

## Chapter Three

Voices eventually replaced the laughter. It sounded like a party.

Even so, I wondered if I should make myself known or do a little investigating first.

I didn't have time to decide before a man from above yelled, "Ahoy! Friend or foe?"

Even though the only light came from torches, someone had spotted me. He must have been wearing night vision goggles.

"Friend, I guess."

"You guess, good sir?" the invisible man asked with an English accent. "What's that you hold in your hand?"

"A flare gun."

"A what?"

Before I could repeat myself, another voice said, "He says it's a flare gun, Master Judson."

"Aye, captain," the first voice said humbly.

A shadowy figure approached the railing between two torches. "When did you arrive?"

"Today," I replied.

"Today? Well, then, I'm sure you're full of inquiries, *non?* You better come up and have a drink. Believe me, you'll need it. Lower the plank! We have a guest!"

I went to the yacht's starboard side, while a pair of crewmen slid a long board gently into the water.

"Hurry up, *señor*," one of them called. "Get on before the sharks come."

The thought of getting back in the water frightened the hell out of me, especially when it was now inky black. Nevertheless, I wasn't about to look like a fool in front of a band of sailors. I climbed down from the yacht, waded quickly through the water, and stepped onto the plank.

Unlike the first galleon, *The Pride* was tied to other ships and planes by thick rope, keeping the vessel upright. As I walked up the plank, I wondered who these people were and what they were capable of doing. Common law most likely wouldn't apply in a place like this. I reminded myself that I was on a quest to find people—people with answers—and perhaps I'd found what I was looking for. Even so, it was best to stay vigilant.

The deck was decorated with a web of lights strung overhead. Some were solar-powered party lights of various colors. Others were little square glass lamps, each lit by fire. Torches tied to the railing provided the most light. Why fire and no electric lights? Probably because an old ship like this had no way to charge batteries.

Once I was on the deck, a pale man with short bristly hair and a dense mustache greeted me. He was dressed in denim bell-bottoms but no shirt. "That flare gun you have, I'll need it—and any other weapons you have." His accent was English and he wasn't wearing night vision goggles as I'd thought.

"I think I'll keep it. Don't worry. I'm not going to try anything."

He held out his hand. "Trust me, lad, you don't want to kill anyone around here, even accidentally. Hand it over. It's for your own good."

I didn't understand what he meant, but I handed both my loaded and unloaded gun over. He didn't take my flashlight, which I held as casually as I could so as not to draw any suspicion to it.

Other men appeared on the deck—five black, four Spanish, and three Caucasians. Each was

dressed in clothing from different eras. One Spaniard and one of the Caucasian men wore dirty white Royal Navy sailor uniforms. One of the black men wore only a brown vest and trousers. Another Caucasian was dressed in baggy denim shorts and a long white T-shirt, reminding me of a wannabe thug. None of them was over five-foot-six. I was six feet tall and towered above them, but I was outnumbered and needed to keep my guard up.

“Hi,” I said sociably. “I’m Heath Sharp.”

“I’m Judson,” the bristly-haired man said.

Before anyone else could introduce themselves, a voice from the staircase said, “And I am the captain.”

A man dressed in a blue captain’s coat with *Windfall* sewn in gold thread on the breast pocket walked down the steps. He wore an admiral’s hat and white pants that were cuffed over his brown loafers, as well as a Hawaiian shirt. His hair was dark, wavy, and shoulder-length, and his eyes a piercing black. One hand was tucked into his pants pocket, while the other held a clay pipe.

“Oh, the questions that must be running through your head, *monsieur*,” the captain said as he reached the deck, his voice laden with French tones.

I said nothing as he approached. His graceful movement was mesmerizing. When he was about two arm’s length away, he stopped to take a drag off his pipe. His black eyes never blinked.

“Where are you from?” he asked as he exhaled gray smoke into the night air. His lips then froze in a slight grin, as if he loved hearing the sound of his own voice.

