "What shall we do when you find out who it is?"

"If it is who I think it is, I've got something very special in mind for him."

He grinned. "Just like the time in Paris when that Pierre d'Lafayette made advances to your mistress...."

Henri cut him off. "Worse. After I'm through, he'll wish all I did was get him drunk and dress him up as a woman then present him to Marquis Coquette as a cousin. Imagine the Marquis' surprise after he took Pierre upstairs and discovered he was a man!"

Both of them broke into riotous laughter, remembering that particular ball. "I have to say that even I was fooled until you told me who it was. Poor Pierre!" he howled, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Aye," Henri followed his gestures. "Would I let you fall into a trap like that?"

"No, I guess you wouldn't," he confessed as he rose to his feet and looked forlornly around the airy room. He loved the freedom from his costume and hated when he had to get back into it. His lips pulled into a half smile. It was but a small price to pay for Blaze's love. "I'm going down to the spring and wash up. When I get back, help me transform back into Justin." His lips curled in disgust. When the day came he could shed his alter ego permanently, he would do so most happily.

"Of course, my friend. Tell me, is all this worth it?"

Justin returned his answer with his most killer smile. "If it gains me my woman's love then it was all worth doing."

Henri leaned forward, placing his tan clad elbows on his knees. "Is she worth all this? Worth risking your life over?"

He didn't miss a beat. "Yes."

* * * *

Sharp clacks of china against china filled the still air as she put the cup on the saucer. It was the only thing she'd been able to hold down all morning. Her sickness confirmed her worst fear. She was pregnant again. Before, the absence of her monthly course didn't mean much though in her case, she was never late. She could have set a clock by her cycle.

"You're so quiet today, Blaze. What's wrong?"

Gabrielle's soft voice pierced the aura of her thoughts so quickly that she jumped and nearly knocked over her tea. "Nothing, Gabrielle. I was just thinking."

Gabrielle's face twisted into a mask of disbelief, her left eyebrow rising. "Hmmm, I'm sure. If a man like Raven visited me all the time, I'm sure I'd be distracted...."

"Please don't mention his name," Blaze asked through gritted teeth. Her belly was rolling as waves of nausea ripped through her. "He's the last man I want to talk about right now." She put her tea on the table, burying her head in her hands. Oh, what was she going to tell Justin about the baby? Deep in her heart, she knew he'd accept the child, making everyone assume he was the father and protect what little reputation she had.

"Why so? Are you no longer seeing him?"

Blaze leapt to her feet, wringing her hands as a myriad of mixed emotions erupted deep within her soul. "No ... Yes ... I don't know! One minute I know I'm in love with him but the next minute, I'm resenting him for not taking Beau and me away with him."

"Don't forget your other child."

She whirled around as the blood turned to ice in her veins. "What?"

"You heard me, Blaze," Gabrielle said softly as she perched her Delft china cup and saucer on the edge of the mahogany table.

Her heart fell to her feet while her breath came in short gasps. "How do you know?"

"I can spot a pregnant woman at twenty paces," the older woman said calmly. "Don't forget I've had children myself." Gabrielle took a deep breath. "Is Raven the father of this child as well?" She nodded reluctantly. "I see. This situation is vastly becoming more difficult. Have you told Justin yet?"

Blaze shook her head as her hands twisted themselves nervously. "No. He knows nothing about the baby." No matter how much she wanted to keep it that way, it was impossible.

"Are you going to tell him?"

She nodded gravely. "I'll have to tell him because he'll figure it out in a few months eventually."

Gabrielle sat back in her velvet settee, crossing her elegant fingers, her ice blue eyes full of concern. "What do you think he'll say?"

Blaze shrugged. She knew he'd be hurt and ashamed but something inside of her said that he would take care of them all. "I'm not sure because he said he wouldn't begrudge me the comfort of Raven's arms but I don't think pregnancy entered his mind."

"He must have assumed that a child was a possibility."

Her heart beat faster, making her head pound. "I'm sure he did but he also might have assumed that I would know a way to rid myself of it as well." She sank back down to into the comfort of the wing-backed chair. "I refuse to rid myself of it."

Gabrielle shifted slightly, adjusting the folds of her crimson gown. "I think you underestimate Justin. I think if you sit down and explain the situation to him...."

"Explain what to me?" boomed the male voice from the doorway.

Both their heads turned. Justin stood there, dressed in a pale suit with silver feathers embroidered all over the great coat. His wig was larger than usual with long curls going down his shoulders. White powder covered his face, making him seem whiter than usual.

"Um," Blaze stuttered as she rose from the chair and hurried toward him. "About the way the English threaten to take over Martinique."

His powdered brow rose. "I'll bet that's what you were talking about," he said dangerously low, his gaze flicking to Gabrielle. "Are you two finished with your tea today?"

"Not really, Lord Blackmore...."

"I'm tired and wish to go home," he replied with a yawn and looked to Blaze. "Get your things and thank Madame Willoughby for her company today," he ordered roughly.

Blaze's anger mounted at his words, making her fists clench at her sides. "Don't talk to me like that, Justin. Madame Willoughby is my dear friend and I refuse to be treated like a child."

"I said I'm tired."

She crossed her arms over her bosom. "So go home then. You don't need me to sit beside your bed until you fall asleep."

"I should just put you over my knee this minute...." he trailed off, leaving her jaw hanging open.

For one brief moment, she felt as though she spoke to Raven. Heavily masculine tones seemed familiar except for the accent. Also there was a glint in his eyes that was so close to Raven's, she almost thought they were one in the same but that was utterly impossible. "Justin," she whispered hoarsely as the heated flush of her embarrassment flooded her cheeks, "don't talk like that in front of Gabrielle."

He looked over to the older woman. "You should have thought of that before, Blaze. Honestly, I don't know what to do with you sometimes."

"That's all right, Blaze," Gabrielle interjected as she rose from the sofa. "I really must end our visit though I hate to. My seamstress will be coming over shortly to measure me for some new gowns." She patted Blaze on the arm. "That positively drains me so I usually have to take a nap afterwards. You should spend some time with Justin. You two have a lot to talk about."

"Are you sure, Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle's smile lit up the entire room, making her relax a little. "Of course I am, Blaze."

* * * *

Justin had been semi-silent throughout dinner, speaking mostly to Beau and ignoring her. What was wrong now? Had he found out her secret?

"Are you feeling better, Justin?" she questioned as she mashed the last bit of sweet potato around on her nearly empty plate. Her appetite wasn't there but it was because of the baby and not Justin's treatment.

"Actually, I am, Blaze. Thank you for asking," he looked over and chuckled Beau under the chin. "We had a little fun today while you rested."

Her fiery brow rose. "Like what?"

They both looked at each other until Beau couldn't hold it anymore. "Papa gave me a kitten and puppy! You know how much I've wanted one of each!" His pink cheeks inflamed with excitement as he kicked under the table. "Can I go and play with both of them, Mama?" She nodded and Beau bounded out the room with all the vigor a five-year-old could muster.

Once he was gone, Blaze turned to Justin, paling a little. "Justin, you didn't."

He leaned back, lacing his hands behind his wigged head. "I did. The boy needs playmates of the animal kind. Since he couldn't decide which one he wanted," Justin answered with his mouth spread in a full grin, "I told him to get one of each."

Tears pooled in her eyes and she dabbed at them with the corner of the peach colored napkin. Her soul had been marred beyond repair or so she thought. Justin, with his gentle ways, had begun to build her spirit again.

He looked puzzled. "Why the tears? Are you afraid they'll ruin your rugs?"

"It's nothing," she answered, sniffing back her tears. "I'm not bothered about the rugs. I'm just glad that Beau is happy. He was never this way with ... with...." She couldn't even say his name. All it did was form a lump in her throat.

"Daniel," he finished politely then rose from his place and came to stand beside her. "You seem rather blue this evening," he said softly as his hand caressed her cheek. "Perhaps you would like a night ride on the buckboard?"

She smiled half-heartedly. The time had come to tell Justin about the baby because she wouldn't be able to hide it in a few weeks. She was beginning to get too far along. "That would be lovely," Blaze murmured, her fingers encircling his wrist.

"Good. Now finish your meal because I've got something to share with you."

* * * *

Lazy clouds changed to silver drifted across the sky, puffy and half-gilded by the round white moon. The sea seemed calm with white caps rolling in to kiss the sand before it swept back out to sea. Distantly, she could hear the pound of the surf against the rocks. Sweet, salty tangs of the open water tinged the air, making her inhale deeply.

"You really look lovely tonight, Blaze," Justin murmured as they sat up on the high ridge overlooking the beach below.

"Th ... thank you, Justin," she answered as his fingers swept a loose curl over her shoulder. Shivers echoed up and down her spine as he did so, much like they did with Raven but he wasn't Raven, was he? Why was she feeling this way? "Before you share your secret with me, I must share mine." It was now or never. She had to tell him before she lost her nerve.

Justin stared out at the water, watching the inky black water move endlessly along with mild caps of silver. "What is it?"

Her spine stiffened. "Well, remember how you told me that you'd never begrudge me the comfort of Raven's arms?"

"Yes, I do."

Lumps of emotion swelled in her throat but she swallowed them away quickly. "I'm ... I'm...."

"You're pregnant," he answered for her in a solemn tone, his fingers toying with the ends of the reins.

Tears formed in her eyes and she made no effort to stop them. "Yes," she said, wrapping her hands around his forearm. "Ho ... how did you guess?"

"It seemed like a logical conclusion I suppose," he remarked, his gaze still poised out at sea. "Also, you don't eat much and have been tired as well as nauseous."

"Was it that evident?"

His gaze remained on the distant horizon where the black water met with the darker sky. "I heard you several mornings in your room getting sick so I added all the clues together. It was a fair assumption."

She wiped the errant tears away as shame and humiliation washed over her. "I didn't mean for this to happen, Justin," Blaze confessed as she gripped his hand. "It just did."

He leaned back, letting the leather reins go slack in his hands. "I should have seen it, I suppose. A blackguard like Raven would most likely not care to prevent a pregnancy."

"It wasn't all him, Justin," she defended, her heart beating stronger. "I was there too. I could have done something but I didn't."

Deep sighs escaped him. "So you're turning to me to save you again."

She sat up straight, pulling her hands away. "No, I don't expect you to. As a matter of fact, I am quite prepared for an annulment if that is what you prefer." Her hands toyed nervously with her satin purse strings. She was going to be alone again but that didn't matter. Splendour would do very well under her command and raising two children would be no different than raising one.

Justin remained silent before drawing a weary, ragged breath. "No, I'm not going to divorce you, Blaze. As I told you when we married, I could not live up to my husbandly duties but no one knows that but you and I. So, for the sake of your reputation and the new baby's," he said, taking her hand, "I'm prepared to stay and raise the child as our own."

Blaze sat there, stunned into quiet. She knew that there were two possibilities for which way this could go and prepared herself for the worst case. Now that it went into the opposite direction, she wasn't sure of how to take it. "Are you certain, Justin? I mean...."

"I am, Blaze. I won't abandon you when you need me so much now. How far along are you?"

"A little more than a month, I dare say."

Justin drew her into his arms and held her close, his fingers twining in the wild red curls floating around her shoulders. "Then it shall be the grandest baby in all of Martinique. We will redecorate the nursery and get some new clothes made. Spare no expense, my dear."

It was at this critical moment that Blaze suddenly realized something. She was in love with Justin. There could be no other explanation for it. From the moment she awoke in the morning to the time she went to bed, she spent a lot of time with him when he wasn't in the office. His company was something she enjoyed. Despite the fact that she could not relish the intimate side of marriage with him, she wanted to be with him, by his side forever. The idea that he wanted to raise a child that belonged to another man ...

"Justin, I must make one other confession."

"What is that?" he asked, nuzzling her cheek lightly.

"I ... I ... love you," she stammered, her heart beating so fast she could hardly breathe.

He turned to her, staring out from under hooded brows with intense eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said I love you."

His long fingers graced the side of her face, trailing down to her exposed collarbone. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear you say that, Blaze," he whispered as his head lowered to take possession of her lips.

"You don't know how long I've waited to say it," she replied breathlessly, her chest heaving wildly.

Justin was gentle, kissing her softly, his hands plundering the plethora of her hair and unbinding the ribbons. Cascades of fiery hair swept down her shoulders, highlighting the creamy whiteness of her skin. "You taste so sweet, Blaze," he murmured as his lips trailed down her neck, igniting her senses.

"Oh, Justin, do you know how badly I want you right now?" she moaned as his hand wound around her waist and pulled her closer.

Suddenly, his lips stopped. He jerked up and covered his face with his hands. "I can't do this, Blaze. I can't go on like this."

Confusion swept through her desire-laden body. "What do you mean?"

"There ... there ... is something I've got to tell you before we go on any further."

Panic gripped her and she hung onto his silk clad shoulder. "What is it, Justin?"

He let out a vicious growl then turned to her and gripped her hands tightly. "Will you promise no matter what I tell you now, you will not hold it against me?"

"What is it?"

"I'm ... I'm...."

Before he could finish, yells rounded the cape as well as the muffled sounds of horses moving over the sand. Sounds of gunfire mingled in with the melee, confusing her. What was going on?

Justin jumped out of the buckboard with ease for a man of his size and headed for the edge, the sound of bits of rock spraying everywhere. "Stay where you are, Blaze. I'm just going to take a look."

She scrambled out quickly and joined Justin at his side. "I want to see what's going on as well," she interjected anxiously, her fingers digging into Justin's arm.

Together they witnessed the riders coming around the base of the ridge, Justin's arm out protectively to keep her from going too near the edge. From what she could see, ahead of the band of men was a lone rider, dressed head to toe in black, firing behind himself. Raven! Her heart fell to her feet as her hand went to her mouth. What was happening? "Dear God in heaven, that's Raven!" she screamed, pointing to the solitary rider.

"I don't know what's going on but I'm going to find out," he said as he pushed her back to the buckboard.

"What are you going to do?" she howled as she climbed in. It wasn't Raven's safety that she feared for, it was Justin's. He was so large and sickly that they could kill him and she wouldn't be able to be there for him.

