

PROLOGUE

Adventure is my mistress; I am always at her command.

Francis de Brangelton to Henrietta d'Arrington - 1694



Lyon, France – July 1707

“The Great Mogul Diamond is the largest diamond in existence,” Laurent de la Fleure, Comte de Chateaux read aloud from *The Six Voyages of Jean Baptiste de Tavernier*. “The only Western record of it exists here.” He handed the book to Francis de Brangelton, Comte de Tournelles.

His old friend held the diamond to the light. He examined the illustration, glancing back and forth between the fortune in his hand and the page in the book. “This must be it.” He tossed the diamond to Laurent and leaned back, absorbed in reading.

Laurent eyed the clear sparkling jewel in the light. It matched the description perfectly: the right size and shape, the surfaces cut in the same way as the one shown in the book, and almost colorless. There could be no mistake. “*Only de Brangelton,*” Laurent marveled. What were the chances of anyone else accidentally discovering and appropriating the Indian Great Mogul Diamond in the New World?! “Is your curiosity satisfied?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Who moved this diamond to the New World? How could he, and why would he? I am certain its sanctuary in the ruins was granted recently, but when exactly?” De Brangelton flipped through the pages of the book. “Keep this sparkler for me till I find out more about its previous ownership, will you?”

Laurent sat down and flattened a sheet of paper. “*I, Laurent de la Fleure, Comte de Chateaux, solemnly and in sound mind stand witness that the diamond described below and contained within this package is the rightful property of Francis de Brangelton...*” He diligently recorded the deed, signed it, set his seal to the top and bottom of the page, and left the page to dry. He polished the diamond on his sleeve. “You don’t mind if I show this jewel to Marguerite, do you?”

“As long as she promises to keep it secret.” The sly reply started an unexpected sea of memories for Laurent. A dozen years had passed since Marguerite’s arrival to Paris had triggered a chain of events which led him, a

Lieutenant of His Royal Musketeers, to quit the regiment, return home to Lyon, and settle into marital bliss. His peaceful civic existence was continuously enhanced by participation in the creative activities hatched by his friends, mostly de Brangelton, whose recent adventure to New World deposited his children, Henri and Charlotte, with Laurent and Marguerite for a year. Henri was a year younger than Antoine, and Charlotte was a year older than Raoul. The quartet always kept Laurent and Marguerite on their toes. Laurent became aware of the children's voices drifting from outside and leaned out of the window, just in time to witness the beginning of a commotion between Raoul and Charlotte. Even at her tender age of seven, the girl was willful, clever, adventurous, and reckless, and Raoul was mortified by the mere thought of failing to keep up with her. His fears were mercilessly exploited and fueled by Antoine and Henri - these two young miscreants found endless entertainment in no-holds-barred competition between their younger siblings.

Right now, Antoine and Henri were arbitrating a game of tug-of-war between the arguing youngsters. Raoul had a slight advantage of pure strength, and he used it to tug hard on the rope. Charlotte toppled forward, her toe barely touching the dividing line, but her sudden move caused Raoul to struggle for his balance. She took the advantage and jerked the rope back. Raoul stumbled forward and his bare toe landed on the line. The older boys hooted.

"You cheated!" Hands on hips, Raoul glared at Charlotte.

"I did not!" She mirrored his posture.

"You are a weasel!" Raoul articulated his unrefined opinion.

"You are a lout!" Charlotte, unburdened by the concept of nicety, readily retorted.

"Shrew!"

"Dung beetle!"

At that shot, Raoul failed to find a suitable response and unceremoniously shoved the girl backwards. She reciprocated. He pushed her again. Charlotte took a swing at him. In a heartbeat, the two were rolling on the ground. The older brothers half-heartedly commanded them to stop and were duly ignored. They finally separated the fighting parties before either one landed a punch on the other.

"You are..."

Henri's hand over Charlotte's mouth cut off her endeavor to quarrel.

Antoine twisted Raoul's arm behind him and waited till his younger brother stopped struggling. He released the boy and jostled him away from Charlotte. Raoul stomped away with an air of righteous indignation. Henri nudged Charlotte in the opposite direction. The older boys suspiciously watched Raoul and Charlotte till the combatants reached the opposite sides of the yard.

"Is my girl finished exchanging pleasantries with your son?" de Brangelton asked.

"Add yet another trivial scuffle to their affectionate history. I appreciate your desire to make certain your strong-headed girl is capable of self-defense, but I wish my younger son was less willing to tussle with her." Laurent turned away from the window.

