

## CHAPTER 1



### *FRANCE & THE CARIBBEAN, 1760S*

"*A*re you quite mad?" Snipes' dark eyes opened wide in horror and something akin to a gleaming interest. "Why in God's name would you want to do something so foolish as to take yourself into a pirate's lair? It's sheer insanity."

"If you won't go with me, I shall have to go alone," insisted Mads, short for Madelyn. Snipes called her Mads because he was sure she was crazy half the time. And now, thanks to this new idea, he had proof of it.

"Mother insisted I find a way to get to the Pirate's Hideaway and I must honor her dying request."

His eyebrow shot up. "Dying request? How positively theatrical, Mads. Is this another one of your crazy schemes?"

His skepticism was infuriating and Mads reached out to pinch him and pull a sensitive hair on his chest. "I am not being theatrical," she retorted. "It's you who are playing the fool, as usual."

He winced and knocked her hand away. "Stop that, you

wretched little pincher. Explain please," he demanded, rubbing the abused spot. "And I'm not playing a fool right now, I'm seriously concerned, Mads. The Pirate's Hideaway is no place for ladies, or gentlemen, I'm told."

Her eyes flashed with scorn, and if one looked really close, a false bravado. "If you won't accompany me, at least '*play the part of a man*' and purchase the tickets for me and Thierry."

He shot her a scandalized look while noting her vehemence appeared to border on desperation. "You surely can't mean to take a nine-year-old child with you on this foolish venture?" Her sarcastic remark regarding his manhood wasn't lost on him, but this second shock was worse than the first.

Mads eyed him judiciously, and he was certain her brain was working like the interior machinations of the timepieces he loved to explore and repair. This was by far the most hare-brained scheme she'd come up with to date, yet he was sure there must be some terribly valid reason behind it. He waited for it to come out. Or at least some semblance of a valid reason in Mads' mind, that is.

Snipes wasn't sure he would ever be privy to the entire truth with this madcap, twice removed cousin he'd grown up with. Since her father had died when she was eight, her capricious ways had only become worse. However, Aunt Marissa actually was dying from lung consumption, that much he knew. Mads would soon be alone in the world except for Thierry, her younger brother.

"Of course, I'm taking Thierry," she replied fiercely, her small nostrils flaring in her patrician nose. "And Mother says it's a real port for all countries, not just a pirate's stop. Besides, she insists I take Thierry."

Snipes was definitely intrigued now, his question smooth, his voice practically purring like a satisfied cat. "Do tell?"

He watched her gaze flash around the scope of her mother's small garden to make sure no one was within hearing distance.

Although there wasn't anyone in sight, her voice dropped to a dramatic whisper anyway.

"I can't tell you everything just yet, for your own safety, of course. If we are caught, the less you know, the better."

Snipes snorted and rolled his eyes impatiently. "Do stop with the theatrics, Mads. We aren't children anymore, playing made up spies and such. Just tell me why you want me to go to this blasted pirate's island with you!"

She drew herself up then, her small fists balled at her sides. "Because I shall be safer traveling with a husband than going alone," she announced through gritted teeth as if she were contemplating a fate worse than death.

Snipes was silent for an astounded moment, then he burst out with a sharp, derisive laugh that had her tapping her small, booted foot. "Husband?" he chortled. "My dear cousin, while I may entertain the thought of a trip to the Caribbean, I cannot, in good conscience, marry you in order to do so. It just isn't done. Besides, your husband, whoever the poor man may be in the future, will have his hands full sorting you out, and I'm looking forward to a front row seat." He scowled as he rubbed the offended spot on his chest again.

This time Mads rolled her eyes at him. "Of course, we aren't really getting married, you fool," she snapped. "We just need to pretend to be married. That way, I won't be approached by any halfcocked ne'er do wells who would seek my kisses."

"Now, you underestimate yourself," he replied gallantly, a grin playing about his well-shaped mouth. "I'm quite sure that one kiss from your succulent lips would ensure they were fully cocked and not half." He bowed slightly, his eyes brimming with mischief.

