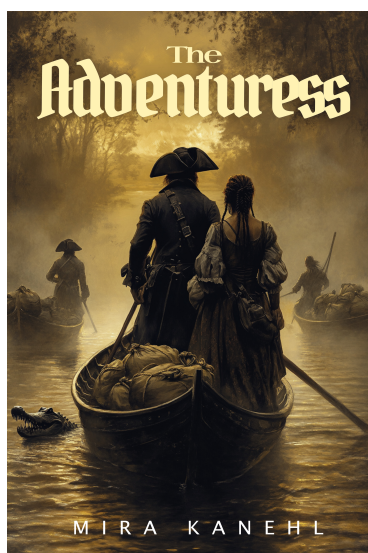


THE ADVENTURESS

FIRST CHAPTER ONLY

ONE VIRTUE AND A THOUSAND CRIMES

MIRÀ KANEHL



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A QUESTION OF PRUDENCE

N*ew Orleans, March 1813*

“It will not go unnoticed for much longer, Jean,” Mr. Clark said, storming into the dusty attic.

Jean heaved the sack of coffee off his back and onto the splintered shelf with a thump. “What?”

“We must limit using the Lafourche route.” He gestured to the sacks of contraband—filled with coffee, sugar and linen—laying at the trapdoor. “Please, Jean, don’t parade the streets with the loot. The rumors around the Baratarians are becoming preposterous.”

Jean wiped his forehead with his sleeve, the coarse linen and dust scratching his sweaty skin. Theories about the happenings at Barataria, the little island sheltering the Barataria Bay from the Gulf of Mexico, crossed many lips in New Orleans. The officials were busy with the aftermath of the war, so Barataria served as the perfect haven for Jean and his brother Pierre’s business. The rumors convinced many people Jean had established his own government there, with reports of three hundred Frenchmen fortified and fourteen

cannons in place to ward off intruders. It was a blatant exaggeration, of course, but it kept snoops away.

Mr. Clark cleared his throat. "Prudence is posing a threat."

"That anonymous writer?" Jean scratched the back of his head, staring into the dust on the floorboards where tiny paw prints disappeared in the corner.

"Indeed."

"Ough." Jean discarded Mr. Clark's concern with a swing of the hand, scaring off a fly passing him that buzzed to a window and bumped into it. "Half of what he writes is nonsense." Jean's gaze followed the trapped insect and the dead flies and moths that lay on the windowsill below it.

"The public does not know this."

Jean inhaled the grassy scent of green coffee overpowering that of the dust swirling in the beams of light entering by the two long windows looking onto the street. The wooden floor of the warehouse over Jean's blacksmith shop gave in and creaked as he paced the room. Though the location was perfect—for no one suspected the strong slaves venturing here for work—the constant fire had Jean sweating. He yearned for proper catches that would let him leave more of the heavy work to others. "What did Prudence bubble around this time?"

"He posted a public letter claiming to have heard a smuggler state the governor overstepped his powers."

Under them, a slave kindled the small furnace—the bigger one was in the adjoining house—and pumped air into the now crackling flames. Jean nodded with a mockingly serious expression, the taste of molten metal creeping onto his tongue as the smoke rose through the floorboards like ghosts rising from the dead. "Oh, even the patient Clai-borne cannot ignore this." Jean snickered, fetched another sack and yanked it over his shoulder. Having grown up in

Bordeaux, and so close to the Pyrenees Mountains—a lawless region that separated France from Spain, and which he often visited for much of his family lived there—he had never had the chance to feel himself part of either country or sympathy for its organizers, be it king or government. But Jean was also a sociable man who cared about people, business relationships and social standing, and he knew this was the point Mr. Clark was trying to touch. Jean smiled. “But for once, I fear Prudence is right.”

Mr. Clark exhaled and strode forward, pushing away the smoke between them. “True or not, your disguise is crumbling.”

Jean lifted the sack onto the rack and offered Mr. Clark a smug smile. But seeing Mr. Clark’s tense expression, Jean’s faded. He shrugged before picking up the next brown sack.

Heavy clinks from the blacksmith’s hammering silenced Mr. Clark before he could speak, and the vibration of the hits thrummed through the wood. It ended with sizzling.

“Vincent Nolte complained that the French Creole planters make no secret of obtaining slaves at a hundred and fifty dollars on Barataria instead of the legal seven hundred here in the city.”

Jean raised his brows, showing his open palms. “Cheap prices give us the support of the people.”

“Mr. Nolte is an influential merchant, and we are compromising his business. Not to mention the scarcity of free money your no-check method is causing in town. The Governor claims it’s driving a wedge between the French and Americans.” Mr. Clark lowered his voice, and Jean heard tiny claws race over wood beyond him. “We are making allies and foes alike, Jean. And our friends may be *en masse*, but our enemies have power.”

Jean puffed. “You fret too much. Don’t forget I outwit their bureaucracy.”

“My point, precisely.” Mr. Clark hit one fist into the other. “We are not just taking their trade but parading the fact under their noses. We are provoking them.”

“That’s the merit of our business,” Jean said, grinning widely.

“You are unbelievable, Laffite.”

He gave Mr. Clark a lopsided smile, but, with no improvement in his companion’s demeanor, sighed. “Fine, silence Prudence if you must, but do not hurt him.”

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