"Leave that to me, Blaze. I want you back home and resting. The last thing I want you to do is jeopardize that baby for any reason."

* * * *

Blaze watched out the window as Justin rode off on her chestnut mare toward the direction they had taken home. He seemed tall and agile, not at all like his purported sickly self. Perhaps he was having one of his better days.

She had protested his leaving, saying that Raven didn't need either of them to survive. He still went anyway, telling her that he owed it to her to help Raven. She had tried to tell him that Raven meant nothing anymore but he ignored her

Dreamily, she put on her nightgown and tied the silk ribbon laces, thinking of nothing but Justin. He was so kind and loving, a vital part of her life. Part of her wished he hadn't ridden off to find out what was going on. What if he was hurt or worse, was killed?

She sat down in front of her mirror and brushed her long red locks, staring deeply into the reflective glass. Subtly, her face had changed. Gone was the pinched face of irritation and fear, replaced by pure contentment. Marriage to Daniel never agreed with her. With Justin, it was nothing but bliss. Aye, they had their arguments like any other married couple yet somehow, they were different.

Her hands swept over her belly. Inwardly, she wished Justin had sired the baby so it could bind them together forever. Tears pricked at her eyes at the thought, her heart breaking slightly. It could never be. Not with his malady. Perhaps if they tried something different....

The brush halted. She needed to quit thinking about things that would never be and concentrate on her future. With Raven out of her life and the new baby, she was about to embark on a completely new journey.

Chapter 14

"What in the hell were you thinking, Henri?"

Justin paced the large cavern endlessly, his hands behind his back and the hated wig on a nearby rock. The sounds of his heavy footfalls echoed through the chasm, mingled with the loud splashing of water.

"Saving your ass," Henri groaned as he proceeded to wash the black dye out of his hair in the small pool inside the cave. "Do you realize that Andre Le Croix knows that you're Raven?"

He felt himself pale underneath the powder on his face. "What do you mean?"

"Someone has spied on you and caught your comings and goings as Raven. Now, with my network of spies, the information was given to me," he said in between dipping his head in the water, "so I staged a 'raid' on Le Croix and Montgomery's company. That way, if Blaze was asked your whereabouts, she could say in all honesty that you were with her."

Now it all made sense. Le Croix was starting to get a little close to him so Henri threw him off the track a bit by pretending to be Raven. "Good thinking, my friend."

"It was only luck that you were on the ridge watching me," Henri stated as he shook most of the water out of his blond locks. "I'm sure Le Croix saw you so that way, he knows for sure that you aren't the Raven. Hand me that cloth over there," he demanded as he gestured to the bit of material.

Justin handed it to him. "I don't know what I'd do without you, my friend."

Henri towed his hair and wiped his face clean of the black dye streaks. "You would be dead but that's neither here nor there. Anyway, I've got something 'special' I'm working on for Daniel."

His quizzical black brow lifted. "Such as?"

"You'll see."

* * * *

Andre paced his study endlessly, disregarding the bits of sand tracked around. He had Raven in his grasp and lost him. Damn Montgomery!

He let out a vicious yell, his hands drawing into fists. The information he had on the Raven that he assumed to be accurate was false. Why that blackguard Blackmore could no more be Raven than he could be!

That only left one question. If Blackmore wasn't the Raven, who was?

He paced a little more before throwing himself into his plush leather chair. This had to end somehow. Raven had attacked their last three shipments and scuttled the ship.

His pudgy hand slipped to his chin. France would be sending an emissary in a few weeks time to see how he was progressing with the governorship of Martinique. Hmm, perhaps if he set a trap and captured the Raven somehow, then the King would allow him to return to France. He hated Martinique with a passion. If only he had not been caught in the bed of the King's mistress! What a price he paid for one lousy night of lust! For that disgusting indiscretion, he had to endure the heat and moist air of Martinique that was not good for his constitution. Only the comfort of his country home in France would cure it.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the only reason he hated Martinique. This reason was a red-headed temptress who paraded herself around town as if she didn't have a care in the world. Damned Blaze Montgomery for making him want her with all that was in him. She knew what she was doing from the start. It was plain to see she did her best to arouse all the men in the town....

He leapt out of his chair at the thought of her. Why did that fat slob of a lord get to have her every night? He'd paid heavily for Maggot to remove the Blackmore obstacle from his path but somehow, the bastard couldn't even get that right. Now, he was going to have to deal with Blackmore a little more heavily than before.

Andre snickered. He would have thought Maggot would have been on his guard since he didn't do what he was supposed to do. Oh well. The useless one was dead and wouldn't be bothering anyone anymore.

His thin lips drew into a smile. He wasn't sure which one he'd have more fun doing. Getting rid of Raven or Blackmore because either of them were very a promising proposition.

* * * *

"Ma'am, the Magistrate is in the foyer. Shall I show him in?" Angelique questioned, her hands wringing her apron nervously.

Blaze looked up from her embroidery as Angelique's fear washed over her. "What is the problem, Angelique?"

Her dark brown eyes welled up with tears. "The Magistrate has several soldiers with him and they've come to take Lord Blackmore to prison."

Blaze's heart leapt into her throat as she rose to her feet. What in the world was going on? "Show them in," she ordered in a steady tone. This simply was a mistake and a very large one on Magistrate Le Croix's part.

Angelique bowed her covered head and slipped out to the foyer. Blaze heard muffled voices accompanied by the click of heels on the parquet floor, coming toward her salon. What was she going to do? What was she going to say?

Monsieur Le Croix entered first, accompanied by two fierce looking French soldiers. His fat form waddled toward her, filling her with revulsion. Not to mention the fact he was hideous to look at, he was also repulsive in so many other ways.

"Monsieur Le Croix, how nice to see you," she said nervously and held her hand out for him to kiss.

Andre blatantly ignored it. "This is not a social call, woman. Where is your husband, Lord Blackmore?"

"Up ... upstairs resting. What does this concern?"

Andre looked her up and down maliciously. "Most definitely not you," he growled and turned to the soldiers. "Go up and find him."

She grabbed Andre's arm and spun him around. "How dare you come into my house and accuse my husband of something...?"

He threw her hand away from him. "I have evidence that your husband is masquerading as that blackguard pirate Raven."

Blaze stood there stunned, staring at him blankly. "He is most definitely not, Raven! Why, we saw a band of men chasing Raven the other night up on the cliffs not too far from here!"

Andre's expression darkened. "Do not lie to me, woman or else I will have to...."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Justin interjected from the doorway.

Blaze peered over Andre's shoulder and breathed a sigh of relief. Justin stood alone, dressed in his canary yellow suit with red embroidery. His pale face glared out from beneath the startling white wig. "Justin," she said, drifting over to him, "please tell this man you are not this pirate called the Raven."

His laughter rang out, deeply filled with genuine bemusement. "Me, the Raven? You must be kidding, Le Croix. Look at me. I don't exactly fit the Raven mystique."

Andre's jaw dropped. "Then where have you been?"

Blaze felt Justin's protective arm pull her closer, the warmth of his body seeping through her gown. She felt safe within the circle of his embrace, much safer than she had ever been with Raven.

"With my wife," he said as his hand slipped down to her rising belly and patted the bulge lightly. "The evidence is in here."

Andre's eyes widened, his jaw becoming slacker. "You're going to have another baby?" She nodded. "Will you swear on the Holy Bible that he has been with you the entire time of your marriage?"

"I'll be able to prove it in seven and a half months," she said dryly as Justin's snicker rose over her shoulder.

"Would you sign a statement stating that Lord Blackmore has never been out of your sight for more than a few hours?"

She nodded without hesitation. "Of course."

The two soldiers, having come down from an unsuccessful search upstairs, hovered in the doorway waiting for Andre to leave. "My humble apologies then," he said quickly as he turned toward the door. "I am sorry to have bothered you."

"Let me show you to the door," Justin said as he slipped out from behind her, his anger evident on his face.

She watched as he put what she considered a friendly hand on Andre's shoulder, walking him through the open archway of the salon toward the front door. Their conversation tempted her to follow and find out what had transpired but something held her back. It was something she was not supposed to hear.

Blaze sank down on the couch, putting her feet on the matching ottoman. How could Andre think Justin was Raven? Why they weren't even similar in body structure or voice! She giggled lightly, covering her mouth with her hand. Where in the world did Andre get an idea like that?

* * * *

"Tell your soldiers to go on ahead," Justin instructed. The last thing he wanted was someone else to hear his conversation with Andre.

"You may leave," Andre ordered. The two men hovering near his elbow nodded and left, their epaulettes shining in the morning sun. Once they were out of earshot, Andre turned on him. "What do you want?"

"First, I want to let you know that if you come to my home again and upset my wife in her delicate condition, I will not be responsible for my actions," he warned in a low tone. "Second, where in all that's holy did you get a notion that I was Raven?"

He watched the muscles in Andre's jowls twitch slightly as if his mind spun a fabulous lie. "It was some information that was given to me, however, I can see now that it was false. However, if I had known Lady Blackmore was in the family way, I would never have come here."

Justin stared deep into the grayish green eyes and knew immediately Andre was lying. It was an old trick his father had taught him when he was a young man. "If you ever want to know what is going on in a man's mind, my son, look into the eyes. They never lie." Father had told him. Since then, he had always relied on what someone's eyes told him for the truth. "Who told you?"

Andre went down a few steps and stopped. "Some fool who could not find his behind with both hands and a map." The magistrate bowed. "I'm truly sorry for having disturbed you."

Justin glared at Andre, giving him a hardened stare. "Now, Andre, aren't you going to congratulate me on my new child? Honestly I would have thought your mother taught you better manners."

Andre's reddened jowls deepened as if the barb struck a nerve. "My sainted mother taught me well, Lord Blackmore, if you must know. Now, if you will excuse me, I have other business to attend to."

"I guess there is so little time and so many people to accuse," he said mockingly. "If you have need of me later today, I will be at your office to see your records."

Andre said nothing as he tromped down the rest of the stairs and threw himself into the magistrate's carriage. The soldiers mounted behind, waiting for Le Croix's signal. With a quick wave of his arm, Andre ordered the carriage forward and it started with a lurch, kicking up a good bit of dust under the wheels. Andre's soldiers followed behind, the sun glinting softly off of their rank bars.

He chuckled softly to himself as the carriage drove further out of sight. Good. The angrier Andre got, the more distance it would put between him and Raven, at least for now.

* * * *

"Blaze, wake up," said a familiar voice, strong and masculine.
"Justin?"

"Aye, it is me," he said softly as he sank down on the couch next to her. "Are you all right?"

She opened her eyes and turned to him. His anger had slipped away, replaced by genuine concern. "I am fine, Justin. Just a little a tired is all."

His hand slipped to her hardening belly. "I guess it's the little one taking so much from you," he mused as he stared at her. "What sex do you think it is?"

Justin's excitement affected her deeply, making her wish the baby were his instead of Raven's. After all, he would be the one around to raise the baby. "I'm not sure yet. I didn't know with Beau until I was much farther along."

His powdered brow rose in response. "You knew what the baby was going to be?"

She nodded, her fingers running along his clean cheek. "Aye, I did."

For a moment, their stare locked together, hot and intense. Waves of desire billowed up from deep inside of her, spreading out in her limbs and making them burn. Before she could stop herself, Blaze wound her arm around Justin's neck and pulled him closer to kiss him. He followed her lead until he was just inches from her lips. "No, Blaze," he whispered. "As much as I want to, I can't kiss you."

His forgotten illness crept back into focus and she released him quickly, her heart pounding in unrequited desire mingled with embarrassment. "Forgive me, Justin. I completely forgot...."

Justin's long finger against her lips silenced her. "No need for forgiveness, Blaze. You didn't do it intentionally."

"I know...."

"Then no more protests," he said and took her hand in his. "Come with me to the garden."

"Why?"

"I thought some fresh air would do you and the baby some good. Also, it will give us a little quiet time."

Her lips drew into a wide smile as her spirit lifted. Nobody but Justin could ever make her feel this good. Raven could have once perhaps but it he was nothing compared to Justin. "You lead the way."

* * * *

He watched Andre enter his house in a rage, his heels kicking up dirt as he moved along. What was going on? Normally he wasn't supposed to be seen anywhere but in this case, perhaps it was warranted.

Looking around, Daniel slipped out of his hiding spot near the base of the old tree at the back of the mansion and made his way toward Andre's house, using the tall grass as cover. No one saw him as he moved, the servants working quietly in and about.

At the back, he found the secret passage. Taking his fingers, he pried open the rusty door and slipped through the opening, carefully pulling it shut behind him. Loud squeaks split the air but he was sure they didn't radiate outside.

Daniel walked through the black passage, his hands his only guide. A light was something he didn't even think about when he made his way here, his only thoughts were that of the pirate Raven. If Le Croix found the rogue and hung him, Andre could have Blaze and Splendour while he left Martinique for the rest of the world. Part of him wished he hadn't started his little shipping operation. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have had to fake his own death and take Andre on as a partner in order to keep going. He simply would have left Blaze and that bastard brat of hers but no, Andre had to stick his big fat nose into everything.

Anger shot through him but he pushed it down as he ventured in the deep black passage. It would do him no good to get Andre upset. After all, he didn't want to end up in prison, did he?

His hands connected with something hard at the end, his fingers feeling the rough wood. Ah, this was the back of Andre's office closet. Now all he had to do was to find how it opened ... Sharp clicks filled the air as the wood swung back. He went through it and hit another large wall of wood. Andre's office closet door.

He listened for a minute, his ear against the cool wood. Muffled sounds echoed through, the voices completely different from one another. Shafts of bright light streamed through the keyhole, providing very little light into the dim dark.

Out of curiosity, he bent down and peered through it. He could see Andre sitting on the deep dark leather couch with a young, dark girl, naked from the waist up, poised between his legs. Her jet colored hair streamed down her shoulders, bobbing in time with her movements. Another girl, equally as dark and exotic looking, stood behind Andre and rubbed his shoulders, her large, bouncing breasts with the ebony nipples incredibly enticing. He hardened instantly. Perhaps this was one performance worth watching.