“California, originally,” I replied.

He took another puff off his pipe and studied my face. “You have a unique look about you. What did you say your name was?”

“Heath Sharp.”

He moved closer. “*Bonsoir*, Monsieur Sharp, I am *Capitaine* Jean Lafitte.”

My eyebrows rose in confusion. I’d heard that name before and my mind quickly backtracked through my memory. The name reminded me of New Orleans, which reminded me of the magazine *The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld*. I’d read a copy years ago when I’d visited the city, of an article about Jean Lafitte.

“Jean Lafitte, the pirate? Didn’t Jean Lafitte die of fever in Teljas in the 1800s?”

The captain frowned, his eyes narrowing. “I was no pirate. I was a *privateer*. And no, I did not die of a fever.”

The man was probably insane. This guy, who dressed like Mr. Howell on *Gilligan’s Island*, told me with a straight face that he was one of the most famous pirates in history. I couldn’t help but show my skepticism. “So, where’s Blackbeard?”

“Unless you want to spend eternity in the brig, *señor*,” one of the Spaniards sneered, “I suggest you watch your tongue before I cut it out.”

I instinctively gripped my flashlight a little tighter.

“No, Amado,” the captain said, “he is confused, much like the rest of us were when the hurricane brought us here.” The captain extended his hand to suggest that I follow him. “Come, let us sit together like gentlemen and I will clear your perplexity as best I can.”

I wanted answers so I followed him to his quarters, my shoes squeaking like mice in hysterics along the way. I was exasperated and wet. In his quarters, I asked, “Could I trouble you for a pair of dry socks?”

The captain snorted. “It would seem that you need more than dry socks, *mon ami*.”

True. I needed an entire new wardrobe, but my wet feet irritated me the most.

“You may borrow my robe for the night,” he said, plucking a long fluffy one off a hook on a

wall. “Undress and we’ll hang your clothes outside to dry, provided it doesn’t rain.”

I peeled off my clothes except for my boxers. I wasn’t going to get totally naked in front of a man I didn’t know.

The room was well lit by a number of candles, even a cylinder shaped star lamp displaying tiny stars on the ceiling and walls. The firelight inside it made the little dots flicker from time to time. The room was also adorned with all types of things from the past and present. A strong smell of tobacco smoke hung in the air. Heavy chairs surrounded a large oak table, much like the one I’d seen on the other galleon. The table was littered with naked pinup girl playing cards, coins, paper money, and chips, as well as wine and rum bottles. I must have interrupted a poker game.

To my left was a bookshelf filled with novels, comics, and reference books. A handful of paintings hung on the walls but I paid them little mind. Instead, I examined several crude sketches of the captain, crew, and the planes and ships surrounding the galleon. A strange triangular shadow hovered in the background but I dismissed it as just another plane or ship in the sketches.

“Is it always so foggy around here?” I asked as Lafitte poured two glasses of wine.

He turned slightly and said, “Indeed. From time to time, it thins out, but it always lingers. It’s like a bad joke.” His tone became somber. “I do miss the sunshine and the crystal-clear ocean.”

His expression was the saddest I’d ever seen, as if he’d been committed to life in prison. “I also miss the bayou and my kingdom in Barataria.” He let out a mournful sigh and approached me with a wine glass in each hand. “But life always has a way of surprising you, *non?*”

“For an ancient pirate, you’ve accumulated a lot of modern things,” I said, draping my sopping clothes over a chair and tying the robe around my waist. I still didn’t buy that I was in the company of such a historic figure.

“I told you,” he said sharply, handing me a glass, “I am no pirate. I’m a privateer. And just because I was born in the nineteenth century doesn’t mean everything I own has to come from that era. Especially when we’re surrounded by such wonderful new treasures. I only wish most of them worked.”

As I accepted the glass of wine, he continued. “You like my drawings, *non?* It was my hobby until I ran out of paper.”