"I stand in awe at how excellently Antoine and Henri have perfected the skill of blaming Charlotte for all their mischief. They experimented with gunpowder because Charlotte wanted to see an explosion. They snuck out to ride at night to prove to Charlotte they are not afraid of the darkness. They lost track of time and thus failed to present themselves to our visitors because Charlotte insisted on tracking a magpie. They stripped Raoul to the breeches and painted him - and his breeches - in war colors like a New World savage and made him run across the wood clearing to the accompaniment of drum beat and these war-yells you taught them. Stop laughing. This performance happened to take place during the formal reception at our neighbors' garden facing the aforementioned wood clearing. Some young heads gathered to give chase, and I felt obligated to advise on strategy. Thus the performers safely reached home. When Marguerite and I arrived, Antoine and Henri were frantically scrubbing the paint off Raoul. Washing the soot out of Raoul's hair took three baths --and yes, his hair was darkened for the occasion. Our fine boys did not miss a single detail. Did I mention that the little savage brandished the spoils of a fake scalping? One of my household horses is missing half a tail. And the reason for this escapade? Charlotte dared Raoul. Upon hearing that explanation, I could barely keep a straight face, and merely sent them all out of my sight without even a lecture on their unacceptable behavior."

Tours, France - May 1710

Under the ominous gray clouds, the fine foggy mist enveloped the streets, and the murky dusk descended much faster than Henrietta de Brangelton had expected. People hurried indoors before the rain fell, and Henrietta cut through the narrow alley behind St. Martin's Basilica to shorten the trip. She and her daughter were halfway down the lane when two seedy-looking men stumbled toward them. The daylight was almost extinguished and the street was deserted. Every building had closed their shutters in anticipation of the rain. Henrietta glanced back. No one behind her, which meant no ambush was likely to be forthcoming. And yet, the relative safety of the busy street, filled with witnesses, was too far.

She put a protective arm around her daughter's shoulders. "*Stay behind me and out of their reach,*" she whispered to Charlotte and steered to the left, keeping her daughter between herself and the wall. If these men meant

trouble, they would try to surround them. Henrietta slipped her hand to the slit in her skirts and closed her fingers around the hilt of her small sword.

The men leered at her with bleary eyes and slouched against the wall.

Henrietta tensed in anticipation of confrontation. "If there is a fight, run forward onto the street and head home. I will catch up with you," she instructed her daughter, who fearlessly, even appraisingly, stared at the men. Fortunately, the men ignored the child as they focused on disengaging themselves from the supporting wall. "It's a fine evening, Madame," one of them said with a malicious sneer when only a few paces separated them.

Henrietta steeled herself for action and confidently strode forward.

"Will you join us for the celebration, Madame?" the second man slurred.

Henrietta pretended to tighten her left arm around Charlotte's shoulders, aware she might be forced to make her daughter run. "Move out of my way," she commanded and continued to march forward.

The men startled at the unexpected notes of authority in her voice. They warily looked around, but recovered from surprise at the moment her path aligned with them. "That was unfriendly, Madame. Is your daughter...?" The first man reached for Charlotte.

Henrietta's caution transformed into intense fury. She nudged the girl forward and backhanded the man with her right hand. His feet lost contact with the ground, and Henrietta used that split-second advantage to follow through with a heavy punch into his temple with her left arm, throwing her whole weight into the swing. The second man belatedly attempted to seize her hand, but the crumpled body of his friend collided into him. Henrietta used that moment of confusion to draw her small sword and faced the second adversary who, with an effort and copious obscenities, finally untangled himself from his collapsed friend. He blinked at the sight of the steel and fumbled for his weapon. Henrietta swept her blade in front of his face and advanced. His widened eyes focused on the point of her sword. He recoiled and flattened himself against the wall. Henrietta held the sharp blade against the side of his throat, under his jaw. He still frantically fumbled to untangle his sword. He was not sober enough to comprehend that he was completely on her mercy. With her left hand, Henrietta deployed a solid punch into his jaw, perfectly timed with the removal of the edge of her blade from his neck. His head bounced off the hard wall with a thickening thud as he slumped forward and slid down to his friend on the muddy ground.

The alley remained deserted. Henrietta concealed her weapon and, tightly holding Charlotte's hand, ran onto the main street to blend into a thinning crowd of hurrying citizens. She glanced over her shoulder, both men remained motionless heaps. "*Serves them right,*" Henrietta fumed. "*In fact, the one who reached for Charlotte should be grateful I did not kill him ...*"

"No one witnessed the clash." Charlotte was perfectly calm. "I watched the windows. Nobody peeked. No one was in the street either."

