
Chapter 1

LA ROCHELLE, *France, 1823...*

The large frigate moved slowly from its dock, edging its way in the choppy waters to the narrow channel that led between the two lighthouses guarding the harbour.

The rain continued to beat down, the thunder booming overhead, the jagged streaks of lightning flashing across the sky.

Captain Jack Steel pulled his sou'wester more tightly around his shoulders, trying his best to keep the rain from dripping down the back of his neck, his tricorn doing very little to prevent it. It was highly uncomfortable but nothing he wasn't used to.

In the distance, he could see a thin, bright line on the horizon, the edge of the storm and his intended destination. It had been raining for two days solid and he could no longer afford to stay in port. Grimes had already warned him that there had been sightings of customs officers on the edge of town, so it was only a matter of time before they descended onto the quayside demanding to know what he had on board. A little thing like a storm wouldn't keep the bastards

away and the last thing he needed was them swarming all over his ship. So, on the turn of the tide, he had weighed anchor and set sail.

He looked to his side as John, the quartermaster, joined him, holding his hat on tightly and shouting against the wind, "It's gonna be a tricky couple of hours, Cap'n."

"You can say that again!" Jack hollered back, his keen eye noting the swell of the ocean ahead, the white crested waves marking their allegiance to the stormy skies above.

The ship slipped past the two lighthouses unhindered and began its journey across the Atlantic Ocean—destination Williamsburg, Virginia.

Jack's crew worked like trojans, each playing his part in keeping the ship safe from the elements. Their very lives depended on their tenacity to do their job under such harsh conditions.

Sails were hoisted and secured as soon as the command was given, John's booming voice heard above the roar of the wind. A wind that whistled through the lines, whilst the wood creaked and protested as the menacing waves crashed against the hull.

Jack's senses were on full alert. Never, did he feel so alive as on days like this. The insistent flapping of the canvas and the roar of the waves set adrenaline coursing through his body, and when they came through the storm, it always heralded a feeling of achievement. A victory for all those on board.

Taking a deep breath, he held the wheel tight, and with grim determination, he kept their vessel on a straight path through the raging storm.

Thorn Creek Plantation, Williamsburg, Virginia...

Sophia Thorn thrummed her fingers on the exterior wooden balcony outside her bedroom and looked over at her father, watching his long strides make quick work of the path that led down to the tobacco fields.

Her eyes narrowed with loathing. He never failed to surprise her. He was an arrogant, overbearing man whom she had the displeasure to call her father. On the surface, he gave the impression that he was the perfect father but, beneath, lay a heart of stone. She and her twin brother, Isaac, could testify to that.

At twenty-three, Sophia and her brother had been motherless for ten years. Their mother, at least, had been able to protect them against his cruel nature—the buffer between good and bad. Her unexpected death at the tender age of thirty-three had left the young siblings bereft and at the mercy of their cruel father, Brian.

It had been a very long and arduous ten years since. Ten years in which the twins had grown up very quickly.

A movement to the left caught Sophia's eye and her face broke into a smile when she recognised her brother striding towards the house.

"Isaac!" she called out to him, waving enthusiastically, and was rewarded when he beamed back.

Quickly, she rushed into her bedroom and then down the spiral staircase to jump into his arms just as he strode through the main double doors.

"Whoa!" he cried, before lifting her up in the air and whirling her around. "Have I been away that long?"

"Yes!" she cried, "two whole weeks."

He grinned, his handsome face lighting up with happiness. "Did you miss me?"

She punched him on the arm. "Of course, I did." She pouted a little and added, "Although I wouldn't have had to miss you if you'd taken me with you!"

Isaac shook his head. "It's too dangerous, Sophia. Besides, you have enough to sort out, doing the paperwork and keeping his nib nose out of our business."

He put her down on the ground and, placing an arm around her shoulders, walked towards the opposite door. "I'm starving and I really need a cup of Loretta's coffee."

Loretta was their cook at Thorn Creek, and according to Isaac, she made the best coffee in all of Christendom. Sophia wouldn't know as she had never travelled anywhere else. But she did agree it was delicious.

They walked through the doorway and down the corridor until they reached the kitchens. Loretta was in the middle of preparing fresh bread, but on seeing Isaac, a broad grin broke out on her face, and quickly wiping her hands, she welcomed him with open arms. She made no bones about the fact she was pleased to see him. Loretta had been with the family for a long time, well before their mother had died. And she'd been the soft, assuring voice they had run to in times of distress. They both appreciated her and she knew it.