Mads giggled suddenly, her face turning pink. "You are so naughty, Snipes; you always have been."

"Yes, but naughty can be so much fun," he replied with a lazy smile, watching a shadow chase away the laughter in her pretty

goldish eyes. With the white-blond curls that fell in enticing spirals alongside her face and the windblown tendrils on her forehead, Madelyn Elizabeth Pendant was a beautiful girl. Her father had been the records keeper for the House of Frontenac all his life. After his death, Madelyn's mother had continued to be held in high regard by the families and often attended child-births among the nobles and gentry alike.

Snipes had entertained the idea of marrying Mads at one time, but his feelings were of family and friendship, not love. She just didn't quite have the right kind of physical assets he was interested in for a future wife. Unless there was an unusually large settlement, or a bloodline reason for the match, it wouldn't behoove him to marry someone he didn't love. Practical as always, and in no particular rush, Snipes was looking in other pastures, although he hadn't been successful in finding his prize just yet. In the meantime, naughty was always nice.

Mads' beautiful smile slowly faded. "All I can tell you right now is that Mother has asked me to book passage to the Pirate's Hideaway and to make contact with Jacques LaSalle as soon as possible. Once I've delivered something to him, I can return home, but it's important that I fulfill her request. After I've booked passage, she said she will tell me more but that's all for now. I also have to find someone to accompany me. She doesn't want me to go alone." She spread her hands in a very *'unMads'* like, helpless fashion, and her lower lip trembled. "The reason she wants me to take Thierry is because she really *is* dying, and she doesn't want him left alone. I know you are aware of that, Snipes."

Snipes' eyes softened at her sorrow, then narrowed. "I do know that, dear girl. But Jacques LaSalle? Do you know who he is, Mads?"

Just about everyone knew Aunt Marissa was dying, and there was nothing anyone could do. His heart went out to Mads, but this scheme sounded crazier than anything she'd attempted so

far. Admittedly, the lure of the Caribbean was certainly strong, but going forth into the lair of the most infamous pirate of French origin rather quelled those desires.

She took a calming breath and nodded. "Oui, everyone has heard of Jacques LaSalle. It is said he is a demon in league with the devil, yet he has the nickname of the *gentleman pirate*."

"He has been the bane of French shipping for the last several years," Snipes added, thoughtful. "His house, the house of Rohan, is in disgrace, and he has been declared a traitor and an outcast to France." He frowned. "I just don't understand why Aunt Marissa would send you and Thierry into such a dangerous world. Don't forget, Francesca and Katherine Fontaine, our distant cousins, have been gone for the last several years searching for that very man. LaSalle was responsible for the death of their father and the abduction of their mother."

"I know," Mads agreed. "I have heard he sails a ship as black as death." She shivered and looked around as if expecting it to sail up and into the garden from the depths of Hell itself. "Mother must have a very good reason for sending me, though, so I cannot let her down." Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Snipes, I'm so worried about Mother. She is failing badly. Even the doctors cannot give her much relief from the pain. I can't stay away any longer today, I must get back to her. Will you help me or not?"

Snipes relented his stern stance and gathered her close in his long arms. "Of course, I will help you, ma petite," he replied tenderly. "I've always wanted to sail into a Caribbean sunset, so let's be off on a new adventure. However, this time we need to pack more than apples for the wild dogs you wish to save from the forest. Such a foolish venture that was," he teased, trying to lighten her mood. Women's tears always befuddled him; he hated it when they cried.

"Oh, dear Seraphim Faust, I knew I could count on you," she enthused with a watery chuckle.

He scowled down at her. "Call me Seraphim one more time

and the deal is off," he proclaimed loudly. "Not only that, but I shall have to spank your little bottom until you are screaming. You know I don't like that name."

Mads threw back her head and laughed, then sniffled. "I won't tease you anymore—for now."