I pointed to the odd triangle. “What’s this object in the picture?”

He lowered his glass and studied where I pointed. “That is the SS *Marine Sulphur Queen*.”

He thought I meant the ship next to the shadow. There was a jagged crack running down its keel. “It looks like it’s been badly damaged, like it snapped or something.”

“The *Queen’s* captain explained to me that such cargo ships weren’t structurally sound. When his was caught in the storm, she snapped in half. You’ll see her tomorrow. She’s not too far from here, and a ship that large is hard to miss, even on the saddest of days.”

“Saddest of days?”

“*Oui*, when the fog is at its heaviest, it can be quite gloomy.” He took a long drink. “You will soon come to realize that for yourself.”

“You really believe you’re Jean Lafitte?” I asked, looking him squarely in the eye as if searching for the truth within his face.

He sighed again. “I understand your confusion and disbelief, *mon ami*. I myself once had the same doubts as you. Come, let me show you some things that may lessen your disbelief.”

He turned on his heel and approached a redwood wardrobe in the back corner. I finally took a drink before following him to the closet. It was good wine, some of the best I’d ever tasted, although it left a tart aftertaste in my mouth.

Inside the wardrobe hung a long red coat, a black cape, and breeches. A pair of scuffed boots sat

on the floor. Hanging from a hook on the back of the door was a black brim hat with a gray feather. A pair of musket rifles and a scabbard were propped against the inside wall.

He slipped off his jacket, tossed it onto a nearby chair, and pulled out the velvet coat. He put it and the hat on, then turned to face me as he buttoned it up. While the coat was majestic and a perfect fit, it didn't go well with his Hawaiian shirt or brown loafers. Its slender sleeves hugged his arms but gave his wrists some freedom. The wide white collar sat flawlessly around his neck. The entire ensemble seemed tailor-made, and even the hat sat on his head as if it was part of him.

"I haven't worn this in over a decade," he said, swinging the cape around him.

"This is how you prove you're Jean Lafitte?" I asked. "By putting on some old coat?"

"No, I want to show you what I wore when this portrait was painted." He moved over to a framed picture of a man in a red coat hanging on the wall and posed like the image on the canvas. "Before coming here, the portrait sustained some salt air damage, but can you see the similarity?"

I studied the painting before shifting my eyes to the captain's same stern expression. The man in the portrait was the spitting image of him.

"The amusing thing about this painting is that it's the original."

"Why is that funny?"

"Because scores of people have told me that the copy the artist made before giving me this one is the original. The year 1814 was a chaotic one. I received a letter from King George III, asking me to fight in his Royal Navy against the Americans. I still have the letter, if you'd like to see it."

Before I answered, he slid open the top drawer of a nearby desk. There was something on the desk covered by a green velvet cloth. "What's under there?"

"Just something I collected from a spiteful little man. Would you like to see it?"

He pulled the cloth back. What lay under it made my stomach turn inside out.

"Jesus!" I gasped, gaping at a severed arm submerged in a yellowish liquid in a ten-gallon fish tank. "Is that thing real?"

"*Oui*, it belonged to Captain George Saxon. He's no one famous. Just another unfortunate louse to get caught in this place."

"What happened between you two?"

"Hard feelings," he said, lowering the cloth over the tank. "Let us leave it at that." He turned and held out an envelope. "Would you care to read the king's letter?" Seeing my pallid expression, he asked, "Are you all right?"

"It's the air," I lied.

"Ah, don't fret, *mon ami*, you will soon get used to it and breathe it as well as the air in the natural world. Like being constantly exposed to a bad smell. Eventually, you won't notice it anymore. Come, let us sit and talk. There is something else I would like to show you."

In spite of myself, I began to believe what he told me. Could he actually be Jean Lafitte?

We sat across from each other at the table. The robe's fabric prickled my skin. It wasn't as fluffy as it appeared.