Henrietta's stride faltered for a moment. "Not a word about it outside the family, Charlotte. I just injured two men, and I don't care to justify my actions to the city magistrate."

A reckless grin, just like her father's, spread across the girl's face. "Mother, did you figure these bastards meant trouble before they spoke to you?" Charlotte had inherited her father's expressive dark blue eyes, his slim build, his agility and grace, his disregard for danger, his thirst for adventure, and, thankfully, his quick wit. Unfortunately, she also had a tendency to repeat his vocabulary, although she knew better than to use such language in company.

"We will talk at home." Henrietta held onto a weak hope that she would not have to explain her militant tactics, but she knew her daughter. Charlotte would not abandon the subject until all her questions were answered. They reached their lodgings without any further incidents just as the first rain drops fell. A few minutes later, Francis, Henri and the surrounding fumes of rum and smoke entered the room only few moments ahead of the violent downpour.

"Our son discovered his limits of rum consumption," Francis released his grip of Henri's collar. Their son was as tall as his father, and this fine fourteen-year-old young man swayed and held on to the wall. His smile was a vacant reflection of the rum-induced swirling chaos in his mind. Francis kissed Henrietta on the cheek, kissed Charlotte on the top of her head, and positioned himself by the fireplace. He shook his head when Charlotte headed toward the settee in the middle of the room. She retreated back to the fireplace, and they all watched Henri with unbridled amusement. Henri did not move from the spot Francis had left him.

"Henri, my boy, sleep the rum off," the father advised the son with a wide grin.

Henri slowly and unsteadily wobbled toward the stairs, but collided into the wall. He frowned at the settee, lurched himself towards it, and collapsed face down. He lay still before raising his head and clawing his way to a seated position, leaning forward to pull off his boots. He barely caught himself from falling down on his face and attempted to lie down. He realized that his short sword was between him and the back of the settee. His fingers gripped the backrest of the settee as he worked his way again to a sitting position and then carefully lay down on his other side, his sword dragging on the floor. Upon completing these intricate movements, Henri immediately fell asleep.

"He is a very practical young man." Francis proudly winked at Henrietta and focused his attention to Charlotte. "What news are you bursting to share, my girl?"

To the accompaniment of Henri's soft snoring, Charlotte's delivered a detailed account of the altercation. The account was complete with unnervingly exact demonstrations of Henrietta's moves.

“Why are you upset tonight?” Francis unerringly read Henrietta’s mind when they retired to their sleeping room. “Punching out a couple pisspots, who – mind you, deserved it! - cannot possibly bother your conscience.”

“I can hardly believe Charlotte’s lack of fear! Did she even comprehend the danger? Or is she unable to obey? Take your choice!” Henrietta shared her exasperation with her husband. “I instructed her to run if there was a scuffle. Did she do that? No! There were no signs of fear, Francis. For a moment there, I was concerned that she would jump in the fray to assist me!...” Henrietta trailed off. “I was terrified to see her exposed to danger.”

Her husband was unperturbed. “I assume her account of the skirmish was accurate.”

“It was a precise military report!” Henrietta paced back and forth in time to the beat of the heavy rain ranging outside. “But she is only ten years old, Francis.”

“She has confidence in you, my dear. Charlotte is wise beyond her years. She has an excellent sense of self-preservation. After all, the girl inherited your determination and de Brangelton blood.” He pulled Henrietta into an embrace. “Now hold still while I untie your laces.”

“Good morning, father, mother.” Charlotte sat at the breakfast table. She had parted her thick, straight black hair in the middle and evenly combed it into the shape of a hood. “And a very fine morning to you, brother. Is your head all clear?” She ignored his incredulous stare.

“What did you do to yourself?!” Henri croaked.

“I look more like mother this way,” Charlotte explained. “I will be just like her when I grow up.”

Henri rolled his eyes.

Francis smiled indulgently at his girl. “Your mother devoted time and effort to become the extraordinary woman she is today.”

“What do I have to do, father?” Charlotte, oblivious to the platter of food in front of her, eagerly asked.

“Learn to pass for a boy.”

“I had no choice!” Henrietta interjected. Her husband, the man known as *devil de Brangelton* among the adventurers and cutthroats in all of France and outside its borders as far as the New World, was wrapped around the little finger of their daughter, and he unreservedly encouraged her to do anything she pleased.

Charlotte glanced in her direction. “I can do that,” she responded to her father.

“I doubt it.” Henri rubbed his temples.