Her eyes had regained their sparkle and he was happy to see it. "One of these days, Mads," he warned.

"How many times have you threatened me with a spanking? You know you aren't going to," she mocked softly. "Your bark is way worse than your bite."

"Ah, you know me too well," he replied dryly. "Although I may yet surprise you if you don't curb your impulsive nature on this trip. It will be dangerous. I need you to listen to me if I'm going to protect you."

"Ha! I just need a man to accompany me to keep other men away. Otherwise, I can take care of myself." She turned away with her chin in the air.

He grabbed her arm and turned her towards him. "I mean it, Mads. I shall endeavor to find us the safest passage possible, but it's dangerous on the high seas. You must be careful, especially with Thierry along."

She sobered instantly. "Of course, I shall be careful. Now go to the shipyards and see what you can find out, please?"

"Mads, Mads, you must come immediately!"

From across the garden, Mads' younger brother, Thierry, was flying at them at breakneck speed. She lifted her skirts and ran to meet him. "What is it, Thierry?" she asked urgently. "What's wrong?"

"It's Mother," he cried, wringing his small hands. "She said to get you right away."

They all hurried into the house and into the bedroom where Marissa Pendant lay on her pillow, a shell of her former self. Snipes knew the general consensus was consumption of the lungs as her diagnosis, and he could certainly hear her laboring

to breathe. It was much worse than the last time he'd been to visit.

Marissa smiled weakly at them, her frail hand shaking as she lifted it to catch her daughter's. "You must go as soon as arrangements can be made, darling," she whispered urgently, holding up what looked like a letter in her other hand. "Rudolph insists on marrying you, and he's on his way to announce the bans. He has been after me for years to betroth you to him, but I wouldn't. When I die, he will take over, and there's nothing I can do to stop him then." She looked over at Snipes. "Are you going to help my daughter?"

When Snipes nodded, she sank back against the bed, her hands dropping, a slight trickle of blood coming from the corner of her mouth. "Oh, thank the deity for you, Seraphim. You have my deepest gratitude."

With a trembling finger, she pointed to the closet and spoke to Madelyn. "In there, is a black leather bag, my darling. It has a small lock on it, and there is no key. Please see that it is given to Jacques LaSalle...in person. He will know what to do when he gets it. It is *imperative* that he get that bag. I'm sorry to ask you to do this, but if you don't, he will never know the truth, and I can't take that to my grave."

"What truth, Mother?" Mads urged, tears in her eyes. "Tell me! What truth?"

Her mother tried to lift her hand again, but she didn't have the strength. She smiled at them all, her eyes tender. "Go, darlings, go now. You must hurry and get away!" Softly, her last breath slipped from her tortured lungs.

"Mother," Thierry wailed, throwing himself on the bed and weeping wildly.

Mads felt like doing the same thing but she turned to Snipes instead, her face pale. "Go and secure our passage while I pack. I know if Lord Gustavo gets here before we leave, I won't be going anywhere. Please hurry, Snipes."

"I believe there is a ship in the harbor that is due to sail tonight, according to one of my friends in the gentlemen's club, but it's not a passenger ship," he warned. "Are you prepared for that?"

"Yes, anything, just go," she snapped, tears in her eyes. "Ask for passage as a family, and I will pray they are accommodating. Lord Gustavo doesn't waste time. I'm sure by tomorrow morning at the latest, he will be here to press his suit." Her big eyes were imploring. "I don't want to be here when he gets here, Snipes."

"I'll be back as quickly as I can then," he promised. He left immediately, headed for the ports. He settled back in the Phaeton while his driver snapped the whip and shot off at a brisk pace.

The streets were dirty this time of year, he mused, staring out the window. It was that time in between the awakening of spring and the leftover, muddied slush of winter, a dreary time of year.

He'd had a hankering for a long time to set sail to the new world and visit his cousins' home in Louisiana, maybe see if Francesca and Katherine had returned home yet. He'd been spending time checking out the ships in the harbor, their comings and goings, and talking to his friends in idle chatter at the gentlemen's club.