"Okay," I said as he reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved a small leather pouch. "If you are who you say you are, what does that make you? Immortal?"

He withdrew a pinch of tobacco and stuffed it into his pipe. "That is precisely the case." He struck a match. "My crew—and everyone else trapped here, including you—are now immortal."

I sat back in surprise. "Are you saying I'll never die?"

"Oh, you can die," he said, puffing on his pipe. "Death's bony hands can reach far, *mon ami*, even in this place. You can kill yourself or be murdered, or die accidentally. Just not of old age."

"What *is* this place?" I asked, leaning forward again.

He exhaled through his nose, the smoke looming in the air. "It's the Bermuda Triangle. Or the Devil's Triangle. Call it whatever you wish."

I blinked. "The Bermuda Triangle? As in the area where ships and planes vanish?"

"Haven't you seen enough evidence today to confirm that?"

I rubbed my forehead. "But how is that possible?"

"Anything is possible."

"Apparently," I mumbled. "Okay, if that's true, answer me this. I saw dead bodies today inside a ship and one of them looked like he'd died just before I found him."

The captain's eyes widened as he stood. "You didn't disturb his body, did you?" Not waiting for my reply, he asked again, this time more insistently. "Did you?"

"Who? The dead man?"

"Yes, you fool, did you disturb it? Touch it? Move it?"

I gave him a questioning look as I shook my head. "No, I only read a suicide note, but I returned it."

"And you didn't touch the body?" he asked, still anxious.

"No, I didn't touch it."

He sighed deeply, lowering himself back into his chair. "Well, that should be all right, then."

A moment of deep silence settled over us as he took a drag from his pipe. I waited for him to explain his outburst, but he didn't and I became impatient as he casually took a sip. "What the hell was that all about? I tell you about some dead guy and you nearly shit yourself."

He slowly lowered his glass to the table, sliding his eyes over me. "I do not wish to travel far into the subject. My sole advice to you about the dead is to leave them be."

"Why?" I asked, utterly confused.

"Just do as I tell you and let us now talk of other things."

"Like what?"

"You were asking how this was possible."

"Yes, how is it?"

He twisted his fingers around his long goatee. "I know not. It just is."

It was like having a conversation with the Caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*. I sighed in frustration and snatched my glass from the table. "How many people are here?"

"Hundreds...thousands. I am not sure anymore. I don't leave the ship very often. There are some out there, the British especially, who continue to hold a grudge against me for my part in helping the Americans defeat them in Louisiana."

"Is that what happened between you and Captain Saxon?"

"Let's talk about you," he suggested, changing the subject.

I put my glass down. "What about me?"

"Your physical appearance is intriguing. Tell me, what nationality are you?"

Again with my appearance? I'd inherited my father's Native American cheekbones, nose, and dark hair, but I had my mother's bright green eyes, which stood out against my olive complexion. I had to admit that seeing a Native American with green eyes was a bit like coming across an albino.

"I'm half white and half Wailaki Indian."

"Indian, you say? You're the first Indian I've seen since we arrived. I must say, your skin color is very light for an Indian."

"I'm only half Indian."

"And from whom did you inherit those electrifying green eyes?"

“My mother.”

“Ah, how times have changed. People of your time can breed with another nationality without prejudice and fear of death, *non?*”

“I wouldn’t say without prejudice, but at least you don’t get put to death for it.”

“What year is it?”

I tried to ease myself into the reality of this surreal moment. I told him the year and he stared at me a moment before lifting his glass to take a drink. “Well over a hundred years,” he muttered.

“What does that mean?”

He lowered his glass, resting both elbows on the arms of his chair, slouching, his legs crossed. “Nothing.”

I let it go and went on to another topic. “How did you come to end up here?”