His sister frowned at him. “Being a boy is easy.”

Henri dropped his face into his hands. “You have no idea,” he raised his head. “Just how will you accomplish that?”

Charlotte waved her arm in a dismissive gesture. “I will behave like you.”

“Stop it,” Henri moaned. “I have a headache, so do not compound it with your daft whims. Don’t even think about it.”

“Don’t worry, I will never admire girls as you do.” Charlotte waved a spoon at him.

“Just how much does she understand?” Henrietta wondered again. Henri was at ease in any company. In fact, he lacked any sense of shame or embarrassment, and his amorous behavior among the young women, and even the older ones, had already caused neighbors to have concerns about their own daughters. *“He is on his way to ripen into a distinguished womanizer, maybe even worse than my brother,”* Francis had gloomily predicted.

“I dread the day when you start to admire boys,” Henri replied.

Charlotte picked up a slice of buttered bread from her plate. “This will never happen. There is nothing to admire about them,” she declared.

Her brother snorted.

“I certainly hope she feels this way for a few more years,” Henrietta silently prayed.

St. Domingue, New World – June 1712

Captain Mathew Johnson appraised the pathetic and scrawny carcass of the man in front of him. The gaunt face bore a slight resemblance to the fanatic who had escaped from him years ago, but there was no recognition, no comprehension, and no intelligence in the hollow eyes. The tropical sun mercilessly beamed down on his scrawny body covered with filthy rags, the warm breeze blew his dirty hair into his dark face, and the insects buzzed around his face, but the man did not seem to notice. He stood still as a statue.

“What is this?” Mathew asked the Governor. “I am searching for the Indian warrior, and this is a vagabond.”

“When he disembarked on my island, he was dressed like a Maharaja. Jewels on his turban and sword hilt.” The Governor fanned himself with a silk handkerchief. “Then he dismantled that cursed house and lost his reason.”

“What cursed house?” Mathew moved into the sparse shade of a palm tree. The Governor followed his example, but the vagabond remained standing in the same spot.

“Have you not heard? An evil spirit moved into the abandoned house. The house itself, it stood over...over there,” he said as he pointed to the heap of rubble. “The most terrible howls arose from that house day and night. No one dared to approach that ghastly place...” He took off his hat and fanned himself.

Mathew followed his example. The heat was unbearable. “So what happened?”

“One day, the howling just stopped. Some young hot heads decided to investigate. And there he was.” The Governor gestured at the vagabond before continuing, “He was scrambling through the remnants of a fireplace with his bare hands and screaming in his savage language.”

“Does he speak English?”

“He spoke it well enough before he lost his mind in these ruins.” The Governor poked the man in the ribs with his walking stick. “He just repeats a few phrases now.”

The vagabond’s body twitched, but his eyes remained void. “Mountain of Light,” he wailed. “It’s God’s wrath. My Sacred Oath.”

The Governor pushed back his wig. “We threatened him with torture, offered a bribe, filled him with liquor, but nothing worked to loosen his tongue. That’s all he says.”

This shadow of a man could indeed be bloody Kumaryan; there was a distant resemblance. Was he pretending or had he gone mad indeed? “How long ago did it happen?”

“About a year.” The Governor fanned himself with both his hat and stained handkerchief. “He has been searching through the rubble ever since. He moves stones back and forth and digs in the dirt.”

Mathew stepped back into the shade. “How does he survive?”

“People here are kind-hearted. They are thankful to him for destroying the house and expelling that spirit.” He pointed at an old jug and cracked wooden plate on the ground. “Some bring him food. These howls were frightening...”

“Where did the spirit go?” Mathew watched the vagabond carefully. Why would a warrior pretend to be mad on this forsaken island?

The Governor plopped his hat back on his head. “The priests say that the spirit went away when this infidel destroyed the house, but his madness is the spirit’s revenge.” He clenched his hands together. “I pray for him to leave my island.”

“Buy his passage to England, and I will take him there.” Mathew seized his chance.

“Why would anyone want him there?” The Governor forgot his prayer.

“The doctors at Oxford University might be interested in examining him.”

The Governor contemplated the prospect. “You should pay me.”

“What happened to his jeweled turban and sword?”

“How would I know?” The Governor sounded indignant, but Mathew would wager that the jewels were divided between the curious hot heads and the Governor.

“I might lose him at sea, or the doctors may not bother with his sorry hide, but either way I have to feed him during the voyage,” Mathew reasoned.

The Governor shook his head. “You can take him off my island for a case of French Burgundy wine.”