* * * *

Andre leaned back, his body spent for the moment. The girls were gone, dismissed after he spent his seed in both of them. Being a magistrate was not easy....

Faint clicks from across the room drew his attention, making him put his clothes back on properly and reach for his pistol. The sounds were coming from his closet, of that much he was sure....

He leapt from the couch and walked toward the closet, his pistol cocked and ready to fire. No one except Montgomery knew about the passage and he told Montgomery NEVER to use it for any reason.

Andre laid a shaky hand on the knob and turned. It possibly could be a rat or perhaps one of the pesky cats that wove in and out of his house on a constant basis. If it was one, he was going to shoot it on the spot and put the bothersome creature out of his misery.

He whipped open the door only to find Montgomery on his knees with his back facing out, both of his hands in front of him, his mouth mumbling some strange words.

Montgomery jerked and whirled his head around. "Le Croix! You scared me half to death," he said breathlessly, his hands still moving.

"What are you doing here and why are you pleasuring yourself in my office closet?" he growled low, his first instinct to shout but he didn't for fear of the servants overhearing.

"I should ask you the same thing, Le Croix," he said refusing to stop his strokes.

"Good God finish what you are doing and get out of my office!" He slammed the door hard amid Daniel's yelps of ecstasy. He cringed and wanted to walk away but couldn't. After all the little whelp was in his domain and should be punished for it.

He paced the Turkish carpeted floor, his hands behind his back as he waited for Montgomery to emerge. Grunts and groans erupted from the closet until there was a deep sigh of satisfaction. His lips curled in disgust. He shouldn't be surprised in the slightest because it was Montgomery he was dealing with after all.

The sound of the lock clicking split the room as Montgomery emerged, a smile like that of a cat after the capture of a mouse planted on his face. "Ah, that is much better," he mused as he fixed his clothing. "There is nothing better than sweet release."

Andre stepped away from him and slid behind his desk, the sheer hatred and disgust filling him like the tide at midnight. "What are you doing here, Montgomery?" he growled as he settled his hose covered legs on the edge of his desk, his eyes narrowing. He wanted Montgomery's explanation and he wanted it now.

"Is that any way to talk to me, especially since I delivered the Raven to your hands?" Montgomery snickered as he took the chair opposite the desk, his gruesome smile still firmly planted in place.

Andre surveyed the scalawag before him, calculating the man's intentions. "You delivered nothing, blackguard. Blackmore is not the Raven according to that precious information that was given you," he snapped, his fury mounting even higher, "Your former wife attests that she was with him the entire time we were chasing Raven down the beach."

Montgomery's blue eyes took on a wild look as his hand ran through his blond hair. "What do you mean?"

"Blackmore is not Raven, it's as simple as that."

Montgomery flew out of his seat and stalked around the room, his hands flailing wildly. "No, this can't be! I saw him going to the place where he keeps his horse and I followed him as he visited my wife."

His curiosity rose, pushing his ire down. "What pray tell was he doing with your wife?"

Montgomery's eyes lit up as he assumed a casual pose. "Something I did only once and had no desire to ever do again."

He remained silent for a moment, his fingers tenting over his ponderous belly. Nay, Blackmore couldn't be Raven, could he? After all, Blaze swore he was with her ...

unless there was someone else masquerading as Raven to throw him off the trail. Ah, it was entirely plausible. "Well, it seems she is living up to the whore label you gave her," he said, the corners of his lips turning upwards. He was not about to let Daniel know his thoughts because the idiot would make a mess of things. "Did you not call her a whore?"

Montgomery nodded. "Aye, that I did," he replied. "What are you going to do about Raven?"

He stood up, gesturing for Montgomery do to the same. "Nothing because Blackmore is not the Raven, of that I can assure you."

The sot Montgomery watched for a moment, as if it took a little for the information sink in. Suddenly, his partner's fury rose, staining his cheeks crimson. "Aye, Blackmore is Raven, you bastard! Why can we not bring him to justice now and be rid of him?"

"I need more evidence," he quipped as he ushered Montgomery toward the closet door, allowing him to leave the same way he came. "I simply cannot convict a man on another's word...."

Montgomery spun around, his eyes blazing with a furious inner fire. "You have before, bastard. What is stopping you now?"

"You," he snapped as he thrust Montgomery toward the door. "Now get out." He had no time for Montgomery to throw that in his face.

Without warning, Montgomery's demeanor changed to one of amused anger, making him extremely wary. "Oh, I will get out, my friend," Montgomery said in an eerie, menacing voice. "Rest assured, you will find out I'm right. In the mean time," he said and laid his disgustingly soiled hand on Andre's shoulder, rubbing it hard. "I've left you something to remember me by."

With that, Montgomery whisked out the door and down the secret passage, his whistle rising through the still air.

He grimaced at the thought of Montgomery's grimy hand on his silk clad shoulder. The very idea of Montgomery coming to him and threatening him! Ha! He was not a man to be threatened by anyone, especially by that weasel Montgomery.

Andre chuckled. If Montgomery kept it up, he might wind up on a distant shore and be dead for a SECOND time.

Chapter 15

"Blaze."

The sound of her name on the wind brought her back from the depths of dark, dreamless sleep. "Oh, Justin," she murmured, her body moving instinctively.

"No, my dear, it's not Justin," echoed the velvety French toned voice.

She opened her eyes, turning toward the lurid voice. Raven sat on her windowsill, much like before except his shirt parted slightly this time, the moonlight highlighting chiseled planes. His jet colored hair streamed down his shoulders in damp waves as he rested against the jamb. She could see the edges of his mask around his glittering eyes and felt herself melting slightly. "Ra ... Raven what are you doing here?" she questioned as she pushed up from the pillows.

"I've come to see you, ma cherie," he whispered in a seductively low tone. "Have you been waiting to see me?"

"No," she retorted as he slipped from the window and settled on the bed next to her.

Raven grazed the side of her face with his gloved hand, sending spirals of sizzling desire through her. "Aye, you have, ma cherie, or else you would not be wearing something so enticing," he murmured as his fingers traveled down the open edges of her silken dressing gown.

She allowed him to slip his hand beneath the silk and cup her left breast, his thumb toying with her nipple and turning it to marble hardness. Her breath quickened in time with her heart, the blood singing in her temples. No, she must resist him. "Stop, Raven."

Confusion crawled across his features, the corner of his luscious lips pulling up devilishly. "What is this?"

"I'm resisting you," she replied as she moved further away from him. "I told you before I'm devoted to Justin and I'm refusing to make love to you anymore."

"Oh, I see," he said in a dangerously low tone. "That sot has won you over. Well, how do you feel? It's been more than two weeks since my last visit."

"I feel fine, thank you," she quipped bitterly as she pulled the covers up further. "So you do not need to visit me anymore."

Raven stood up and walked slowly around the bed in a predatory gait all the while keeping his gaze on her, his gloved fingers touching the sheer curtains. "It seems you have made some use of me," he stated menacingly, mingling with the hard clicks of his boot heels on the floor. "I gave you a son and it seems now that I've given you another. Tell me, does that mean nothing to you?"

Blaze remained silent, her senses spinning. How did Raven know? "I am not pregnant again," she lied, her fingers clutching the end of the coverlet tightly. No one knew except her and Justin.

"You are, my dear. Remember I have many spies employed around Martinique. Come, did you think to pass the child off as Blackmore's without my finding out about it?"

She felt like a trapped animal, waiting for a predator to strike. "No, Raven. Justin has accepted the child as his and will raise the baby as his own."

"How thoughtful of him," he mocked savagely amid the click of his boot heels on the floor. "Just how long can you go in this charade, my dear?"

"What do you mean?"

Raven halted at the other side of the bed and manacled her wrist, pulling her hard toward him and forcing her to stare into his eyes. The covers fell away, allowing the cool ocean breeze to chill her skin. "You intend to pass the child as that bastard Blackmore's and I have no say in this? I think not," he growled as he cupped her face and plowed her lips, urgent and painfully.

Blaze tore away from his lips, her eyes on fire. "Don't touch me, Raven," she snapped as she pushed him away. "I don't want you anymore."

Confusion made for a turbulent mix behind his dark eyes. "Why not?"

"Do you plan on marrying me and giving both children the benefit of your name?" Raven sat silently, his mouth open as if he were about to say something but quickly closed it. "I see I have my answer," she snapped viciously and sprang from the bed, out of the reach of his tempting touch. "If you were even slightly inclined to provide for me, I might reconsider what you were hinting. Since you have not shown me anything that would prove to me that you want me for more than a mistress, I wish to have no part of you anymore."

"You do not mean that, ma cherie," he replied in a shaky sounding voice. "I need you."

Blaze threw her head back and gave him a contemptuous glare, her arms crossing over her bosom. That was the last thing she wanted him to see. "Oh you do? Is your wife not providing for you as a wife should?"

"You fire my blood," he murmured huskily as his gloved hands slipped up her arms, the soft swish of leather against satin rising through the air. "No woman has ever been able to do that to me." Sharp tingles of desire stormed through her at his touch, her body heated beyond measure. Why could he not quit?

"What about your wife? She must have fired your blood enough to marry her," she spat out as she tried to step away from him.

Sensual laughter escaped his throat as he pulled her closer. The sexual heat and fragrance from his body floated around her like a blanket, making her feel heady and warm, almost as if she wanted to dive into his arms again. "I did what any man would do for her in her desperate situation."

"What situation was that?" she paused, her heart pounding. She really didn't want to know the answer but curiosity compelled her to ask.

"She was widowed and was left with a lot of debt so I offered to make her an arrangement. She accepted and we have been wed ever since."

Blaze reluctantly pulled herself from his embrace and crossed the floor, the parquet wood floor smooth and cool under her feet. She stood with her back to him in order to keep her senses from spinning. "You said before you loved her. Do you still?" The familiar story of Raven's wife hit her hard, making her stop and think. It was almost as if she and the rogue's wife were identical twins caught in the same web of deception.

She heard Raven's breath draw in behind her. "Yes I do."

"Then go back to her," she replied coldly. This play of her senses and mind was not something she asked for when she started seeing Raven again.

Soft clacks of his boot heels indicated he was closing the distance. "I need you in my life, ma cherie, as well as our children." His warm hand on her shoulder was comforting but oddly, it wasn't as comforting as Justin's.

"It is sorely obvious that you don't need us enough to leave your wife, Raven. Tell me, what is holding you back?" Blaze felt his retreat and knew there was something much deeper than love holding him hostage to his wife.

"Her condition at the moment is delicate and I'm afraid the news of an imminent divorce would upset her."

Pain and hurt formed a dagger, stabbing her in the heart with a vicious thrust. There could only be one answer. "She is with child as well is she not?"

"Aye."

Sobs hitched in her chest but she refused to allow them free. Her suffering was something Raven would never see. "Is the child yours?"

Silence abounded around them, broken only by the soft swish of the curtains blowing with the midnight breeze. Again, there was only one answer. "Aye."

She wanted to break down, cry, scream and yell at the injustice inflicted on her. "Leave me now, Raven, and never come back," she ordered through gritted teeth. Her fists clenched at her sides as the anger quickly started spinning out of control.

"You do not mean that, ma cherie...."

Blaze spun around, the heat of her fury stained cheeks stopping his words. "I do, Raven. I never want to see you again!"

Raven closed the distance between them, gripping her upper arms in both hands and shaking her slightly. "You do not want this, ma cherie. I can read it in your eyes. Come, tell me, have you not enjoyed the gifts I have given you?"

"I have to the fullest extent," she said, her voice cracking from the strain. "But I cannot trust you or even love you anymore. The only thing I can do is keep your neck from stretching until you leave Martinique."

Surprise leapt across his features. "You must care for me a little, ma cherie, or else you would not help me." His gloved hand reached out and cupped the shelf of her jaw, his thumb stroking the hard line softly. Tremors of excitement coupled with fury rumbled up

and down her spine, spreading throughout her limbs. Why could she not stop herself from falling under his spell?

Blaze wrested her chin from his grip. "I am only helping you because of the children, nothing more. Justin is the only man I love and the only one I can depend on when I need him, which is more than I can say for you."

Raven stood silent for a moment, his hands going to his hips as if her words angered him like never before. "I know you don't mean that, Blaze, because you are confused now. I'll give you a little time and space...."

"I don't need time and space!" she shot back angrily as she stepped beyond his reach. "What I want is to be left alone by you. I won't be your whore anymore." Shame mingled with the anger, making her heart pound even harder than before. Why must she choose men who used her at will and threw her away once they were finished?

Waves of anger mixed with shock rippled across his face. "You were never my whore."

"I was your whore and plaything but I refuse to be that anymore despite the fact we have one child and another one coming."

"But...." he stammered.

"Get out before I wake up Justin and he'll throw you out!" she ordered through clenched teeth. The longer Raven stayed, the more dangerous the situation would become.

Soft snickers escaped his lips. "May I have something before I leave?"

"No," she retorted through stiff lips.

He said nothing as he pulled her hard against his chest, his lips plowing hers. Suddenly, all of the senses she batted down came to life again, bright and fiery, making her body responsive to his touch in every way.

Raven plunged his gloved hand through her hair as he held her head, the pressure gentle but wanton.

Tenderly he explored her mouth with expert caresses, allowing her to respond though she tried in vain not to. Dimly she was aware of the soft leather of his glove as his hand slipped beneath her gown, the weathered material running over her nipple in gentle motions, bringing it to life. Instinctively, she arched against his palm, as if begging for more.

Thankfully, her better sense awakened and she put a hand on his chest, pushing him away. "No, Raven, you're not going to do this to me again. Get out."

Raven swept into a low, mocking bow. "As you wish my dear." With that, he stalked over to the window and leapt out of it, disappearing from her vision, hopefully forever.

Tears of shame and confusion slipped down her cheeks as she sank down on the bed, drawing her dressing gown around her against the chilly night air. Why did she fall for it all the time? Once she knew Raven was married, why didn't she just resist him? He

had played her for a fool and had given her two children along the way. Why didn't she ever learn not to trust a man?