With his usual charm, Isaac asked her for some coffee and she immediately set to making a fresh brew for both of them, telling them to go into the parlour and that she would bring it in, with some special snacks for Isaac. She always spoiled him.

Sitting on the sofa in the parlour, Sophia waited whilst Isaac took a seat at the table before asking, "So, how did the trip go?"

"Very well indeed. *Sunfire* handled beautifully as usual. We've made a pretty penny this time."

Between them, they owned a ship called *Sunfire*. Something their father wasn't privy to. It was a dangerous life but fate had led them in this direction. Isaac had left home, shortly after their mother had died, to lead a life aboard the merchant vessel *Nonsuch*. He had learned everything from the

bottom up and had earned himself a name for being a trustworthy, hardworking, likeable member of the crew.

Several years later, under an insufferable new captain, a mutiny had taken place and the remaining crew had voted wholeheartedly for Isaac to take his place. One thing had led to another and the crew had decided to take ownership of the ship, changing her name from *Nonsuch* to *Sunfire* and turning to piracy to fund their lifestyle.

Isaac had continued to visit home as usual, and as far as his father was concerned, he was still working for the *Nonsuch*. It would remain that way until Isaac decided otherwise. His father was not to be trusted. Truth be told, he only visited the plantation to see his sister and to make sure she was safe. He couldn't abide his father.

As soon as they had enough money put aside, he planned to move her to her own house on another part of the bay. Sophia was quite shocked when he had revealed to her what had happened regarding the mutiny, but when she learned of his intentions to buy a house and make a new life for them both, away from their loathsome father, she was more than ready to become involved herself. She kept track of their money and helped find buyers for goods they had plundered. She was very adept at reading people and could tell if someone was trustworthy or not. Maybe that was to do with living with their father for so long, for she could spot a wrong'un a mile off.

At the moment, she was dependent upon their father for everything and it irked Isaac. Luckily, Sophia was highly spirited and she knew how to handle their father's temper. More often than not, simply by keeping her distance. He admired Sophia; she was not only beautiful but strong-willed. Without it, he feared she would have been browbeaten into a shadow of the beautiful woman she had become.

It was what spurred him on to keep plundering other

ships. That, and the fact he enjoyed every minute. He smiled and, remembering something, reached inside his long coat and brought out a small item wrapped in cloth. He handed it to her.

"I found this and thought you might like it."

Sophia's eyes lit up. "Oh, what is it?"

"Open it and see."

Sophia took the item and peeled off the cloth to reveal a jewelled hair pin. "Oh, it's beautiful!"

"Bodmin assures me the diamonds are real and not paste."

"I love it." She jumped up and walked over to a small oval mirror on the wall. Raising her hands, she neatly put the gold pin in her blonde hair. Her striking green eyes stared back at her. "It's so beautiful. Thank you, Isaac."

There came a knock on the door and Isaac called out, "Come!"

It was Loretta and she was carrying a tray with not only the sought after coffee, but several small pastries.

"There you are, Master Isaac. That'll keep you going until supper." She turned to him and queried, "You *are* having supper tonight?"

"Yes, I wouldn't miss one of your delicious meals," he laughed and then added, "but I won't be staying. My ship leaves tonight."

When she'd left, Sophia raised her eyes to his. "Where are you anchored?"

"Usual place, *Archer's Hope*."

"Is there any cargo to unload, or did you sell everything?"

"Sold it all to our usual contacts. I will return later tonight with the trunk. Store it in the usual place and bank it weekly into my account so as not to arouse suspicion."

They heard footsteps in the hallway and both quickly went silent. The door opened and their father appeared. He

swept his cold gaze over Isaac and remarked, "Thought you would humble yourself and pay us a visit, did you?"

Sophia regarded him, her expression veiled. He was so rude. Always had been and always would be. She wondered for the umpteenth time what sort of life her mother must have led and pitied her. They had witnessed a lot, but she knew her mother had kept more hidden from them.

Isaac sipped on his coffee, and his voice, equally as cold, said, "I never humble myself, Father. I have returned home to see how my sister fares." Before her father could respond, Isaac asked, "Coffee?"

Their eyes met and her father thought better of retaliating. "Black, no sugar."

Taking the coffee, her father took a seat opposite her and leaned back in the chair. "How's life on board the *Nonsuch*?"

"Very well. We are sailing to Jamaica tonight. With the cross winds, it shouldn't take too long."

"What business is she doing there?"

"Usual. Whatever the captain decides to buy and trade in. I'm not privy to the details, I'm just there to do my job." Isaac shot a look at Sophia and winked. She hid a smile and looked down at her hands resting in her lap. Not long now, and she would be away from this place and free to do as she pleased. She couldn't wait.