“You pay his passage to England, plus give me a barrel of rum,” Mathew bargained. “In case this crazy spirit leaves his body and moves to someone else’s during the voyage.”

Dalmatia - July 1712

Honore de Courbet had served as a Knight of St. John’s order for nearly 20 years. He had begun his career as a young warrior on a ship sailing the Mediterranean Sea to protect the Christians from heretics, to protect Western trade from infidel raids, and to promote himself in the world. He was respected and trusted, his dedication and reputation were beyond doubt and reproach, and he was rewarded with a task to negotiate the acquisition of St. Elias’ relics from a dysfunctional monastery of the Byzantine church in Dalmatia. Honore had spent the past two years in that God-forsaken place, had patiently endured long and winding discourses, had watched, waited, and maneuvered his way among the riddles and lies, and was finally in full possession of St. Elias’ skull and two rib bones, securely arranged in a small casket with a glass top. He had not taken his eyes from the bundle since the Archdeacon had closed the lid, sealed it, and had it wrapped in a thick cloth and transferred to Honore. To protect it further, Honore hid the casket inside a nondescript cargo trunk, and stored it in his room.

Honore patted the verification papers in his pocket, opened the cargo trunk, and unwrapped the cloth to once again behold the sacred acquisition for the Knights of St. John. He was not certain of his superiors’ plans to house St. Elias’ relics. The powers from Tours, Rouen, and Reims were willing to pray and pay for the privilege, but Honore had his own agenda: Bourges.

Honore once again admired the craftsmanship of the artisans who made the casket. The construction was solid and surely no one could touch the relics without breaking the seal, but the mosaic of glass windows on the lid afforded one the chance to view the contents inside the casket. The lock and seal would be broken when the relics were delivered, in order to retrieve the authentication papers inside. The papers inside were identical to the ones in his pocket. He prayed for his success. He braced himself to avoid falling under any suspicion by his superiors in the Knights of St. John, to never allow them to suspect that he was forcing their hand to grant these relics to St. Etienne’s Cathedral in Bourges. However, he was confident of himself and his allies within the Church.

He lingered in his prayer, in his gratitude to the providence for his formal instructions. His suggestion to conduct the transfer of relics to France in a completely anonymous manner had been accepted. While St. John’s elders and Church officials would officially negotiate which city was the most

worthy to possess St. Elias' relics, the relics would be delivered to Marseille and would be stored in Montpellier.

That's when the most delicate part of the deal would occur. Upon disembarking French soil, Honore would send a quiet word to his contact in Bourges. The cardinal, on pretense of research at the University, would come to Montpellier, accidentally discover the relics, and claim St. Elias' relics for St. Etienne's Cathedral.

Honore crossed himself and carefully wrapped the cloth around the casket again. He cushioned it with straw on the bottom, and, to protect the casket from shifting inside, he used his personal assets - five rolls of silk, two Persian rugs, and four large bedcovers that had been embroidered in India. He bundled his clothing to protect his other treasures - the small paintings of St. Stephen and St. John inside a double frame of gold, enamel, and pearls; the gilded bowl and salt and pepper set decorated with rubies and sapphires; the silver tray with six matching plates; two porcelain vases from the Orient; a fine Venetian crystal decanter and six glasses; an onyx and ivory chess set in a rosewood box; and five bags of hashish and opium. These herbs helped him to hear God when God spoke to him.

Marseille, France - August 1712

Rene Prassal had begun his life as an honest man, but he failed to comprehend the subject of his studies for the law, and thus he drifted in his youth, earning his living alternatively the best he could manage. In his checkered youth, he had been a warehouse clerk, a soldier, a courier, a coachman, an armed escort, and even the manager of a boarding house, until finally good luck - and his father's connections - brought him to his current master's employment. This position paid well. At first his duties were straightforward - he was only responsible for the young nobleman's comfort and general provisions for the household. The future seemed promising and secure. When the young Marquis had come into his position and inheritance, Rene's duties had expanded to cleaning up the Marquis' messy love affairs with demanding mistresses and dealing with disgruntled husbands and irate relatives. A lot of money was squandered there, as Rene witnessed again and again. One scandalous affair ended in a duel and forced the young Marquis into exile, and Rene loyally endured years away from France. The Marquis' sins were eventually forgiven and forgotten, and Rene was looking forward to return to their native land, but the Marquis suddenly involved Rene in an affair which had the potential to lead Rene straight to the gallows. This latest assignment entailed acquiring five paintings from the house of a Viennese nobleman without the current owner's permission. The Marquis assured him that the theft was perfectly justified, that these portraits were originally stolen from their rightful owner, and that he, Rene, was compelled to obtain