Justin, however, was the exception to the rule. He was kind and could be trusted. After all, he did save her from ... Her mind spun quickly to Raven's story. His wife was in the same situation as she had been in so the rogue pirate had chivalrously saved her from....

Her thoughts stopped as it whirled on the possibilities. It sounded almost too close to her story so could it be possible that Justin and Raven were the same man?

She had thought about it before but dismissed the notion. After all Justin was a large man and couldn't even get a leg into Raven's clothes

Unless he was wearing a costume that is.

Blaze shook her head as the thoughts whirled chaotically in her head, tempting and teasing her to believe them. No, it wasn't possible. Justin couldn't deceive her, could he?

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Blaze got up from the bed and went to Justin's door. She knocked on it lightly. "Justin?"

Silence greeted her. "Justin?" she called a little louder this time in case he took a sleeping powder to help him. "Please answer me, Justin. I need you," she said as more tears slipped down her cheeks. Still no sound. She leaned her head against the door. "Justin," she cried, the tears coming faster. She needed him now, more than ever. Why wouldn't he answer her?

"Blaze? Is that you?"

Blaze jerked her head up at the sound of his voice. "Justin? Can I come in?"

"Of course," he answered sleepily. She could tell by the sounds he was getting up and getting the key for the door. "What's wrong?"

"I ... need to be with you right now," she wailed as the emotions inside roiled to a high boil. Everything seemed to be turning upside down and falling apart.

"Give me just a minute," he said as the sound of the key slipping into the lock split the air. Several clicks sounded and the door opened, exposing Justin in his long, red and white striped nightshirt. A small white wig sat askew on his head, giving silent testimony that he slept in it. Immediately, his sleepy face softened and held out his arms. She ran to him without hesitation. "What's the matter, Blaze?"

"I can't stay in that room alone anymore, Justin," she wailed against his chest, the feel of his arms around her made the demons haunting her seem less terrifying. "Can I sleep in here with you from now on?"

"Well, I don't know, Blaze, but for tonight, you can. Why won't you sleep in your own room?" he murmured softly, his lips against her hair, his fingers smoothing her wild strands lovingly.

"I ... just can't," she replied despite the fact she wanted to tell him the truth. If Raven came back tonight, she would have no defenses against him at all.

"Raven's been coming to see you, hasn't he?" Justin questioned softly.

She looked up sharply, blinking hard. "Ho ... how did you know?"

Justin's hands cupped her face gently. "I heard you both in the next room, my dear. I've known he's been coming to see you on a regular basis for quite a while now."

Blaze buried her face in his thick chest, her arms going around him to hold him tightly. "I'm so sorry, Justin!" she wailed as the tears fell like rain from her eyes. "I never wanted to hurt you."

Justin's arms wound around her, holding her close. "I know you didn't my dear. You and Raven have a past as well as children together. I would be daft to think you could ever care for me."

* * * *

He felt her pull away and look to him, her emerald eyes glistening. "I don't want Raven, Justin. I want you and only you." She felt soft under his touch and would melt under his tender caresses, just as she had many times before. Why must this be so hard?

His heart beat faster, making him take a sharp breath in an effort to slow it down. "What are you saying, Blaze?"

"I love you, Justin." From the cadence of her words, Blaze spoke the truth. He had what he had always longed for, yet something made him keep a short distance. What would she do once she found out about his deception?

He kissed her lips softly. Caught between the two guises, he had begun to hate Raven and everything the rogue stood for. All he wanted out of all of this was Blaze's love and desire and now he had it. Next came the harder question. Would she still love and care for him once she knew who he was?

"Do you love me?" Her brilliant eyes swam with emotion, creating a pool in which he longed to lose himself.

"Yes," he barely whispered above the soft breeze wafting through the window. "I have for a long time, Blaze and now I can finally confess that."

"Good because I want to be with you always, Justin. Nothing will ever change that for me," she murmured breathlessly as she cupped his chin, pulling him close.

Fear and panic ripped through his heart, shattering all the growing happiness. Blaze would never forgive him once she knew the truth. "Don't say things you don't mean, Blaze," he conjectured as he turned away. He couldn't stand her loving stare, knowing how deceptive he'd been all along.

"I do mean it, Justin," she insisted, her hands gripping his shoulders in a tight embrace. "You mean more to me than any man alive, including Raven. Nothing will ever change that for me."

Blaze's lips touched his gently and he responded, the blood rushing to his groin. She was like a drink that he could never taste enough. Passion flowed from her lips like a raging river, covering him in its gentle warmth. He didn't care if he drowned it in or not. All that mattered was right here in front of him, glowing with the life inside of her, a seed

he had planted for a second time. At least this time, he would see it to fruition. "You are everything to me, Blaze," he murmured softly against her mouth, his tongue lightly caressing the outer edges. "As well as Beau and the new baby."

"Be with me tonight, Justin. Nothing will exist but us." From the way the light played on the shelf of her jaw to the way it highlighted her cleavage, nothing made him want to make love to her more. Unfortunately, she would find out his secret all too quickly.

"You know I can't, Blaze. Please don't ask me to."

Her expression softened. "I didn't mean like that, Justin. I just want you to stay in the same bed and just hold me." Blaze's gentle arms wound around him, her fingers curling around the tendrils of his wig. "I don't want to be close to anyone but you."

Without thinking, he bent down and scooped her up protectively in his arms. Blaze's arms went around his neck, giving him a tempting view of her breasts as he strode to the bed. Her nipples, erect and ready, pushed against the thin silk of her ivory dressing gown, making him hunger for her. His manhood strained beneath padding under the nightshirt, making it painful to walk. How in the hell was he going to survive the night with her luscious body next to his?

Justin laid her down gently, amid the aroma of the sweet juices pooling in her core, tempting him to taste its honeyed essence. His heart pounded, making his temples hurt. It was getting very dangerous to be around her.

Blaze's fingers traced the outline of his jaw before cradling the shelf in the cup of her hand. "Justin," she murmured breathlessly. "I love you."

"I love you too, Blaze," he replied, his lips finding hers. Tenderly he tasted her and felt her respond to him as never before, her body arching into his. Unable to stop himself, he burned a trail of kisses down her silky neck as tiny gasps of ecstasy escaped her mouth, his hands roaming everywhere. Plunging beneath the gossamer dressing down, her cupped her breasts and kneaded them softly, her nubs turning hard like ripe cherries and just as succulent.

Blaze's soft moans urged him on as he swept down to her breasts and tore open her gown, the sound of parting fabric adding to the sexual heat burning between them. He nipped lightly at the hardened buttons before cupping the generous mounds together, paying equal attention to both. Her scent was cloying and heady, demanding that he partake of her fruit.

"Oh, Justin," she moaned softly as her hands touched either side of his face. "You don't know how I've dreamed of this moment."

He looked up. The emerald glow from her eyes wasn't just from his baby that she carried, it came from her heart. All the years he had wasted trying to hate her or wipe her from his mind suddenly vanished as well as the anger. It was as if nothing existed tonight. "More than likely as much as I have," replied in a hushed whisper as his fingers brushed against her quivering tips.

Justin wanted to get his fill of her even if he couldn't make love to her. He wanted to taste her and bring the slice of heaven to her. She was like a potion vital to his blood, a component necessary for living. Why had no other woman made him feel this way?

Blaze's rising belly arched to his kiss as he scorched a hot path down her belly toward her navel, his tongue probing the delicate circle. Her cries became louder as he moved further down, the softly scented hair caressing his chin

He parted her moist nether lips, allowing his fingers to sweep up and down her wet crevice, releasing more of the fragrant aroma. Without hesitating, he teased Blaze's core with his experienced thumb, her cries becoming more urgent. "Oh, yes, Justin," she gasped, her hips moving. "I want you to touch me."

"I want to do more than touch you," he said hungrily. "I want to taste you all night long."

His lips moved over the tender flesh, savoring every inch until he found the key to her paradise. Though it was small, it increased with his calculated movements, her hips rising and falling as his fingers dove in and out of her. Her scent was beginning to become too much

Her moans deepened, making his manhood strain to sheer pain but he didn't care. Blaze was here in front of him, open to him fully as Justin for the first time. He was going to savor every delicious moment of it.

Blaze turned over, throwing her arm over Justin amid his soft snores. Her eyes fluttered open a bit, making her notice morning had come. How much better she felt, being here, next to Justin. He protected her like no other man had, including Raven.

In between her legs, her privates throbbed with the many times Justin had brought her to ecstasy. It was almost the same as it was with Raven yet it was different somehow. His touch excited her a tad more, taking her to an entirely new level of ecstasy.

She snuggled into him closer, nuzzling his neck. He smelled so damned good ... Something tickled her nose, making her want to sneeze. Since Justin always wore his wig, even to bed, she assumed it was some loose hair. Reaching up, she went to move it out of the way until she noticed it was different.

Blaze sat up a little bit and examined the hair a little more closely, holding it up to the light. What she saw made her blood turn cold. The hair was the color of the dark midnight with slight waves. Justin was not as bald as he said he was.

She drew a deep breath and moved the wig aside slightly so as not to wake Justin. More black locks fell out from under the wig, falling down his shoulder. Much to her horror, there was a scar on Justin's neck. It was in exactly the same place as the one on Raven, the wound she caressed many times as they made love.

Unable to breathe, she stared at the old injury, her eyes filling with tears. The man lying next to her was the same one who gave her Beau and the child she now carried. Justin was Raven.

Her fists balled in clenches of rage and she held them over his sleeping form. Why had he done this to her?

Blaze's heart slammed into her ribs, freezing her blood. This damned man had deceived her and for what reason? Revenge?

He had lied, completely and without remorse. Did he think she was some empty-head little tart ready to fall into his arms after all the lies spewing from his mouth? Blaze's belly curled into a tight knot as the shame and fear slipped in. This lying rogue was the father of her two children. Tears slid from her eyes as she lowered her hands, the erratic pounding of her heart slowing. It was completely clear that there was nothing left between them but fabricated lies.

Blaze slid quickly and quietly from the bed, drawing a sheet around her. Without hesitation, she quickly tiptoed from Justin's room to hers and closed the door before she let out all her emotions. How could he do this to her? Tear her in two directions and make her choose?

Blaze ran to her bed and threw herself down on it, burying her sobs into the soft, goose down pillows so as not to wake the deceitful rake sleeping in the next room. Justin had played her for a fool, making her fall in love with him.

Brushing away the tears, she looked up and stared out the window. If Justin was going to play with her emotions, she might just very well have to play with his and see how he liked to be taken for a fool.

* * * *

Through the following days, Blaze seemed distant and quiet, often pulling away from him when he drew her close. She feigned morning sickness but he knew better. Blaze hardly spoke or ate. At night, she insisted in sleeping in her own room instead of his. What happened to change her feelings?

"Are you in there, Justin?" Henri questioned as they rode across the open plain of Splendour, the tall reeds weaving in the wind.

"Aye, Henri. I was just thinking of Blaze," he answered quietly as they pulled to a halt near the sandy beach edge. The waves crashed in and out, the gorgeous blue once a comforting sight. Now all it did was remind him of the ruse he had played on Blaze.

"I'm not surprised, my friend. She's beginning to get that rosy glow most pregnant women get that makes them so damn attractive."

He shot Henri a warning look. "I'd be careful about making any statements you'll regret my friend."

Henri's mood as well as his angelic face lightened. "I'm sorry, Justin. It's just that she's so beautiful...."

"I know, Henri," he said bitterly, his mind spinning on Blaze. What happened to make her act so cold toward him lately?

"What is wrong with her? Besides being pregnant of course."

"I don't know, Henri," he said, his fingers flexing against the leather reins of his bridle. "She confessed her love to me then turned as cold as ice in winter. I don't understand."

Soft chuckles escaped Henri's lips, irritating him to no end. "More than likely, it is the babe causing her to be this way, 'tis all. Come, cheer up, my friend. Another ship awaits us."

"When?" It was getting far too dangerous to be Raven anymore, especially with Blaze in the condition that she was in. The last thing he wanted was to endanger her or Beau.

"Tonight," Henri responded casually as he brushed stray blond curls from his shoulders. "It looks as though it will be a big one this time. It would mean a lot of money."

"How interesting. Is there any news of our mutual friend Montgomery?"

Henri shook his tri corn-topped head. "No, there isn't. It seems like the little weasel faded into the woods."

"He'll turn up sooner or later. My only hope is that he'll turn up dead," Justin snarled as he thrust a fist in the air. With all that was inside of him, Justin wished he could be the one to choke the life out of Daniel Montgomery, slowly but surely.

* * * *

Daniel crouched low in the woods, far enough from the bastard Blackmore and his friend. Every word they uttered came to him clearly, as if they were standing right next to him. He smiled. With his impeccable stealth, they wouldn't have any idea they were being stalked.

They sat on magnificent horses, dressed in their finest. Blackmore wore a gaudy red satin suit with obnoxious stitching on it, the curls of his white wig trailing down his shoulders. Blackmore's slender counterpart dressed in ivory wood, looking every bit the aristocratic French nobleman. Too bad France was going to lose their Dauphin before it was over.

His smile widened. The trap he and Le Croix had laid down was one that Blackmore could not escape from, a perfect example of brilliance. As for Blaze, he'd take care of the little wench as well as that brat of hers. Once they were all gone, Splendour would be his again. Oh, the parties he would throw....

Daniel leaned back a little from the dense copse of foliage blocking his path when he saw them move. Blackmore's gaze surveyed the area, as if he expected someone to be following him. Daniel held his breath lest one blade of grass or one leaf blow. Detection was the last thing he wanted.

Blackmore continued to look around, his stare going all around. Daniel slowed his heartbeat down, the sound so loud in his ears he thought Blackmore would surely hear it.

The bastard stopped his looking, seemingly satisfied that no one was around. He turned to his friend and they continued to speak for several long moments before they parted the dense green meadow and headed for Splendour.

Daniel let out his breath, the dizziness in his head beginning to fade. For a moment, he thought he would surely pass out from the lack of oxygen but Blackmore had the forethought to leave the area not a moment too soon.