The club was a hotbed of gossip, and it had garnered him information to store away for the future. Like the fact that at one time, Gustavo's father had been the best of friends with LaSalle's father. It was rumored in the society circles that the Gustavos might have had something to do with the troubles that had befallen the House of Rohan, but no one had any proof. It was an interesting crumb to pull out and look at in this situation, though.

He sighed and shifted in his seat, pulling slightly at the smooth fabric of his tan breeches that had ridden up to his crotch. Blasted things were a tad on the tight side. Perhaps he



was on a fool's errand, agreeing on a moment's notice to sail away with Mads, but he couldn't leave her to the mercy of Gustavo. Besides, he was not due to inherit his own father's lands and home unless three of his older brothers were to find their rest first. He didn't feel like waiting around for that to happen like some macabre harbinger of death. So, he might as well take the plunge, so to speak, and try something new.

He also didn't like Rudolph Gustavo. The man was disgustingly rich and an arrogant bully. His father had a poor reputation amongst the brothels, so society mothers shied away from him. They didn't want their daughters betrothed to the son of such a man, and their network was large and well versed as to who was an eligible male and who was not. So far, Gustavo hadn't managed to snare, or buy, any girl for his bride. Snipes didn't trust him not to do something underhanded just to force Mads' hand, and he didn't intend to let that happen if he could prevent it. She was his buddy, his madcap adventure friend and crazy cousin. He'd known Mads was afraid of the man before today and had turned down his proposals many times over. Gustavo wasn't the sort to take no for an answer and had remained persistent. Without Marissa Pendant here to act as a buffer, something bad would happen to Mads, he was sure of it.

When Richard stopped at his command, he sprang from the Phaeton and walked with brisk, sure steps along the docks, moving impatiently among the crowd. Some men were unloading ships, some were loading, and some people were dickering with the merchants regarding their wares. The docks were alive with people who were there for all sorts of reasons. He hastened his step.



CAPTAIN JOSIAH WINGATE lifted his nose to the wind, the smell of the salt air and murky harbor water assailing his senses as he

watched the people scurrying here and there on the docks. His galleon, the Trinity, was loaded and almost ready to take off for his return mission to the Pirate's Hideaway. He idly took note of the male figure rushing through the people below as if headed directly towards his ship, but his mind continued the inward perusal of his task.

Jacques LaSalle had sent him to France for fresh supplies and to receive any mail addressed to residents of the Hideaway. Before the island governor Morgan Macalister had returned to Scotland, he'd assigned Jacques LaSalle as the new governor of the little English supported colony.

Jacques longed for news from his uncle. News that might exonerate him as a traitor to France and restore the reputation of the house of Rohan. Especially since Jacques had received word from Morgan that he'd reclaimed his clan and castle in Scotland. Morgan wanted Jacques to come and visit as soon as he and Frankie could get away.

Josiah's lips curled in a brief smile as he pictured Jacques' wife, Frankie, in his mind. She was a beautiful woman, as hot headed and magnificent as they came. She and her twin sister Kat, who was now married to Morgan MacAlister, had come to the Hideaway over a year ago, seeking the blood of Jacques. They were determined to find their mother, whom they swore he had kidnapped. The fierce fighting beauties had set the entire colony on its heels until their mother was produced, safe and unharmed. Victoria Fontaine had married Frenchy, Jacques' trusted first mate. Once it was all sorted out, Jacques had married Frankie. Funny how things turned out sometimes.

Josiah's wool-gathering thoughts were disrupted as he realized the man he'd seen rushing through the crowd earlier was now running headlong up the gangplank of his ship. His quick eye appraised well-cut clothing tailored to a lean, muscular body, and an air of determination on the square-jawed face. A man on a mission, undoubtedly. When Jenks pointed to him

from the top of the gangplank, the man came towards him with a confident stride. Hand on the hilt of his sword, Josiah remained at guarded rest, waiting for him to approach.