the paintings in order to reunite them with the original owner. Rene cursed the day he was employed by the young Marquis and even thought of quitting the service, but the Marquis promised a large award for risking his neck. He informed Rene when the Viennese nobleman was absent from home, and Rene was lucky enough to break into the house and leave without anyone spotting him and raising an alarm. To Rene's relief, they departed from Vienna within a week. When they arrived in Marseille, the Marquis added six more paintings, each individually wrapped and sealed, for the delivery to the same illustrious personage in England. There was too much secrecy around a pile of canvases for Rene's taste, but if the Marquis and noble Lords generously paid for the paintings and the secrecy...

"So here is the plan," Rene whispered to his brother-in-law, to make certain that not even one drunkard at this dirty tavern could overhear their conversation. "I will arrange for a small escort for the cargo. You put together a small group to attack..."

"Attack?!" His brother-in-law's paunchy figure shook as he crossed himself. Durrant's wit was limited, but Rene needed an accomplice and Durrant knew where and how to contact men willing to do anything for a few coins and to remain silent about it.

"Be quiet!" Rene hissed, but no one paid them any attention. "I will make certain that no fighting will need to take place."

Durrant emptied his mug. "Your Marquis will search for these paintings."

"He will send me," Rene said as he took a swallow of his sour wine.

"How can you be so certain?" His brother-in-law scratched his head.

"I know him and I understand the ways of nobility," Rene replied dismissively. "We hide these pictures now. In half a year, we - I - will tell him that a friend of mine met a Captain from the New World who is selling these paintings, but no questions asked. This is an easy way for us to make money." There was more to his plan, but he did not dare reveal it.

"I... I don't know," Durrant mumbled. "What will we do if the Marquis does not buy them back?"

"You are a fool! He will retrieve his property! The price we will ask - I mean, the Captain from the New World will ask - is nothing to him! Don't you see? My plan is secure! We are about to miss a fortune!" In exasperation, Rene slammed his fist on the table. He swiveled his head to check if they attracted any attention, but no one cared. There were only five portraits appropriated by Rene for his master, and Rene privately wondered if the additional paintings would be of the same content.

"What are these pictures of?" Durrant again exhibited inconvenient curiosity.

"Portraits," Rene answered vaguely. Some portraits, indeed.

Chapter I - TWO YOUNG MEN

A boy becomes a man when he learns to fend for himself among his peers.

Laurent de la Fleure to Henri d'Arrignon - 1694



Lyon, France - March 1712

Laurent de la Fleure spent many hours in his library room checking the accounts, perusing the news, contemplating civic papers, pondering upon the idiocy of men, debating and plotting the appropriate course of action for both important and trivial issues, reading books, and sipping brandy behind the closed door. He liked the plain white ceiling, the oak cabinet with carved doors, the maps of the world and of France on the wall, and the high bookshelves full of leather-bound volumes, but he did not like to wait for his son. Laurent had summoned Antoine half an hour ago - where was the young reprobate?

Two years ago, Laurent had recognized that Marguerite, bless her heart, most excellent wife and mother, doted on Antoine and spoiled him beyond reason while the young man took shameless advantage of her devotion. *"If he continues to hide behind a skirt, he will never become a self-reliant and judicious man,"* Laurent had explained to his wife. He brutally overruled her loud objections, cut the apron strings, and sent Antoine to military school for a taste of independence and acquisition of life experience. The young ruffian's education in military school had forged his self-reliance and now Antoine's arrogance and disrespect for authority caused disorder in the household. Antoine could do nothing wrong in Marguerite's eyes, but Laurent begged to differ. This difference of opinions caused more and more heated arguments between Laurent and Antoine, between Laurent and Marguerite, and set a bad example for Raoul...

Laurent's annoyance mounted. Just how long does it take for a young man to traverse their residence?! Laurent had lost his temper yesterday, when Marguerite had eloquently expressed her contrary opinion about their son's imminent departure to fencing school. In retrospect, perhaps he should have mentioned his plans to his wife before arranging for Antoine's immediate future...

The door opened and the defiant young man finally marched inside.
“Father. You sent for me?”

Laurent silently regarded his seventeen-year-old son, and once again, recognized himself at that age. God only knows if he was just as much of a trial to his own father. He waited till Antoine exhibited signs of impatience.

“I arranged for you to attend the fencing school in Montpellier.”

“Why?!” his son yapped. “Pardon me, father, with all respect, but what will I learn there that you have not taught me?”