He leaned back on his haunches, digesting all the information. Blackmore had fallen for everything, making his capture all that much easier. His lips pulled into a satisfied smile. Now it was time to enact the second part of the plan.

Chapter 16

Blaze felt numb, her heart shattered beyond repair. Justin had deceived her for so long, it was pathetic. How could she not know they were one and the same?

Blindly, she worked on the tapestry on the salon, her mind blank. Since the morning she had discovered Justin's secret, she couldn't bear to be near him or even have him touch her in the slightest fashion. He sickened her, making her own feelings of shame overwhelming.

"Madame?" echoed Angelique's voice through the doorway. "Are you up to having a visitor?"

"Of course," she said quickly, wiping away the tears forming at her eyes. "Where is my Beau?"

"Here, Momma!" he called as he ran into the room and leapt into her arms. He felt so warm and smelled sweet. His glossy black hair, pulled back into a queue, reminded her of Justin's hair. Her tears rose again.

Beau pulled away and stared at her, his dark eyes a mix of confusion. "What is the matter, Momma?"

"Nothing, my pet," she replied as she smoothed the tendrils by his face. "I will tell you that Momma has a secret."

His eyes widened. "What secret?"

"Well, it seems that you're going to have...."

"A brother or sister," Justin finished from his place in the doorway.

Beau's hands clapped together excitedly as his gaze traveled between them. "You mean you're going to have a baby?"

Justin's footsteps closed the distance, a raw echo behind her. She didn't cringe when he put his hand on her shoulder lovingly. "Yes, Beau, your mother is going to have a baby."

"I'm going to be a big brother!" he announced as he leapt off her lap and ran past Angelique, keeping her in tow.

Justin walked around her chair and settled himself in the couch across from her, crossing his ankles casually. "I need to speak with you, Lady Blackmore."

"Ye ... yes, Justin?"

"It seems we are at an impasse here. I would like to know what I have done to you to make you act so cold toward me."

"Nothing, Justin," she said quickly, stressing his name hard as her anger boiled to the surface.

He got up from his seat and moved over to the vacant settee next to her, grasping her hand. "I must have done something to you. Didn't you enjoy the other night?"

Her fury got the best of her. "Of course I did, Justin, but it wasn't as good as it was with Raven."

Underneath the powder and paint, she could tell Justin was seething just by the expression on his face. "What do you mean?" She stared at him hard, wondering if he was really the nobleman he said he was. If he was only a pirate, he had more than likely used her to get a foothold into the world of wealth and privilege. His ill-gotten gains afforded him all he had desired so more than likely, he would tire of her soon. She was nothing more than a means to an end.

"What I mean is that I've made my choice and I've chosen Raven. It's been good with you, Justin but...."

Justin leapt to his feet, his hands balled at his sides. "Are you telling me that all you've said about loving me was a lie?"

She lifted her chin high. "Not exactly, Justin. You see, you were there as sort of a stop gap for Raven when he wasn't there. I do love you but not in the way that you want me to."

Justin paced furiously, his fingers clenching and unclenching. "I cannot believe I'm hearing this, Blaze. You confess to love me yet you're comparing me to that rogue that's nearly gotten you killed several times ... I don't know what's going on in your head!"

She set her embroidery hoop aside and stood up as well, facing him toe to toe. "You never will, Justin. As a matter of fact, I'm meeting Raven tonight to discuss plans for leaving."

Justin clamped her upper arms and held her tight. "You can't mean that, Blaze. I love you and you'll never leave me."

Blaze wrested herself from his grip and stood back from him, arms crossed over bosom in a defiant manner. "Oh, yes, I'm going to leave you, Justin, and Beau is coming with me. You can have Splendour and all its glory as well as all the slaves and other holdings."

"I don't want them, I want you!"

"You can't have me, Justin. It's just that simple."

"I won't let you leave, not while you are carrying my child."

Blaze poked him in his fake chest. "The baby isn't yours, Justin. It's Raven's baby just as much as Beau is so that is where we both belong. I'm leaving with or without your consent."

With that, she stormed off, her heels clacking against the parquet floor. She had wanted so badly to tell Justin she knew his secret but she couldn't. All morning long, she tried to think of a way to call his bluff. Then, it finally came to her. Tell him that she was going to meet Raven about leaving. Justin would show up as Raven and it would be up to her to unmask him.

* * * *

Soft winds pervaded the valley where Raven normally showed up. In the distance, she heard the soft swish of the sea and imagined the moon dappled waters, turned almost black by the night. It reminded her of Raven. Justin, she told herself quickly. She shouldn't think of him as Raven anymore.

Moments ticked by, making her heart pound even harder. What if Justin had decided not to come? If he didn't, that would make her look like a complete and utter fool.

"Madame," uttered a soft feminine voice.

She turned around to see Angelique standing behind her, holding the reins of one of the mares from the stable. Her heart pounded hard inside of her chest. Was something wrong with Beau? "Angelique? What are you doing here? Is Beau all right?"

Her generous mouth stretched into a smile. "The little master is asleep and I've set Lisette to watch him. I'm here because I must tell you something."

"What is it?"

Angelique walked toward her. "As you know, his lordship's physician and I have become very close since his stay here." The girl stopped. "And in that relationship, I have learned a few secrets that would be useful to you."

"What secrets?"

"I know why you're here, Madame. You're waiting for his lordship."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied. "I'm merely getting a breath of fresh air."

"Madame, please, I am here to help you, not to hurt you."

Her brows knitted together. She liked Angelique well enough but something inside of her didn't really trust the girl's motives. "What do you mean?"

"The truth about his lordship."

She turned away, refusing to look at Angelique. The fear that her expressions would give away her secrets rising high within her. "What are you speaking about?"

"Come, now, Madame. His physician mentioned something in his sleep about the Earl's double identity as well as I overheard them talking amongst themselves. Of course, if you prefer to keep in the dark about it...."

Blaze whirled about, her hands clutching Angelique's. "Tell no one of this or else we will all hang!"

"I have no intention of telling anyone, Madame. What I want to do is protect everyone from that bastard first husband you have."

Confusion whirled around in her mind like a storm at sea. "What do you mean, Angelique? Daniel's been dead for almost six months!"

Angelique shook her head. "No, Madame. He was never dead. He only wanted you to think that so he could form his own shipping company with Monsieur Le Croix and steal rum for profit. His sole intention was to make you destitute so that Le Croix could get his hands on you."

Blaze paled, her hands clutching her belly. Daniel was still alive, somehow by the grace of Heaven or Hell. Her mind reeled back to his funeral. The day had been overcast and chilly as they stood outside of the tomb. She had wondered what condition Daniel's body was in because she had never seen it. All she knew was that one of his enemies had shot him through the head and his body immediately went to the undertaker's office. It was a good two days before the funeral could commence because of the 'time needed to prepare the body' by the undertaker. She found it strange then but it made sense now. Daniel's body would have reeked had it been around for two days, even in the ice house. More than likely, it took them that long to find enough rocks to total Daniel's body weight. "How did you come by this information, Angelique?"

"I have seen it in the water," she replied. Like most people of the island, Angelique's family practiced an odd form of religion that was a combination of many other religions. Part of it was the practice of seeing into the future. "What I have seen, has come true. As for his lordship, he has done what he has needed to in order to protect you as well as the children."

"No, I will not listen," she cried, placing her hands over her ears. No, this was not something she wanted to hear from anyone, especially from Beau's nanny.

Angelique ripped her hands from her ears. "You must listen to me if you want to save the lives of everyone involved. Tonight, there is a ship that is supposed to be full of rum. It isn't. It's full of the king's soldiers ready to pounce. His lordship is walking into a trap."

Her heart pounded out of control, her temples throbbing. "How do you know this?"

"The physician mentioned the ship in his sleep last night and I questioned him about it in his dream state. He gave me all the information I needed then I gathered the rest on my own," Angelique said quickly, grabbing her hand. "Come with me. We must hurry before it's too late!"

She mounted her horse quickly, followed by Angelique. Though she mistrusted Angelique's motives, something told her to follow. After all, the girl had nothing to gain by Daniel. He had raped her when she was a young girl and gave her a child. Blaze was outraged. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could have done. After all, Angelique was his to do with as he pleased. No law could touch him.

Angelique had given birth to a little girl but sadly, the baby only took a few deep breaths before dying. Blaze had taken the child's death hard, especially since Beau was due to be born a month later. Taking pity on Angelique, she assigned the girl as Beau's nanny. She could not have made a better choice. Angelique was almost like a second mother to Beau.

The girl took the lead, showing her the way through the dense forest, weaving a strange path. Where were they going?

* * * *

Angelique led them to a tiny, secretive cove. Tall mountains of stone enclosed the same port, gray and imposing. The sea, as black as midnight, washed in, crashing against the rocks with a loud splash and making her tremble a little bit. That was the sound she heard when she made love with Justin those lonely five years ago, the cad timing his strokes so that they coincided with the tide.

"Where are we?" She looked around at the dense copse of dark trees surrounding her, listening to the sounds of the night. This place seemed familiar yet she could not quite place it.

"His place, Madame."

She whirled about. "How did you know about it?"

"I told her," echoed the familiar, French accented voice. She turned to see Justin, aka Raven, leaning casually against a tree, his strong arms crossed over each other.

"How? When?"

Angelique's face remained stoic and plain, her hands gripping the reins of her horse. "I shall leave you two alone. If you should have need of me, call for me."

With that, she turned away, leading her horse behind her, the plain cotton of her gown catching the rays of moonlight.

Rage burned through her like a beacon, thrumming through her limbs like a wildfire. "You have quite a bit of nerve coming here," she snapped.

"You were coming to meet me, ma chérie," he replied in a casual tone as he pushed himself away from the tree and walked toward her.

Her breath caught. Justin was beautiful by moonlight, his hair tied back in a queue with a black silk ribbon, the bluish tint glowing in the moonlight. Silk wrapped around

him as if it were part of him, making the throb between her legs worse. Why did he have to be so damned attractive?

"No, Raven, don't come near me," she demanded as she retreated. "I don't want you."

"Au contraire," he said softly as he closed the distance and gripped her upper arms in his strong, gloved hands. "You do want me. That blaggard Blackmore means nothing to you," he murmured against her lips as he took possession of them.

With an enormous amount of effort, Blaze pushed him away. "I don't want either of you, so leave me alone!" she cried as she turned and ran.

Blindly, she tore through the dense brush as the thorns ripped at her cheeks, holding her cotton gown up high. She couldn't move very fast because of her burgeoning belly but she still managed to evade him for a short duration.

Behind her shoulder, she could hear the distant hoof beats as Justin's horse bore down on her. Before she could take another step, a hand reached down and snatched her from the ground. "Let me go!" she cried.

"No, ma cherie, not until you listen to what I have to say."

Before she could issue a reply, he had her right in the saddle, holding her tightly. He urged the horse into a light lope until they reached the cove clearing. Halting the horse, he put her gently on the ground. Instantly she backed away as he dismounted. "Say what you have to say and leave me alone."

"Ma cherie," he murmured as he drew her back into his arms, his lips scorching a path down her neck, igniting her senses. The wall of her resolve started to crumble, making her utterly vulnerable to his touch. "Do not send me away."

"I ... must...." she said breathlessly, her arms winding around his neck. "I won't let you tear me apart like this."

"I'm not tearing you apart, ma cherie. I love you."

Her senses suddenly returned, making her glare at him murderously. "No, you don't, Justin, or else you wouldn't have put me through this."

Justin stepped back, his eyes wide. "What do you mean, ma cherie?"

Blaze's fury got the best of her. "You know exactly what I mean, Justin!" She ripped at his mask. "I've known who you were and what you were for the last several days. How could you do this to me?"

Justin's black gloved hands reached up and slowly removed his mask, revealing his handsome aristocratic features unencumbered by powder and rouge. "Blaze, let me explain," he said slowly as he advanced on her, his voice dripping with sexual promise.

"No, Justin, I won't let you explain. You've used me as your plaything and I won't have it!" Her cheeks grew hot. "You seduced me in the cave for a reason, didn't you?"

Justin's hands gripped her upper arms and held her steady, staring into her eyes with a glare of intense seriousness. "Yes, I did, but I realize that I made a mistake in doing so, Blaze. From the moment I had you, I knew you would be mine forever."

Blaze wrested herself from his grip and stepped away, her hands rubbing her arms where his touched burned her. "Why did you do it?"

Justin cast his gaze heavenward, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. "There is a reason," he said as he looked back toward her. "Daniel Montgomery ruined my family. You see, my father took his own life when he gambled everything we had to Montgomery. I was the one who found him lying in a pool of blood in his study." Justin's eyes moistened for a moment before quickly clearing up. "After I went through the debts and paid everyone, including Montgomery, there was nothing left. So, that led me down the path to piracy and to you."

She threw her hands up in frustration. "Why me?"

"I found out about you from my friend, Henri."

Her brow rose in suspicion. "Your physician?"

Justin's chuckle rose high through the clearing. "Aye but he's not really a physician, my dear. Let's just say that he's a French nobleman for now."

She crossed her arms over her chest, refusing to believe anymore of his lies. "Pray continue."

"Henri brought me all the information I needed to know about you."

"What sort of information?"

"Like where you care to ride or where you were on certain days. After I had all my information gathered I formulated a plan on how to seduce you."

Her ears burned as she heard this, her heart thumping in her chest. Did she want to hear the details? "Why did you do it, Justin? After all I meant nothing to you!"

Justin sank down to a nearby rock and patted his empty lap. She refused to sit down. Without ceremony, he reached over and manacled her wrist, pulling her down into his lap. "You're going to listen to the rest of the story if I have to hold you down to tell you."

"Let me go!" she demanded, trying to free herself from his strong grip.

"Not until you listen to my side of the story."

"You are a fiend, Justin. Manhandling me like this...."

Justin captured both of her wrists in his right hand, leaving his left free. "Really? Hmm, let me see how you like this...." With that, Justin cupped the mound of her right breast, squeezing gently, his gloved thumb running over her nipple. The nub reacted instinctively, her breath drawing in sharply. "Just as I thought. You like the way I handle you."