That night, Isaac returned as promised with a small trunk full of silver coins. Their father was already asleep so, quietly, Sophia led Isaac around the back of the house and into one of the big barns. Easing an insignificant stone out of the wall, Isaac lifted the trunk into the cavity and then replaced the stone. It was the perfect hiding place. No trace could be seen of their stash whatsoever.

Sitting down on the dusty barn floor, Isaac withdrew a bottle of rum from inside his coat and settling herself beside him, Sophia produced two goblets. It was a ritual with them and an enjoyable one at that.

Pouring them a healthy draught each, Isaac grinned and said, "To us and the future."

Sipping the fiery liquid slowly, Sophia leaned her head against the barn wall and sighed softly. "How much longer do you think it will take to make enough money to leave this godforsaken hole?"

"I don't know, maybe one more year. We nearly have enough, don't we?"

Sophia nodded. "Nearly." She angled her head to look at him. "Can you not move a little faster? Plunder a few more ships?"

Isaac slapped his thigh and laughed aloud. "You make it sound so easy! You have no idea what is involved or how dangerous it is, Sophia."

"Then take me with you on a journey! Just one. Please? You know I want to explore. I've never even set foot off this land. I simply sit here and wait for you to regale me with tales of your exploits and daring. It's unfair," she huffed.

"I have enough to worry about without the addition of trying to keep you safe whilst on board."

"I can look after myself!" she responded heatedly. "You know I can wield a sword as well as any man. You've taught me well over the years."

"Sophia, you are tiny. Yes, you can parry a sword very well, but against the strength of a burly pirate, how long do you think you could last?" He shook his head. "Just bear with me for another few months, even a year if it has to be, but we will break free from our father. I promise you."

Sophia took another draught of rum and closed her eyes.

Could she stand it? She had stood twenty-three years of it so she supposed another few months wouldn't matter.

"Very well, if I must. The nearer my escape gets, the more restless I become. Not long now." She raised her goblet to his. "To us, dear brother, and solitude!"

"Amen to that."

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Sophia waited quietly until her father had left to oversee their plantation, and saddling her small mare, *Bounty*, she rode into Jamestown. Her stash of silver coins was safely stored in her saddlebag. They never deposited it all in one go as she didn't want to raise any suspicion as to where the source of the money came from. Doing it in smaller amounts here and there, never raised an eyebrow from the bank teller. And that was exactly how they wanted it to be. It was a separate bank from her father's, but even so, one could never be too careful.

She always enjoyed the ride to town. The plantation was on the outskirts of Williamsburg and so it was only a short journey to Jamestown. She liked nothing better than to walk along the wharf admiring the many ships that were moored in the bay. Some were absolutely massive and quite awe inspiring. She found it fascinating watching the crew climbing up the rigging when the ships set sail, or simply perusing the people who sat in the small boats navigating their way between the much larger vessels.

She pulled a face. If only Isaac would let her go on a trip with him. It need only be a short one. Just to see the Caribbean islands, would be a treat. It was all right for him to deny her, but he wasn't the one having to bear the brunt of their father when he was in one of his moods, which seemed to be more and more often lately. It was truly wear-

ing. He was never nice to any of the plantation workers. They weren't paid much and he took advantage of them wherever and whenever he could. Her eyes narrowed. No, her father wasn't a nice man at all.

She took a deep breath and tried to erase him from her mind for a moment, gazing at the surrounding scenery and breathing in the heady scent of the wildflowers scattered amongst the picturesque marshland.

Reaching town, she dismounted, and tethering her horse, she went inside the bank. Ten minutes later, and her deposit was done. No questions asked. Satisfied, she walked down the steps onto the street and just as she was about to reach for Bounty's reins, someone shouted behind her. She whirled around just in time to see a runaway horse heading straight for her. Before she had time to react, a hand grabbed her around the waist and whisked her out of harm's way.

She fell backwards in the process but strong arms kept her from falling to the ground.

Gasping with shock, she looked up to find herself in the embrace of one of the handsomest men she had ever laid eyes upon.

For a moment, they stared at each other, not saying a word. He looked almost as startled as she did. Sophia felt a blush suffuse her already hot cheeks and quickly tried to right herself. Lord, he was handsome.

He helped her to her feet and regarded her with gorgeous brown eyes flecked with hazel. "Are you unharmed?" he asked. "I saw the horse coming and I acted instinctively. I hope I didn't hurt you in the process."

Sophia swallowed hard. "No, not at all. I must thank you for saving me." She looked over her shoulder to see the horse in the distance. There was a trail of dust in its wake where its hooves had churned up the ground. "Goodness, I wonder who it belongs to."