"Captain Wingate?" came the cultured, if somewhat desperate sounding question from the man's lips.

Josiah nodded warily. "I'm Captain Wingate. What can I do for you?"

The man bowed slightly, courteously. "Captain Wingate, my name is Seraphim Faust, and I have urgent need of passage for three to the Pirate's Hideaway. I'm told this ship is headed for the Caribbean very soon. My family and I have desperate need to be on it."

"I'm afraid this vessel is a supply vessel, so we don't take passengers," Josiah replied cautiously. "Besides, the Hideaway is no place for a god-fearing woman or children."

"I'm willing to pay you well for passage—it's a matter of life and death."

Josiah frowned, appraising eyes the color of home-made toffee and the expensive cut of the silk, cream-colored vest and black trench coat. "Still, we are not set up for passengers. The only cabins we have are quite small, nothing suitable for a married couple or children. What is so important that you would risk taking your family into a pirate's port?"

"It is imperative that we make contact with Jacques LaSalle as soon as possible. I can collect my wife and child and be ready to leave within the hour if need be," he replied urgently. "I'll pay you double fare if I have to, but we must be on this ship when it leaves port."

Large, smooth hands that had obviously known no physical labor grabbed his black matching tricorne and held it in place. His brown curls were held back with a shiny black ribbon. Certainly, a gentleman, probably from the ton. He would well be able to afford double the normal fare.

Josiah weakened. Double fare, when they didn't even take

passengers, meant coin in his pocket. The man was obviously desperate. "What do you want with LaSalle?" he finally asked.

"I have information for him that he urgently needs," Faust responded. The wind nibbled at the black ribbon that held the hair behind his head and Josiah wondered idly how long it would withstand the chilling harbor breeze.

"I'm picking up mail for the Hideaway. I can take this information you speak of to LaSalle for you," Josiah offered graciously. "You don't have to take your family into a dangerous situation."

Faust drew his long length up, his jaw set. "While I appreciate your offer, Captain, this must be delivered in person. It's not something we can entrust to a third party because it's not ours to do so. It's been given to us by someone LaSalle may have known in the past, and it was their dying wish that he receives it. We *must* fulfill this request ourselves."

He looked around with a slight pause and then continued, a frown on his face. "There is also imminent danger to our persons. Someone who would stop us from our mission is coming for us as we speak. So please, I'll pay you whatever you require for safe passage to the Hideaway. Name your price."

Josiah's eyes narrowed as he considered the offer. Perhaps this had something to do with the information Jacques was seeking from his uncle. If there was any chance that it might be, he couldn't turn this man away. Jacques had saved his life twice over. He was loyal to him, whether pirate, mercenary, governor, or whatever he decided to be on any given day. Finally, making up his mind, he nodded sharply. "I will take you to LaSalle for a reasonable fare, but be warned, he does not suffer fools gladly. We leave in one hour. If you are not on board by then, we will not wait."

"We will be here, Captain," Faust assured him, his toffee eyes gleaming. "I think you'll find this fare reasonable." He handed Josiah a bag of coins. "If not, let me know. I can get more."

Josiah glanced briefly inside the bag, then closed it and stuffed it in his pocket. "It will do nicely, thank you. I shall have the men ready the cabin."

"Oh, would it be possible to have two cabins? If these are as small as you say, my wife and child might be more comfortable sleeping in one bed while I use another. Just for the trip," he added.

Josiah thought it strange that he would want to be separated from his wife, but he did have two adjoining cabins. The cook was in one, but he could move him over to the next one. "I can do that, but it will cost you a bit more," he replied, keeping his thoughts to himself. He took the extra money Faust handed him and added it to the bag. If Faust didn't make it back, he'd made a nice profit for himself this day. However, he would give him the requested hour. He was, after all, an honorable English gentleman of His Majesty's navy.