"That's not fair, Justin."

"Life is not fair, Blaze, and it never will be. If it were, my father would not have died the way he did. You and I would have been together, raising a brood of hellions...."

"Stop, Justin," she ordered as the tears commenced at the corners of her eyes. She'd dreamt of being with him when he was Raven, the nights seemingly endless as she tossed and turned, her mind burning with his haunting memory. "This can't work. We are

two different people now." She pushed up from his lap and stepped away from him. "I know your reason for doing what you did but I can't ever forgive you for it."

Justin gripped her wrist hard, pulling her toward him. "You must forgive me, Blaze," he murmured, his hand slipping down to rest on her rising belly. "I was cheated out of five years of Beau's life. I won't let you cheat me again."

Tears poured down her cheeks in a torrent. She wanted him to be part of her life but he couldn't be, not after what he did to her. "No, Justin," she whispered as she backed away from his touch. "I'll never learn to trust you or your motives so it is best if you take to the sea and never return."

His face took on an expression of utter seriousness. "I won't, Blaze. I'll never go away, not while you have things that belong to me."

"What things do you speak of?" she questioned angrily, her voice rising above the splash of the water against the rocks. "I have nothing that belongs to you."

"You do," he said, nodding his head slightly as he leaned against a tree, crossing his arms. "You have my children as well as something else I treasure."

"What else do I possess that belongs to you?"

"My heart."

* * * *

Andre crouched low in the bushes with the waiting soldiers, releasing his breath slowly as not to make any noise as well as lessen the pressure on his tight waistcoat. He smiled broadly. The pirate Raven, better known as Lord Blackmore, was in his clutches as well as his future bride. Hmm, she looked wonderful tonight with her red mane flowing in the salt tinged air ... his breeches tightened uncomfortably. The things he wanted to do with her flowed through his mind like a raging river, making the pain worse, the images of her cowering before him, bloodied and bruised....

"Andre!" Montgomery whispered in his ear.

Andre pulled his arm back and buried it in Daniel's gullet, making the bastard's air push from his lungs in a quiet swish. "Shut up, you idiot! I don't want you to give us away!" he said in a hushed tone. "When the time is right, we'll take them. Until then, I want to watch this little scene play out."

"You can't wait to get your slimy hands on her, can you?"

He whirled around and glared at Montgomery, the hate rising in his heart. "How would you like to experience death for a second time?" Montgomery's mouth opened then shut quickly as if what he wanted to say didn't bear announcement. "That's what I thought."

Andre turned his attention on the young lovers ahead of him, his hand adjusting his wig. Blaze looked utterly magnificent except for one thing. Her rising belly disgusted him and he would most definitely have to do something about it. After all, it wouldn't do for his wife to be bearing any brats that weren't his, would it?

"No, Justin, you must go and never return. If not for my sake, for your own. Right now, there are soldiers waiting on that ship to take you back to France to try you...."

Justin closed the distance between them with several of his long strides. He gripped her arms in his gloved hands, holding her in place. "No, Blaze. I'm not leaving here for any reason. As far as the soldiers, I already know about them. That's why I haven't taken the ship. The men are scattered at the moment for their own safety...."

Confusion slipped through her like an unwanted feeling. "How did you know?"

"Henri supplied me with all the information I needed as well as Angelique."

Her brows creased in the middle. "How does Angelique figure into all of this?"

Justin's soft chuckle echoed through the small clearing. "Henri has a terrible habit of talking in his sleep so Angelique listened to his murmurings on several occasions and came to me with what he said."

"So why did you tell her?"

His gloved hand caressed the side of her face, sending chills down her spine. "I had no choice. She had it all figured out so I made her promise that she would help me in any way possible. In any case, she was the one who washed and repaired my clothing, drying it within hers on the line so that no one would see it."

"This makes no sense, Justin, and never will. Go now and never return."

She heard the coldness in her words and felt her heart break in two. Justin was the love of her life and always would be but that wasn't enough. If there was no trust, then there could be no marriage.

"No," he said softly as he pulled her resisting body toward him and held her tightly, his cheek nuzzling the top of her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

Throaty chuckles echoed from deep within the forest, followed by sharp crackles and the sound of clanking metal. Blaze clutched onto Justin hard as Andre Le Croix, followed by the King's soldiers, emerged from the forest. Their muskets glimmered in the moonlight, making them seem more ghostly.

"That's what you think," Le Croix answered, his gun pointed at Justin's chest. "I knew I'd catch you sooner or later, Blackmore."

Justin's face twisted into a mask of black hatred. "You bastard," he spat out as he held tightly onto her. "What do you want?"

"You," Andre answered as his gaze traveled toward her. "And her," he said, his thick lips pulling into an evil grin. She shuddered. The man had something in mind for her and it wasn't pleasant.

Justin pushed her behind him for protection, his arms holding her close. "Touch one hair on her head and I'll kill you," he snarled.

Blaze's fear rose like the tide before a storm, her hands clutching his waist while her heart pounded out of control. What were they going to do to Justin?

"Oh, I don't intend to touch her," Andre said as he began to circle, the glimmer from the muskets dancing around him. "I intend to break her."

She shuddered as tears fell from her eyes as Justin held his ground in front of her. "You won't touch her, Le Croix. I swear by all that's holy, I'll kill you if you do."

"Tsk, tsk," Andre commented as he continued his dance around them. "'Tis too bad I will have to dissolve our little partnership, Blackmore. I had always hoped we could make it profitable."

"You wanted nothing of the sort, Le Croix," Justin answered, his movements keeping in time with Andre's. "The only thing you want out of this is Blaze and I'll die before I let you have her." Blaze looked from one man to the other, her heart pounding out of control, her body trembling. From the glint in Le Croix's eyes, something deadly simmered behind those dark orbs.

Andre's mouth twitched at the corners before pulling into an evil grin. "That can easily be arranged." With that, he pointed his pistol in Justin's direction and fired.

Justin fell backward, clutching his arm. Out of reaction, she grabbed him and went to the ground, holding him tightly despite the blood pouring from the wound between her splayed fingers "Damn you, Andre!" she cried as she clutched his bleeding arm. "Why did you do that?" Warm liquid seeped through her spread fingers and dripped slowly onto her gown. She rocked with him in her arms slowly back and forth, her fear rising. How badly had he been wounded? Was he going to live? The glimmer of the bayonets shone down on them, creating an illusion of false light. She looked from one to the other, her heart pounding hard. What was going to happen next?

"Such language from a lady," Andre mocked and gestured at Daniel with a jerk of his head. "Montgomery, come and get your wife," he ordered, his pistol still trained on Justin

Stunned disbelief stormed through her as Daniel pushed through the thicket of dense undergrowth, weaving unsteadily. His blond hair hung limply in his eyes, his gestures exaggerated. "Of course," he announced in a drunken slur. "Aren't you glad to see me, Blaze?"

"Yo ... you're dead," she said slowly, her hand clutching Justin's arm hard in order to stop the flow of blood.

"Stay away from her, bastard," Justin snarled through clenched teeth as he tried to pull himself up.

"Now that is no way to speak about my wife," Daniel muttered as he sauntered forward and grabbed her upper arm, jerking her from under Justin.

"Let me go!" she cried, trying to wrest herself from his grip, her anger rising. How in all that was holy was he still alive?

"Don't touch her! She's pregnant!" Justin shouted from his position on the ground, attempting to rise to her aid. The soldiers shoved him back to the ground with the tips of their glimmering bayonets, daring him to move.

"No, wench, I won't let you go," Daniel snarled as he pulled her hard against him, the reek of his ale laden breath making her belly turn over heavily. "So you're carrying the bastard's brat again, I see. Perhaps we will have to remedy that."

Andre waved his pistol in the Justin's general direction. "Take him to jail and make sure the physician looks at him."

The soldiers lunged forward and dragged Justin unsteadily to his feet. "Remember what I've said, Blaze," Justin promised as the sharp clicks of the manacles closing around his wrists rose in the air. "I vowed to protect you and I haven't broken a promise yet."

With her heart in her throat, Blaze broke free of Daniel's clutches and rushed forward, touching Justin on the sleeve. "Y ... yes, Justin, I will remember," she stammered as the confusion whirled around in her like a raging storm. She wanted to say more, to tell him that she loved him but she couldn't. The hurt of his betrayal kept her from saying anything more.

The soldiers dragged his resisting, bleeding body away from her. Blaze wanted so badly to go to him but her hurt and shame kept her from doing so. Her trust had been shattered beyond all repair.

"You will not be implicated in this matter, Lady Montgomery," Andre said as he sauntered toward her, re-sheathing his pistol back in its holster with a confident sneer. "You are a complete innocent."

I'm not as innocent as you think, she thought bitterly as the weakness in her knees grew. She had to get home and to Beau, possibly talking to Henri ... "I ... I ... need to get home," she said in a shaky voice. "I'm not feeling too well."

Andre's gaze flicked over to Daniel's gaunt form. "Take your wife home, Montgomery...."

Daniel's grip on her arm tightened, sending shock waves of pain rippling up her limb. "Don't you mean your wife, Le Croix? After this is all said and done, she belongs to you."

New surges of panic and terror swept through her. "What do you mean?" she demanded as she whirled about on Daniel.

Familiar expressions, ones that she hated to see, crossed his face as his lips spread into a wide grin. "Don't you understand, Blaze? Le Croix and I are the ones who have been stealing the rum and selling it in England for profit. Only that bastard Justin found out about it and decided to cut himself in on our business," he snickered. "Unfortunately, he didn't have enough gumption to take his own life as his father before him had."

Blaze paled as her vision cleared. Justin was telling the truth. Daniel had caused the elder Lord Blackmore to kill himself. "I hate you, Daniel, with everything that's in me," she snarled as she wrested herself from his grip. "I wish you were dead."

Andre's evil laughter filtered around the dense copse of trees amidst the eerie call of owls over head. "That can be arranged, dear lady," he smirked, turning to his men.

"Accompany Lady Blackmore back to Splendour since she does not wish for her husband to do so. Make sure she arrives unharmed."

A young captain saluted. "Oui, mon capitaine," he answered and looked to the rest of his men. "You have your orders."

Despite her protests, two of the men grabbed her arms and practically dragged her resisting form to the carriage. "You will pay for this, Daniel," she called out. "One way or another!"

The hated look of evil contempt crossed his ugly features. "As a matter of fact, I'm counting on it, Blaze."

Chapter 17

His arm throbbed hard, the tied cloth not really helping at all. The blood flow ebbed but it still oozed slightly. Justin pounded his fist against the dry straw on the cot, the harsh crackling filling the air. How in the hell had Le Croix found out who he was?

Justin banged his head lightly against the cold stone of the jail. He'd lost Blaze, possibly forever. Her love was the one thing he had wanted from the moment he tasted her lips to the moment he had her for the first time. Their souls melded together, not by children but by love. He knew she had loved him but with all that had happened, he was sure that she hated him as well. Justin smirked. Could he blame her?

He stood up unsteadily and put a hand against the jagged, cold rock for balance. The worst part about imprisonment was the fact that Montgomery and Le Croix were loose and able to do anything they wanted to Blaze. Memories of Beau's stories of Daniel's brutality hit him like a wave of hard sea water, making his anger swell even more. If that bastard hurt his wife or children, so help him....

His hand curled into a fist, pounding against the hard stone. The only consolation was the fact that Henri was watching her. He frowned, his heart pounding out of control. Would his friend be enough against those mad men?

Torches flickered in the wrought iron sconces, the golden light dancing shadows on the wall. The odor of urine, sweat and death permeated the air, making his belly clench tightly. Several times, he'd wanted to retch but the painful throbbing in his arm prevented it. The last thing he wanted to do was to make it bleed worse.

Straw covered the floor as well, making a soft swish under his booted heels each time he moved. Why in all that was holy had this happened? He looked forward to living a quiet life with Blaze and Beau as well as awaiting the birth of their new baby.

He frowned. If Blaze ever lost that baby because of those two bastards, they would pay in the most unholy way....

"Git up ye scalawag," screeched the old jailer who shuffled his way down the small staircase leading to his cell. "Ye physician his 'ere."

At the mention of a physician, Justin half expected Henri. Instead, it was an old man dressed in a black cassock with a weathered brown bag at his side. Long gray hair surrounded his wrinkled head, topped by a matching black hat with a wide brim. The old man kept his head down as he walked, the valise jangling at his side.

"Git back, varmit," the jailer scoffed as he produced a set of keys that jangled on a hard iron chain. "He will take a look at ye." He slipped the key in the lock and turned it, the click rising through the air.

Justin stepped back, his good hand brushing through his tangled black locks. More than likely, the good physician would patch him up just in time to be hanged.

The old man stepped in and nodded at the grizzled jailer. "Thank you, my good man," he said and stepped into the cell. "Please leave us."

"Nay, I will stay here...."

"I need to be alone with the prisoner," the physician ordered. "Now leave us."

"But what if something happens...?"

"Nothing will happen, my good man, but if it does, I will make sure you are exonerated."

The jailer shook his head. "'Taint proper, guvnor."

"Would this change your mind?" The physician produced several gold coins that sparkled in the dim light of the cavernous jail.

The old man's eyes lit up and he took the coins, putting one in his mouth and biting down on it. "Real gold! Right cheerio, guvnor!" he said happily and closed the cell door, locking it carefully. "Call for me when ye are finished!" Twirling the ring of keys on his fingers, the man whistled a happy tune as the coins jangled in his pocket, possibly destined for the nearest tavern.

"Now sit down," the man ordered in his perfect English accented voice. "Here, I have a coin for you."

The physician laid it in his palm and he turned it over in the dim light. One side indeed had the fleur de leis but the other side had a portrait, unlike the one that he had given the jailer.

Justin got up and limped to the door under the watchful eye of the physician, looking at the coin. The portrait was none other than Henri! There was only one man who could have had this coin! He turned. "Henri?" he whispered quietly.

Henri nodded. "Aye, 'tis me, my friend. I'm here to get you out as well as tend to your wound," he said, striding over from his spot. "Sit down on the cot."