He took one last draw from his pipe before placing it on the table. “My life took a turn for the worse in 1821. Despite my loyalty to the US Navy, they still viewed me as a threat and drove me out of Galveston. In retaliation, I set my entire empire ablaze so the government couldn’t claim its spoils. I meant it as an act to bring me more power but it caused my downfall. After losing two of my ships when I refused to attack a Spanish merchant vessel, I was reduced to nothing but a common thief. I tried to rebuild my militia but failed. After five years of living like an outcast in the country I’d fought for, I went to Teljas to enjoy wild hunts with the natives. I then left for Puerto Rico to buy slaves, but a hurricane set upon us.

“When the storm ended, we found ourselves here. There were other ships trapped here, as well, but not nearly as many as there are now. Over time, more ships came. Then strange flying machines began to fall from the sky.” He chuckled. “I thought I’d seen everything. Then I saw my first television, although it didn’t work. Nothing that requires batteries or electricity can operate here.”

“Why not?”

“No one knows.”

That explained why neither my cell phone nor flashlight worked. “What about that body inside the ship? The suicide note I found said he died in 1836. If that’s so, why hasn’t he decomposed?”

“Nothing from the outside rots here,” he explained. He twisted his fingers around his goatee again. “Everyone is preserved in the same manner they were when they arrived, even after death. Machines and ships stay as they were. Metal does not rust and the water does not eat at the wood.” He untangled his fingers. “And flesh does not decompose or wither away.”

“Why?”

“I do not know.”

“You don’t know? You’ve been here all this time and still don’t have a clue?”

“I told you, I don’t leave the ship often. And frankly, I no longer care.”

I decided to try another route. Perhaps it was because I still didn’t fully believe he was who he claimed to be. “Before you came here, you say you were a slave trader?”

“*Oui*,” he answered without hesitation.

“So, those black men on the deck are slaves?”

“I understand in your time the thought of slavery is inconceivable. But in my time, slavery was a part of everyday life, like tying a witch to a stake and burning her to death. Yes, I sold slaves, even owned them. We’re all guilty of the wrongs from our own eras, *non?*” He took a drink. “And yes, they were slaves. They once belonged to me, but shortly after we arrived here, I set them free. I gave them the option to leave or stay. At first, they wouldn’t leave the ship. Like the rest of us, fear kept them planted here—especially the sounds at night.”

“Sounds?”

“*Oui*. Torturous shrills with the ability to cease the beating of even the stoutest heart. Fortunately, they’re not as common now as they once were. As time went on, some of the crew and slaves left, but those who remained here have become my friends. My equals, if you will.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to show me something?” I asked.

“But of course. Wait right here.”

He went to the other side of the room, where he rummaged through his belongings. As he did, I glanced over at the green sheet covering the severed arm. If I didn’t watch my step, I might end up losing a limb.

When Lafitte returned to the table, he carried a large wooden chest. With a mighty heave, he hefted it onto the table, knocking over several bottles and sending them crashing to the floor.

“It’s not another arm, is it?” I asked nervously.

He smiled. “How well do you know my story?”

“Not well.”

He reached into his shirt pocket for a handkerchief. “I see,” he said, pressing the cloth against his forehead and drumming his fingers on the lid of the chest. “When I left home, I took a substantial amount of treasure with me.”

My eyes widened when he raised the lid, exposing silver and gold coins, pearl necklaces, rubies, and uncut diamonds. It was a typical pirate treasure—enough to make Bill Gates drool.

“Holy shit!” I said, reaching into the chest and plucking out an uncut diamond. I held it up to the light to study the stone. It was heavy, with rough edges, and about the size of a prune. Once cut and polished, the clarity would be clear enough that it would be worth more than my plane.

“It’s all real, *mon ami*,” he said, pulling the stone from my fingers and tossing it back into the chest. He closed the lid. “Everything is real. And so am I.”

I sat back as the reality of the situation washed over me. Lafitte laughed as he retook his seat and rekindled his pipe. Blowing a perfect smoke ring, he said, “Tomorrow, I will show you where you must go.”