"I have no idea, but they'll have a hard time catching it by the looks of things."

Sophia turned back to him. He was so tall that she had to angle her neck to look at him. Her eyes roamed over his face, noting his strong jaw and brown, sun-kissed hair tied back with a leather strap.

His eyes crinkled at the corners and he smiled, showing even, white teeth. "Allow me to introduce myself. Jack Steel."

Sophia's pulse seemed to be racing and she tried to calm herself. How could she have such a reaction to a man she had only just met. She really had to compose herself. She smiled back and shyly replied, "I am Sophia Thorn."

"Thorn? You're not from Thorn Creek Plantation by any chance?"

Sophia nodded.

"Well, I never. So you're Brian Thorn's daughter?" He tilted his head, studying her.

"Yes, I am. Do you know him?"

"Yes, fairly well. We have business dealings on occasion. In fact, I'm going there this afternoon." He regarded her silently. "I knew he had a son and daughter, but I never would have believed his daughter would be quite so beautiful."

"Oh." Sophia blushed hotly under his perusal, and unused to such compliments, she didn't quite know how to answer.

Jack looked down at Sophia Thorn and couldn't quite believe that such a beautiful creature could come from such an odious man as Brian. Her green eyes, edged with long, dark lashes, were exquisite and matched her dark green riding habit perfectly. Her small, heart-shaped face, golden blonde

hair and perfectly plump, soft lips had made his heart stop for one moment.

It was strange because he couldn't recall ever having experienced such a sudden surge of emotions. It felt as though someone had come up and slapped him around the face. He'd met pretty women before but Sophia was beyond compare.

She seemed to possess a sweet nature, unlike her father, who was one of the meanest men he'd ever had the misfortune to come across. A right nasty bastard on all accounts. But he bought Jack's booty and never asked any questions. He usually drove a hard bargain, which always came out in Brian's favour, of course. But that was the nature of his business and it proved that there were more thieves on land than at sea in one way or another.

Jack looked down at the demure woman in front of him, and always one to make the most of an opportune moment, especially when a pretty woman was involved, he asked her if she would like to have lunch with him.

Her face looked a little shocked. "Oh, um... I—"

He interrupted her, "I know we've only just met, but I'm already acquainted with your father, and after lunch, I can escort you back home. After all, I'm going there anyway."

He watched her face, noting the little frown on her forehead, the way her eyes darted nervously to her hands whilst she tried to come to a decision. Raising her eyes to his, she finally agreed to come. He could see it was a decision she hadn't come to lightly and it heartened him, for it would seem she, too, felt their connection.

Fate had literally thrown her in his path and he wasn't going to ignore such a momentous opportunity.

Holding his arm out and smiling broadly, he waited for her to place her hand on his sleeve, but the moment never happened.

For, suddenly, a deep voice boomed, "So this is where you are!"

Both of them looked up to find her father glaring down at them from his high vantage point upon his horse. The atmosphere quickly changed and Jack was immediately wary. Brian oozed anger and it seemed to be directed at Sophia.

"You're coming back home now," he ordered her.

"But, Father, I—" Sophia began, flustered.

Her father immediately interrupted her. "Do as I tell you or you'll take the consequences." His eyes were blazing. Something had clearly upset him and Jack had no idea what. He tried to intervene.

"Mr. Thorn, we were just going to have lunch together. Perhaps you would like to join us?"

Brian turned his cold gaze on Jack, and with most men, it would have made them tremble with fear, but not so with Jack. Steel by name, steel by nature. He was used to tackling men such as Brian and kept his gaze unwavering.

"Neither of us will be joining you for lunch, Mr. Steel, and if you wish to do our usual transaction this afternoon then I suggest you hold your tongue."

Jack's eyes narrowed and he was about to respond when Sophia placed her hand in his and gave it a small squeeze. His eyes met hers and he understood her silent message to remain quiet. Perhaps he would make things worse if he retaliated.

Sophia, clearly embarrassed, quickly walked over to her horse and untethered it. Mounting quickly, she urged her horse towards her father's. As they rode away, she turned to look back at Jack, a wistful expression on her face.

Jack stared after them until they were but a dot in the distance. How rude for a father to treat his daughter so in public. Whatever had she done to cause him to act like that?

But then this was Brian Thorn. He was a ruthless, hard bastard.

Even though he had only just met Sophia, Jack already felt protective of her and he knew that he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd assured himself of her well-being. So one thing was certain, he wasn't going to leave Thorn Creek Plantation without first making sure that the pretty little Sophia was unharmed.