Justin moved to the cot and plopped down, holding his arm out for Henri. "How in the world did you make yourself up like this?"

"My cousin, Victor, is an actor who has taught me the art of the theatre as well as acting," he replied casually as he removed a knife and cut away the bloody bandage wrapped around Justin's arm. "That's how I fooled them all."

Justin grimaced as Henri pulled away the bloody bandage, the encrusted gore pulling at the wound. "How bad is it?"

"The bullet merely grazed you, is all. There's no exit or entry wound so I think I'll bandage it and apply a poultice because there's no need for stitches."

He gulped hard as he readied himself to ask the inevitable. "How is Blaze taking all of this?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid," he replied nonchalantly as he ripped cloth for a bandage. "She has not left her room since you've been captured."

"Are Beau and the baby all right?"

Henri looked up as sorrow crawled over his face. "Beau is fine but it's the baby who isn't."

He paled as Henri's concern sank in. "What do you mean?"

"I'm worried about Blaze. She hasn't eaten or slept since you've been jailed. That's not good for the baby."

Justin leapt to his feet and paced the cell, running his hands through his wild hair. "I should have told her sooner, Henri. This should not have gone on as long as it did," he said in a low tone in case someone was listening.

"That can't be helped now, Justin," Henri said over his shoulder. "We need to find a way to get you out of here."

Justin stopped in front of the bars and placed his hands around the cold iron. "It's no use, Henri. Blaze hates me and I'd rather die if I can't have her love."

"Give her time," Henri stated, his voice rising higher to make it over the rustle of the straw. "She will come around."

He whirled on his heel. "What do you mean?"

Henri lifted the hat from his head and threw it to the side. "Give Blaze some time and build her trust again. In time...."

"There is no more time, Henri. Your father's emissary will be here soon to try me and more than likely hang me."

Henri's gray painted brow rose. "Really? Hmmm, this gives me an idea...."

"What are you thinking, Henri?"

"Nothing," Henri replied quickly as he stood up. "Now let me bandage that arm and I'll be on my way."

He laid a hand on Henri's shoulder. He had known that look too long not to know that Henri was up to something. "You are working on something, you devil, aren't you?"

An expression of mischief crawled across Henri's made up features. "Moi? Never. Besides, I have other work to do besides save your ass again."

"Still the same old Henri," he commented lightly, trying to hide the tide of fear rising in him. No matter what, he'd have to survive this even if Blaze didn't want him to. He had his children to consider now. "Will you be seeing Blaze today?"

Henri shrugged. "I don't know. She has refused any and all visitors, including me. Why?"

Justin stormed over to the end of the cot and extracted a tattered piece of paper. "I want you to give this to her."

"Where did you get the paper?"

"You would be amazed at what I can get when I want it," he announced in a hushed tone. "Take it to her, will you?"

Henri took it from his outstretched fingers and tucked it into the pocket of his costume. "Aye, I will. Am I to wait for a reply?" he asked casually as he applied some foul smelling poultice to a cloth.

He wrinkled his nose at the awful smell. "No," he said, his stare concentrating on the green mess on the rag. "What is that?"

"Your poultice, my lord," Henri replied as he slammed the cloth onto the wound.

"Owwwwwww!" he snarled, his teeth gnashing as the hot, searing pain traveled up his arm. "Why did you do that?"

"To quiet you down, Justin. I've mixed a pain soother as well as a sleeping potion in it so that you'll get some rest for a change," Henri answered quietly, his voice slipping into a perfect English accent. "You need your strength for what lies ahead."

"I don't need to sleep...." his words trailed off as his head spun. The poultice must already be in his system....

"Lie down, Justin," Henri murmured and helped him to the straw cot, his senses still reeling. "Let me take care of everything."

Henri's voice sounded distant, as if he were standing a great length away and shouting. He wasn't, was he? He was right there. "Henri, make me one promise," he asked through weary lips.

"What is that, my friend?"

"Take care of Blaze, Beau and the baby for me. They're my life."

Henri's warm hand on his shoulder was warm and comforting. "I'll fight for them just as if they were my own."

* * * *

"I am Lady Blackmore and I'm here to see my husband," she stated in a shaky voice to the young French captain stationed at the front gate. The stench of urine flowed

over the top, overwhelming the area. She grimaced at the rolling of her belly and held a scented handkerchief to her nose. How could they house Justin in a place like this?

His wigged head tilted toward the list sitting in front of him. "Oui, Madame but your name is not on this list. The Magistrate has ordered that the pirate is to have no visitors."

"Perhaps I can change your mind," echoed Henri's familiar voice. Thankfully, he accompanied her today or else she would not have enough nerve to come by herself. Daniel had left at early morning light to go somewhere. Silently, she had prayed he would never come back.

The young officer looked up, his amber eyes narrowing before widening in an expression of recognition. "My lord, forgive me for not recognizing you!" the man said, rising from his seat and bowing, the gold bars of his blue great coat shining in the sun.

Blaze turned to Henri as confusion swept through her. "Why is he bowing to you?"

Henri took her elbow gently. "I am a nobleman, 'tis all. Perhaps the boy has seen me before," he admitted, shrugging his broad shoulders. "Will you admit Lady Blackmore now?"

The officer nodded. "Of course, my lord. I would refuse you nothing," the man stated in a gracious tone, sweeping his arm towards the prison gate. "Will she need an escort?"

"I will escort the lady," Henri said in a quiet tone

"Very well done, my lord, however there is one little thing."

Henri's brow rose quizzically. "And that would be?"

"I must check her handbag before she goes in," the officer said rather sheepishly, almost as if he were embarrassed to make such a request.

"Of course," she said quickly and handed him her purse. There was nothing in it except a few coins and a powder puff as well. What he was looking for remained hidden under her gown.

The soldier gave it a perfunctory rummage through and handed it back to her. "'Tis all in order, Madame, and thank you for your cooperation. Now if you and his majesty will walk this way...."

Now it was her turn to be quizzical. "Majesty?"

Henri gripped her elbow harder. "He's mistaken, 'tis all. Since I've worked at the palace, many people have told me I resemble the Dauphin Louis," he explained as he propelled her past the guard toward the gate. "Come, let us see Justin."

For some reason, his explanation of being mistaken for the Dauphin somehow didn't fit. Obviously, there was something more to the story than Henri would lead her to believe. Pushing those thoughts out of her mind, Blaze pressed on, her only thought being Justin. What exactly would she say to him?

* * * *

The jail was nothing more than four cells gathered in a collection underneath the court, the room dim and dank. Raw, sweaty odors mixed with the sickly, sweet perfume of death danced around the air, assailing her nostrils. Her belly lurched hard, threatening to expel what little contents it possessed. Justin was down here and she had to be strong for him.

Blaze ascended the steps, her feet slippery on the wet stone. The black stone walls were thick with a mossy substance, its stench hanging in the air. Moans and groans filled the air from the other cells, mingling with the clank of chains. Being in this area gave her the chills but she had to make it through to see Justin.

"Come this way, miss," garbled one of the uncouth jailers as he picked up his keys in a grubby hand. "The blackguard is over here."

She followed the man to the cell containing Justin. "What have they done to him?" she whispered to Henri as they neared his cell.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I've already taken care of everything."

"Up now, scalawag," the old man shouted as he opened the door to the cell. "Yer wife is here to see ye."

Justin's supine form moved quickly and he sat up, rubbing his hand through his hair. "Blaze," he murmured sleepily.

"Please leave us," she ordered the jailer. "I wish to speak to my husband alone."

"But miss...."

"Take this, my good man, for your trouble," Henri said and extracted a few gold coins from his pocket.

The old man's eyes lit with an excited fire as he bit down on the coins. "Aye, real gold! How long do ye need, miss? If anyone finds out I let ye in here by yeself...."

"Come with me, man, and I will show you something you've never seen before," Henri said as he laid an arm around the dirty shoulders. "I'll be back in a quarter hour, Blaze."

Henri escorted the jailer out of their area, towards the door. Once they were out of earshot, Blaze turned to Justin. "I'm glad to see they didn't hurt you," she said softly, her voice shaking. She wanted to touch him so badly but she wouldn't allow herself to do it. After all, he'd duped her this far so what would stop him from duping her even more?

"You got my message," he murmured softly, his hands taking hers and holding them to his face. "That proves you love me because you came."

Blaze sank down on the cot next to him wearily, her hands buried in her lap. "I don't know what I feel right now, Justin. After what you did to me, I doubt whether I can ever trust you again."

"You have every right to be angry, Blaze, but you have to let it go. What I did wasn't right but I did it for a reason."

"I know your reasons, Justin, but that doesn't mean I have to forgive them. Why couldn't you have told me sooner?"

Justin's warm hand slipped over hers, his fingers dancing against her palm. "Because I didn't want you to pick up a sword and join me, that's why. I couldn't endanger your life, Beau's," he remarked as his hand traveled to her belly. "Or this little one once you told me that he was growing inside of you."

Blaze stood up and paced the length of the cell. "It won't work, Justin. My heart as well as my trust has been shattered. Nothing could ever heal that."

Justin rose to his feet and closed the distance between them, his hands encircling her shoulders. "No, it can be healed if you let it," he whispered softly into her ear. "Let it heal."

With that, he turned her toward him and tilted her chin up. "Learn to trust me again, Blaze, and I swear that you will never want for anything ever again."

"But..."

"You talk too much, woman," he said huskily as his lips touched hers. Familiar sensations of heady desire stormed through her veins, setting her soul on fire. Her heart beat wildly, almost as though it was going to pound out of her chest as his hungry kiss deepened. Justin's tongue plundered her mouth, enticing hers to come out and play. She responded, throwing her arms around his neck while he pulled her closer to his taut, hard body. The evidence of his desire was utterly evident through her gown.

Justin parted the kiss reluctantly. "Do you realize what you do to me, Blaze? You turn my blood to fire every time you're near," he confessed as he walked backward to the cot and sat down, urging her to straddle his legs.

Realizing his intention, Blaze tried to get up. "No, Justin. I'm not falling for anymore of your lies."

Justin held her in place and pushed her down, grinding his hard manhood against her damp mound. "It's not lies, Blaze. It's the truth," he whispered huskily against her throat as he thrust his hips in an upward motion.

She felt the juices flow from her privates, making her underpinnings wetter. "I ... I ... can't Justin," she gasped as he pushed hard against her, his hands urging her hips into fluid strokes.

"Yes you can," he reiterated as his right hand slipped beneath her gown. He tore the pantalettes and her undergarments until he exposed her quivering womanhood, the pleasure nub ripe and ready.

With a quick flick of material, he was exposed, the tip of his hard manhood riding against her wet core. "You know you want me inside of you, Blaze. Don't deny it."

Justin was a dish best left uneaten. He was far too tempting to her senses as well as her soul. "Aye ... Nay ... I don't know!"

Before he said another word, he slipped inside of her easily, allowing her muscles to hold him captive. "You fit me like a sheath to a sword," he said in a breathless voice. "I want no other woman but you."

Blaze blocked out those words as the warm rush of headiness over took her, making her hips move in that familiar motion. Justin felt so good and so right, fitting her perfectly as well. It was a shame that their marriage was something that could never be.

She stared straight into his eyes as she moved up and down, tiny gasps escaping her throat. Suddenly, she couldn't take anymore of it. She plundered his mouth just as he had hers, wrapping her arms around his neck as they rocked on the tiny cot.

"I want you so much, Blaze, that it hurts," he confessed as she drew up, almost allowing him out before descending to take him all in again.

"I ... I..."

"Say nothing," he told her as he stood up. "I want to enjoy this moment as long as it lasts."

Blaze felt the cold stone against her back as Justin pressed her against the wall, his shaft buried inside of her to the hilt. Each thrust brought more cries of ecstasy from her throat, the sound echoing through the cold walls of the jail. Sensing her approach to the climax, Justin slowed his strokes, almost pulling out of her wet crevice only to plunge deeper. She gripped into his broad back, her hips arching to take more of him in as her cries became louder. Was she truly going to be able to live without Justin for the rest of her life?

Justin thrust hard one last time and shuddered, kissing her lips. "I love you, Blaze, even if you don't love me."

Blaze couldn't even look at him. "As I said before, Justin, I don't know how I feel except betrayed and angry," she said softly as Justin set her on the floor and tucked himself back into his breeches. "I don't know what tomorrow will bring."

Justin drew her close and held her tightly. "It holds us and our children, Blaze. Why can't you see that?"

She broke away from him. "I do see that, Justin, but not right now. I don't trust you and perhaps never will but I want to prove to you that I do care about you."

His eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

Blaze lifted up the top layer of her gown and exposed it to him. There was a black shirt and matching breeches neatly stitched on the underside. "I brought these for you. Take them off my gown," she whispered, her gaze trailing over his shoulder. "Put them on and don't ask any questions."

Justin nodded and ripped them from the underside of her gown, the sound of parting fabric shredding the still air. "What is this supposed to prove?"

She laid a finger against his lips. "Ask no questions, Justin, because it will all be answered in the court room. Now change."

He remained silent as he shrugged out of his garb and into the ones she'd brought. Unable to remove her stare, Blaze could only revel in the body she'd come to enjoy. She sighed wearily. After his trial, she would never see that glorious perfection of manhood again.

* * * *

Several long tedious days passed for Blaze. She tried to see Justin several more times before the trial but each time she was refused. Henri did not accompany her on those outings because it was important to keep up the ruse of the confused, worried wife so that their plan would work out perfectly.

"Mama, where is Papa?" Beau asked as he tugged on her gown as she readied herself for Justin's trial.

She whirled around. Beau had never called Justin Papa before. "What did you say?"

"Where Papa was," he said as the tears cracked his voice. "I miss him." He fell to the floor and started crying.

Blaze knelt next to her son and drew him into her arms. "There, there, Beau. Everything is going to be all right. Justin will be home soon, I promise," she said as she rocked him back and forth, her trembling hands smoothing down the wild black strands.

"I hope so, Momma," he sniffed against the cotton lace of her gown. "I want him to come home."