“You might benefit from extended exposure to different styles of fencing. I trust you will grace the fencing school with your illustrious presence longer than your embarrassingly brief sojourn in military school.”

“Yes, father,” Antoine answered through clenched teeth, although he managed to maintain a relatively civil tone despite the rather obvious resentment and defiance simmering under the surface. “May I ask, father, when are you planning to ship me out into this, this... glorified exile?”

Laurent slowly exhaled. Any questions phrased in this form inevitably lead to arguments, and each of these arguments was followed by an unpleasant discussion with Marguerite, frequently culminating in a night in the library for Laurent. Definitely, a hundred miles between himself and his beloved son would bring harmony and order to the household.

“We are leaving the day after tomorrow. I trust this is enough time to arrange your important affairs in order?”

“Yes, father.” The fury raged in his gray eyes, but his face maintained a mask of indifference.

Montpellier, France - April 1712

Laurent de la Fleure and Francis de Brangelton abandoned their elder sons to the tune of exuberant celebration and retired to Laurent’s lodgings for a dignified dinner of roasted lamb to celebrate the occasion of establishing a distant, although probably very temporary, residence for their beloved heirs.

“What happened in military school to the elder son of the famous, respected, legendary, etc, former Lieutenant of His Majesty’s Musketeers?” de Brangelton asked after a second large glass of excellent burgundy wine.

Laurent refilled the glasses. “After four months, my arrogant son was bored stiff and began to question the wisdom and expertise of every military leader until he was advised to refrain from expressing his opinions. He paid no attention to the warning, and it was not long before the headmaster sent me a formal request to remove my precious son from their care... What is so amusing?”

“Were you any different at his age?”

“Imagine my surprise when I met Antoine on the road, three days travel behind him, at his tender age of sixteen.” He attempted to smother his pride, but it crept into his voice. “His teachers’ forbearance ended sooner than I expected, and they locked him up in his own room. He packed his belongings, climbed out of the window, and saddled his horse in the darkness of the night. Before he escaped, though, he shot the lock on his door off to make his point.”

“Commendable,” de Brangelton said, lifting his goblet in a toast. “Henri lasted only a couple of weeks in military school.”

“You don’t say. A de Brangelton in military school? I pity the school officials. How did that absurdity happen?”

“Watch your words. It was Henrietta’s idea. I could not stop laughing long enough to object, and so off he went. After a week, Henri compared the tedium of military school routine to a monastery, and announced that a monastery could be more entertaining and useful if the monastery was located close to a nunnery and the monks were teaching him the skills of making liquor. Since he delivered his tirade within the hearing range of the honorable headmaster, feathers ruffled and tempers flared. The headmaster threatened to have Henri whipped, so, in response, Henri took a hostage.”

“And you nurture the delusion that your son is reasonable?”

“My son made very reasonable demands, namely, for the headmaster to expel him and, of course, promise that there would be no retribution. The poor excuse for a headmaster had to oblige since the hostage with a knife to his throat fainted. Then my son composed a letter detailing unreasonable actions by the aforementioned headmaster. Henri concluded his epistle by asking if he should head home, or if I would visit and, I quote, *‘talk some sense into this buffoon of a headmaster.’* Stop laughing.”

“Like father, like son.”

“I went to retrieve my son. That enterprise involved forcibly prying him away from the passionate embraces of a well-endowed nymph. I brought him along on a minor business of mine, and assigned him for the lookout one evening. This rooster of mine was distracted by a swaying skirt below a tight corset. He abandoned his post to follow her! So I followed my young buck, restrained him, and choked off the air to his lungs till he passed out. I also nicked his skin with a knife for good measure. When Henri regained his consciousness, I lectured him that, first and foremost, he must pay attention to business and not rely on his father, or mother, or maybe his younger sister to save his life each and every time his groin overrules his mind. When I mentioned his sister, he swore at me. Next time my boy stands guard, he hopefully will not notice a naked Venus sauntering by. I pray he learned the lesson for life.”

“And yet, you are wasting money for the fencing school.” Laurent left the question hanging.

“Ah, yes. Henri’s brazen womanizing did cause mayhem at the de Paulet’s household ...”



