

Chapter One



Demonic shrieking raced windward, a howling chorus that rose from the grey mist off the starboard side of the ship. Wailing cries echoed eerily over the crackling of the sails and the steady splash of waves against the hull.

Madeleine shivered. Alone on the deck of the ship, she clutched the wooden handrail and leaned into the wind, straining for a glimpse of land through the fog. It must be just over there, she thought. *Ile des Démons*.

The name had long haunted her imagination. Even now she could hear her mother's soft voice filling the long waiting days with stories of time past. Madeleine loved the romantic tales *Hélène Hébert* had told, especially the story of the doomed *Marguerite de Roberval* and the *Ile des Démons*.

Madeleine remembered the first time she had heard it. They had been sitting by the fire, waiting, as always, for her father and brother to return from the adventures of their day. Madeleine's own days were filled with dull household routine and the dreary social calls that duty demanded. She escaped the narrow bounds of her life only through her mother's stories as they sat by the fire in the quiet hour before dark. Madeleine settled at her mother's knee as Hélène brushed the lustrous brown hair that was her daughter's chief claim to beauty.

Staring into the flames, Hélène's voice in her ears, Madeleine could picture those phantom people and places so clearly that eventually her mother's tales began to seem more real than the teller.

The tragedy of Marguerite was her favourite.

"It was early summer," Hélène recounted, "in the year 1542." So long ago, Madeleine thought, more than a hundred years!

"The famous soldier pirate, Jean François de Roberval, so bold, so daring, sailed from France to command the fort of Charlesbourg-Royal, far across the ocean. His young niece, the lovely Marguerite, accompanied her uncle to the New World. What an adventure! To feel the wind in her face! To see the world spread out before her!"

Hélène's voice rose in excitement and Madeleine could picture the endless, open sky above rolling seas. Her heart leapt at the thought of so much space, so much freedom.

The brush twined softly through her hair as H  l  ne went on. “Marguerite travelled as her uncle’s assistant, but where she sought duty, she found instead love with a handsome sailor named Martin. They tried to be discreet. What choice did they have, poor things, under the watchful eye of Roberval? Such an important man would never approve a union between his niece and a poor sailor with no prospects. So their great love must never be expressed, save in a touch of the hand, a glance, a sigh.”

Here H  l  ne herself sighed. It was such a sad little sound that Madeleine knew at once how Marguerite and Martin must have felt. When I fall in love, she vowed, I won’t let anyone stand in my way. I’ll shout it from the rooftops!

H  l  ne continued. “The ships of Roberval’s little fleet dropped anchor at Newfoundland to take on water and supplies. After so long at sea, Marguerite was happy to be back on solid ground and even happier for the chance to share the company of young Martin. Together they roamed the wooded hills, picking berries, fishing for salmon, stealing kisses. Marguerite’s trusted servant stood watch for them. And then, it happened.”

H  l  ne’s hand tightened on the brush, pulling Madeleine’s head with a sharp little jolt. Madeleine bit back an exclamation, reluctant to break the thread of the story. In a moment, her mother’s hand relaxed and she resumed the tale.

“Roberval learned of the affair. He was furious! As pun-

ishment for their deception, he marooned Marguerite and the servant on Ile des Démons — an island inhabited only by the demons from which it took its name.”

“And what of the sailor?” demanded Madeleine.

Hélène smiled. “He chose to stay with his beloved. The three castaways built a rough cabin of wood and brush. There was plenty of game and fruit, even eggs, and the refined young Marguerite became a skilled hunter. Faith in God alone sustained the three amid the fearful screams of the island’s demons.”

Privately, Madeleine decided the screams were probably no more than the cries of birds and animals. But Hélène’s voice swooped and fell with such passion that Madeleine did not want to spoil the mood by saying so.

“Eight long months passed with no ship or hope of rescue in sight. Marguerite became pregnant. Martin, alas, fell ill and died. A few weeks after, Marguerite gave birth to a daughter. There was no priest to baptize the baby, but Marguerite called her Martine, in memory of her lost lover. After seventeen months on the island, the faithful servant died, and then the child. Marguerite’s despair was immeasurable. Somehow she endured a year of utter loneliness, until at last she was rescued by Breton fishermen sailing home with their harvest of cod. She returned with them to France, and shut herself away in a convent hidden in the Vallé des Orages — the Valley of Storms. Her own storms were past. Now she had only to wait for the good Lord to call her home.”

Madeleine cried every time Hélène told the story. Her mother believed she was touched by the tragedy of lost love. Madeleine thought the real tragedy was shutting oneself away in a convent. She couldn't imagine anything worse. She did, however, take a grim satisfaction in the knowledge that the mean-spirited Jean François de Roberval had been murdered one night as he left his church in Paris.

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A fine spray of salt water splashed up from the bow of *La Destinée*. Ahead and a little to the right, Madeleine thought she glimpsed the darker shadow of an island behind the grey curtain of mist. For an instant the weird, wailing cries grew louder, then faded again to nothing as the ship drew away.