She wanted to say she did too but the words died in her throat. Part of her wanted him to share in the joy of their impending child but the other part warned her to keep her distance. If Justin duped her so easily once, it only stood to reason that he would do it again. "He will be all right, Beau," she said softly as she nuzzled his chin. "Do you remember Justin's friend, Henri?" He nodded as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "He's going to help Justin and keep him from the hangman's noose."

"Good," Beau replied as he threw his tiny arms around her neck. "I want him to come home so we can be a real family."

Blaze's heart shattered. Justin could never come home. As if to solidify matters, she had booked passage earlier in the day on the H.M.S. Wharburton for a one way trip back to England. Martinique no longer held the magic that it once had. Justin could have Splendour and run it as he pleased. Hopefully, it would make him a far richer man than he already was. She sighed wearily. After Justin's trial, she would be gone.

* * * *

"Order in the court!" ordered the large man with meaty jowls as he sat in the judge's seat. A white wig covered his head, trailing down his impossibly thick shoulders. "Now, the prisoner is to stand up." Count de Valois was an older man, imported from the French court specifically for Justin's trial. The Magistrate Le Croix sat next to him, his thick fingers interlaced over his large stomach. A look of utter contentment slipped across his face in waves, making her angrier than she had been in her life. He had no right to do this to Justin! With Henri's help, it was quite possible Andre would be sitting in Justin's position very soon.

Blaze looked from Count de Valois to Justin. He stood as proud as any man could in a prisoner's box, holding his head high as if to dare them to say anything. She looked to

his clothes. They were ill fitting and tight, not to mention short. Putting her gloved hand to her mouth, she smiled silently. It was all part of Henri's plan.

She turned to gaze about the crowd gathered in the tiny courtroom. All of the women sat in the cramped benches with their gazes fixed lovingly on Justin, most of them swooning. For the first time since his arrival, they were seeing him as he truly was and it made her feel stabs of jealousy. Blaze turned back around, her heart pounding. Justin had belonged to her for such a short while yet she still felt as though he did. Why could she not let go?

"Do you know what you have been accused of, Lord Blackmore?" Count de Valois announced.

Justin tilted his head. "Aye, your honor."

"So what do you have to say for yourself, man? Why have you committed such atrocities against the French King?"

"I have my reasons," he said staunchly as muscles jumped tersely in his jaw.

"Please share them with the court," the Count ordered, his thick fingers intertwining on the desk.

"I have no desire to, my lord. Hang me if you wish, but I will not share why I have committed these crimes."

A look of utter contempt crossed the judge's face. "You dare to defy me? I should...."

Henri leapt to his feet and bowed, the edges of his silken cravat swinging in time with his movements. "May I say something, my lord?"

"Who are you?"

A smile of triumph crossed Henri's lips. "You should know me, my lord," he said as he casually stepped towards the judge's bench. "Or perhaps you know my father's mistress, Madame Du Barry."

Count de Valois' face went blank before a look of recognition swept across his powdered face. "What do you mean?"

Henri laid his hat on the solicitor's table and leaned a casual hip against it. "My father, if you must know, is King Louis XV of France," he announced proudly

Blaze felt her heart freeze. She was sitting next to the future King of France! She looked up. Henri possessed very aristocratic features as well as manners, gained only through court training. She should have known he was more than just a physician but he duped her just as well as Justin. Was she that innocent?

The Count's jaw dropped. "You are the Dauphin?" he questioned as he swallowed hard.

"Aye, that I am," Henri announced to all and sundry. "I can personally vouch for that man in your prisoner box," he said, gesturing to Justin. "Not only is he a fellow nobleman but he is no pirate. Look at his clothes for heaven's to pity sake. They don't fit."

Count de Valois looked to Justin and dismissed the entire notion with a wave of his hand. "That matters not, your Majesty. Anyone could have brought him clothing that was too small."

"Au contraire, my lord. No one has."

"But his wife...."

"Is with child and in no condition to help her husband," he corrected gently as he sauntered up to the Count's desk and leaned against it. "I have the real perpetrator in custody. I think you should look at the evidence. Madame Du Barry would wish you to." There was a silent message being sent to the Count but she wasn't sure what it was, only that it involved the King of France's famous mistress.

Blaze looked to Le Croix who sat next to the Count, looking petrified. Sweat poured down his face in rivulets, smearing the white powder. She turned her attention back to Henri who seemed much calmer and more collected.

"So this is not the real Raven?"

Henri shook his head. "Nay, he is not. The real Raven," he said, snapping his fingers, "will be here momentarily."

With that, there was a clamor at the back of the courtroom. She as well as the others turned to see what it was. At the back of the room, two men came in bearing a third between, his body almost utterly limp. The mystery man was dressed as Justin was, his clothes fitting perfectly. Jet colored hair, flat and lifeless as though someone had dyed it with lamp-black, fell in the stranger's eyes.

Henri gestured to him with a flick of his lace-encrusted wrist. "There is your perpetrator, my good man. One Daniel Montgomery."

An awed hush went through the room as Daniel was borne up toward the front, his booted heels dragging on the floor. Blaze held her breath, never imagining this was part of the plan. The only thing Henri had told her was that she was supposed to get the clothes to Justin and get him to change. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe. Would this work to free Justin?

"Bring that blackguard up to the front," Count de Valois ordered, his gavel striking the bench hard.

"Of course," Henri answered casually as he pushed away. The men stopped next to him and he gripped a handful of Daniel's hair. "You are the Raven, aren't you?"

Limply, Daniel responded. "Aye," he said slowly as if he was in a drugged state. "I am he." Taking a weak arm, he pointed to Le Croix. "He is my accomplice."

Le Croix's face turned bright red. "I don't know what this idiot is talking about! I don't know him!"

Henri chuckled lightly. "I think you do, Le Croix," he responded in a confident tone as he withdrew a packet of papers from his great coat. "These were among your papers and I think the good Count would like to see these."

Andre leapt to his feet and ripped them from Henri's hand. "Where did you get these?" he screamed, his limbs trembling.

"From your office, Andre. You apparently are not smart enough to be a pirate otherwise, you would not have left this evidence around for to be found."

Le Croix said nothing as he turned quickly, stopped by a brightly uniformed soldier.

"Sit down, Le Croix and let me see those papers," the Count ordered in a stern tone.

The soldier took them from Andre's stunned hand and laid them in the count's open palm. With quick fingers, the Count opened them and lifted his monocle to his eye. He was silent for a few moments before looking to Andre. "Captain, clap that man in irons on a charge of treason," he said and turned to Daniel. "As for him, he will be stretched by the neck until dead," he announced and looked to Justin. "My good man, you are cleared of all charges. You may take your family and go home."

Cheers abounded around the room, splitting the still air. Henri went over and clapped Justin on the shoulders as well as others coming up and shaking his hand.

Blaze took this as her signal to go. The ship was waiting and she needed to get Beau ready. Taking her hand, she blew him a light kiss and turned, the tears pricking the corners of her eyes. Despite all that Justin had inflicted on her, she still loved him on some level and always would. After all, they shared more than their bodies. They had two children.

She exited the court with a heavy heart. This would be the last time she would ever see Justin.

* * * *

Justin looked over the crowd and watched Blaze leave the court. Why was she leaving? Didn't she want to go home with him?

He tried to push through the throng of people who wanted to congratulate him as well as pay homage to Henri but it was no use. There were too many to get through. Despite that, he tapped Henri on the shoulder. "Where's Blaze going?"

Henri shrugged his dark clad shoulders. "I don't know, Justin. Home probably." "Get me out of here so I can be with her," he demanded. "She needs me right now."

"Your wish is my command," Henri stated in a mocking tone as he set about clearing through the crowd.

Justin's heart pounded as he was hustled outside and into a waiting carriage. He was free to be with Blaze and their children, watching them grow up and become the adults they were meant to be. He leaned his head back as the carriage started with a jerk and headed toward the direction of Splendour. If it weren't for Blaze and her love, he wouldn't be here right now.

Just as he passed the grove of trees on his right, he could hear Montgomery's screams as the court carried out Daniel's sentence, his mind desperately trying to block out the sound. His belly curled into a tight knot as the screams grew louder. That could have very well been him.

"How did you get Montgomery to confess to being the Raven?" he questioned wearily.

"A little laudanum goes a long way, my friend," Henri confessed. "In addition to Daniel's addiction to mulattos, he was also a consumer of great amounts of laudanum. So, I offered him my own special brand," he said as Daniel's screams became a distant memory. "He won't feel a thing, poor bastard."

Justin felt a little sorry for Daniel but the man brought it on himself. "What will happen to Andre?"

"He'll go back to France with his tail between his legs and my father will deal with him, I suppose. As for Count de Valois, the reason he convicted Daniel so quickly is that was the price of my silence about Madame Du Barry."

He leaned forward. "Thank you for all that you've done for Blaze as well as me. I don't know how to repay...."

Henri held up his hand. "Just have a good life and healthy children. That's payment enough."

* * * *

The crowd huddled at the dock as dusk started to fall all around St. Pierre. Her bags were to have been loaded earlier so that only left her to board as well as Beau, his hand clutched in hers. The skin of her cheeks were chapped as well as stained from all the tears she'd shed over the last few hours. Why couldn't have Justin told her earlier? That thought echoed in her mind like a haunting melody, a tune she could never rid herself of.

"Mama, where are we going?" Beau asked quietly as they waited to board the ship.

"Home," rang a familiar voice.

Blaze turned at the sound of Justin's voice, her blood freezing in her veins. He was dressed in a simple dark-blue navy suit with a tight fitting waistcoat, great coat and matching breeches. Instead of wearing buckled shoes, he wore boots that molded to his well-built calves like a second skin. His dark hair swept back into a queue, tipped by a matching hat and feather. Her heart nearly stopped. He was entirely too handsome for his own good. "We're going to England," she told Beau.

"You'll be going home, Beau," Justin reiterated as he strode toward them.

"Justin, this can't work! I don't trust you! If I go to England...."

He manacled her wrist in a tight hold, refusing to let her go. "You can't go to England, Blaze. I love you as well as Beau and I don't ever want to spend a moment away from you."

Her tears returned energetically. "No, Justin. I don't trust you and I don't know if I ever will."

"Give me six months," he begged as he held her hand to his chest. "Do you remember what I said to you once before? This beats only for you. If you leave, I will die."

She shook her head, her wild red curls floating around her head. "You won't die, Justin. You'll go on the same as before...."

"I won't. You have my heart as I have yours. As much as you like to deny it, Blaze, you love me."

She couldn't deny it. She did love him with all that was in her. "It isn't enough, Justin. I don't trust you."

"Give me six months, Blaze. If I can't make you trust me in six months, you're free to leave. I won't stop you, I promise," he murmured as he kissed her gloved knuckles, encouraging the familiar desires to course throughout her veins. "I think though in six months you won't want to leave."

"You seem very assured of yourself, Lord Blackmore," she said mockingly. "Perhaps I will change my mind."

His black brow arched devilishly. "So I take it that you'll stay?"

"Aye, I will under your condition."

"You have made this heart as well as the rest of the man very happy, Lady Blackmore," he said confidently as he led her and Beau away from the ship. "Are you ready to go home, Beau?"

"Aye, Justin!"

"You can call me, Papa, my boy because that's who I really am," he announced proudly.

Beau stopped. "You're my real papa?"

Justin swept Beau up in his mighty arms. "Aye, that I am, son and always have been. When you're old enough, I'll tell you how I first came to know your mother."

"I love you, Papa," Beau confessed as he laid his head against Justin's shoulder.

"I love you too, my big boy," he said as he strolled down the street with his son in one arm and Blaze's hand on the other.

Just as they got a short distance away from the ship, Blaze suddenly remembered her things. "Justin, we have to go back!" she cried, jerking him to a halt. "All of our things are on the ship."

"No, they're not. Everything is at home and put away."

"What do you mean?" she said a touch incredulous.

"When I found out where you were, I informed the ship owner to send all of your things back to Splendour."

She grew wide-eyed at his blatant arrogance. "What if I hadn't decided to come home? What would you have done then?"

"You were coming home, Blaze one way or another," he said as he picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. "There is nothing that will ever come between us again."

Blaze thought long and hard on his words. She'd been stubborn far too long and had her heart closed off to him. Perhaps it was time to open it again.

Epilogue

Blaze rocked Ariana's cradle idly with her foot, rocking the baby to sleep. She could do nothing but watch her little girl, her pride and joy. After what they had been through, she was able to bring forth this beautiful baby, a delicious combination of her and Justin. In the six months, she had promised Justin, they had remarried in grand style, inviting all and sundry to the wedding. The only difference this time was that she had begun to show, soliciting all sorts of rude remarks from the women of St. Pierre. She disregarded them as she always had. Their approval meant nothing to her.

She stared at the cradle and listened to the soft snores of Ariana Gabrielle, named in honor of Justin's aunt, Gabrielle. She smiled. If it hadn't been for Gabrielle's part in this plan, nothing would have worked out. Not only did she gain an aunt but a confidante as well. She had forgiven everything, realizing that it was necessary. Gabrielle only wanted to see her and Justin happy.

Justin's warm hand on her silk clad shoulder brought her back to reality. "Is our daughter asleep yet?"

"Aye, Justin. She nursed quite a bit and has gone back to sleep," she murmured as little crimson haired Ariana shifted in her cradle. "It's hard to believe it's been almost two months since her birth."

"I can because I've been half mad with wanting you," he whispered as he rose on an elbow next to her, the sheet falling below his perfectly chiseled chest. "Since she's asleep...."

"I don't want to wake her," Blaze said half-heartedly. She wanted Justin as much as he wanted her, perhaps even more so. Ever since her return to Splendour, Justin had remained true to his word. Each day, she began to trust him a little more and found that her love grew higher, something she wasn't sure was possible. Now, with the birth of Ariana, her heart soared.

"You lie, woman," he said as he gently urged her down on the bed and slid over on top of her. "If she's anything like you, she could sleep through a storm much less a few grunts and groans from her parents."

"I guess you're right, Justin," she said with a smile. "Nothing will ever come between us again."

His lips descended on her neck and began nibbling on all her sensitive places. "You talk too much, woman."

THE END