Montpellier was first populated by Romans. Later on it became an important center of commerce and learning: The University welcomed the scholars from all over the known world since the fourteenth century; the pilgrims on the way to Santiago de Compostela traveled through; and even if the port had dried up, the scholarly reputation would have remained and the legacy of striving commercial and trading glory would linger. The long history, a mix of cultures and influences, prevalence of commerce, a military garrison at the Citadel, and a sizable student population made Montpellier a colorful, clamorous, multi-faceted town, as well as a perfect place for Henri and Antoine to relish their independence. Their fathers, in their infinite wisdom and zealous quest to unburden themselves of their heirs’ troublesome presence, allowed Henri and Antoine the freedom to handle their own finances. Certainly not coincidentally, the allowances were for the same amount.

In their search for suitable lodgings, Henri and Antoine concluded that there was no reason to stay in a respectable, boring, and outrageously expensive neighborhood populated by Montpellier’s noble families and conceited pampered classmates. They had found a boarding house in the University’s district, where the other occupants were either students or junior officers, and the atmosphere was boisterous and carefree. Henri and Antoine rented an excellent set of rooms consisting of two separate private rooms with a common sitting room and bath closet. This arrangement also set aside even more funds for entertainment. In a short time, Henri and Antoine were pleasantly surprised to discover that the fencing school prided itself on providing exposure to fighting techniques from other parts of the world – they learned to handle a scimitar and practiced with cutlasses and sabers. Antoine landed himself in an affair with the young wife of a pompous Law Professor at the university while Henri acquainted himself with every good-looking young woman in town. All in all, the two young men happily settled in Montpellier.

Henri arrived at the Promenade de Peyrou with a quarter of hour to spare before Bernadette’s appointed time. Due to her scatterbrained disregard for punctuality, it meant he had half an hour to spare. He leaned on the parapet next to Antoine and they contemplated the crooked city streets below and the hazy skies above.

“A music recital!” Antoine voiced a complaint. “She wants me to attend a music recital with her because she thinks all noblemen must patronize music.

Yesterday she persisted in asking my opinion on a pair of new gloves because I will have to pull them off. The other day, she wanted me to pick out ribbons for her because that's what lovers do. I am absolutely fed up with her demands."

"And with her bed?" Henri inquired.

Antoine slapped Henri with a hat. "Why do women insist on being so high maintenance after only a month of dalliance?"

"Will you ever figure out how to treat a woman right? Just play along with her little whims."

Antoine shrugged his shoulders. "Why should I dance to her capricious tune? If I cared to march to orders, I might as well be at home, where my father quite delights in instructing me. Or in military school. He insists that I must understand that I am a member of the de la Fleure family." Antoine cleared his throat in preparation for his best impression of his father's lecture. "The name of de la Fleure is one of the oldest and most respected in Lyon. We have the responsibility to promote civic prosperity in our town, as we always have. Your lack of interest and your ignorance appall and mortify me." He switched to his normal voice. "I was happy when my father consigned me to Montpellier and thus removed me from his overbearing presence. Now I find myself an object to other sermons. She complains -"

Fortunately for me, Henri thought as Antoine kept talking, there are no worthwhile civic activities in Ferrand for my father to involve himself into. He never bothers to discuss his plans and aspirations. No, he drops everyone into situations with only one course of action, such as exiling me to this fencing school. Why not marry Charlotte to Simon de Paulet instead and unload her into that family? Because no reasonable person can deal with the de Brangelton girl, that's why.

"...she presumes I exist solely for her pleasure," Antoine concluded his monologue.

"Next time my family visits, ask my sister to assist you in your love affairs," Henri said. "No woman will speak to you after such a disaster."

Antoine adjusted his cuff lace. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"Do you remember the de Paulet sisters? Henrietta is a year older than me. Eliza is a year younger. I rather like Henrietta; she has a nice, full figure. To curb the temptation and to avoid suspicion, I paid as much attention to Eliza. She's no hag, by any means. She has pretty eyes..."

Antoine closed his mouth.

"...and neither Henrietta nor Eliza suspected my gallant address to the other, until one fateful day, when Mme. Constance announced that she expected Jean- Louis to marry Charlotte. My sister proposed to marry one of de Paulet sisters to me instead. Both Henrietta and Eliza were excited at that ridiculous idea."

Antoine regained the faculty of speech. "What did happen between you and... both sisters?"

“Nothing more than few kisses with either one,” Henri admitted, choosing to withhold that such a situation was not for his lack of efforts or desire. In hindsight, he suspected that Charlotte warned them about his duplicity “I raised hell with Wildcat for landing me in such a predicament, and lo and behold, Charlotte made the sisters aware of my duplicity and rallied both of the de Paulet brothers to blacken my character. My devil sire cast me away till Henrietta and Eliza are married off, and neither one to me.”

Antoine slapped him on the back. “Count your blessings!”

