Saving the Marquise's Granddaughter

Carrie Fancett Pagels

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Dedication

In memory of Ruby Evelyn Skidmore Fancett, my beloved mother, who died of pancreatic cancer during my work on this novel.

About Carrie Fancett Pagels

Carrie Fancett Pagels, Ph.D., was a psychologist for twenty-five years before becoming a Christian historical romance writer. An award-winning and bestselling author, she's previously published short stories and novellas as well as nonfiction material. Saving the Marquise's Granddaughter was inspired by genealogical research. She lives in the historic triangle of Virginia with her husband of twenty-seven years and their teen son, with an adult daughter nearby.

Prologue

Eastern France, 1742

Suzanne loosened the reins, and the sure-footed mare cantered out from under the thick tree boughs. Inhaling the piney freshness, she shadowed her brother into the clearing as they approached the ancient stone cottage.

They'd mastered the boundary of *Grand-mère's* estate, almost to the duchies of Germany.

Success. Laughter bubbled out of her as she tipped her head back to relish the unbound sunlight.

Guillame turned around and bestowed a satisfied smile. He had demanded they ride to the outermost region as practice.

In case we're ever found out. Her good humor fled. *May we never need to run because of Father's beliefs.*

Guillame reined in his stallion, but Fury shook his black head and lifted his white-tipped tail, demanding to be in charge.

Her own sweet mare obeyed instantly. *Odd that the horses should be so opposite of their masters' temperaments.*

Instead of the silver-haired woodsman's wife, a thin youth, holding an axe, emerged from the cottage. Eyes wide, mouth open, he turned and ran back inside before returning with another young man, this one more sturdy. His dark golden hair glistened as he stepped into the pool of light in the clearing.

Even from this distance, Suzanne could discern his fine, even features, wanting to get closer to see him better as he offered a beatific smile to her and Guillame. When they returned to Versailles she would sketch, then paint, his compelling image.

The door behind the young men opened again, and the woman joined them, wrapping an arm around each as though in protection. Were the youths Huguenots? Did the woman believe Suzanne and her brother were there to assist them out of France? *Non, we rehearse in case we ourselves are ever betrayed.*

"*Bonjour*!" Louisa raised a frail hand to her eyes.

"Bonjour, *Madame* Louisa. *C'est moi*—Guillame."

The elderly lady released the youths. The shorter one returned to the cottage.

Suzanne dismounted and led the horse to the water trough, mindful of Guy's admonition always to let him do the talking and to stay clear. Unable to hear his words, she went about watering her mare.

"Johan!" the woman's warning caused her to look up as the young man headed toward her.

Suzanne paused, chewing her lower lip. She must be very careful. Wasn't that what Guillame and Papa cautioned? *Say nothing.*

His face was even more perfect up close, and young. He couldn't be much older than she but was tall with broad shoulders. When she painted the cleft in his chin, she would shadow it carefully, for his was not too deep. But his eyes—she'd never be able to capture the light blue that changed to green like the ocean as he examined her face in return.

He touched her hair, lifting tendrils that had fallen loose from the queue. Heart beating faster, she stopped breathing as warm fingers grazed her temple. Smiling,

he leaned in, his full lips so close she could kiss him if she dared such a thing. She pulled back as he held something between his fingers and then, cupping debris from her hair in his palm, outstretched it for her to examine. A husky laugh accompanied his word. "*Insekt*." His pronunciation startled her.

But that wasn't what made her cheeks burn. *Non!* She had been gaping at his appearance while he had been examining her for bugs and dirt as though she were a common farm animal. She, the Marquise's granddaughter. Even at this young age, admired at Versailles as a great "catch."

Johan bent and released his find back to the earth, then brushed his hands together, grinning—as though he'd just saved the world. Apparently satisfied, the young man walked away from her, responding to Louisa's second call.

Suzanne, the granddaughter of the family who owned these estates, abandoned now by this Johan, no gentleman at all; whose only greeting was a single German word.

Insect, indeed!

1

Versailles, 1745

Gossamer threads, woven by Etienne's words and affixed to Suzanne's heart, were all that kept her feet anchored to the parquetry floor. She tilted her head back, her neck stiff from sitting so still for the maids' ministrations. Tonight, *certainement*, in the ballroom of Louis XV, her future would be revealed.

Yet even as she imagined Etienne's proposal of marriage, her constant shadow-companion, dread, drew with inexorable strokes, a portrait of her family being carried off to prison. Such would happen to them if their secret Huguenot beliefs were discovered. Sweeping that image aside, Suzanne shook the hundreds of dark ringlets that tumbled from her upswept hair.

"Come to the mirror, Suzanne." Cracking open an aged leather jewelry case, her mother lifted Grand-mère's necklace before winding it around Suzanne's neck.

She shivered as the rows of cold pearls settled against her skin.

Maman's warm fingers fastened the heavy gold knot closure. "This necklace will be worn at your wedding."

Soon, with Etienne, Suzanne prayed. After their nuptials, she should be safe. But what of her parents and brother? Dread crept up and clutched the necklace,

clung there, dangled like the large topaz in the center.

Maman decanted a beautiful bottle of rose-scented perfume.

Suzanne sighed.

Heavy perfume couldn't mask the unpleasant odor that recently clung to Maman with this maddening illness that would soon claim her.

Suzanne's gaze settled on the portrait, finally completed after two years. The sea-blue orbs of the German peasant she'd met stared back at her.

Guillame had threatened to show the painting to Etienne.

Etienne LeFort. How many balls had he attended? Surely, she was the only young woman in all the apartments of Versailles never allowed.

Her mother adjusted the sheer ivory fichu tucked into the tight stomacher. *Maman* padded to the gilded white armoire and returned with buckled shoes with high curved heels.

"*Merci.*" Suzanne squeezed into the tight pumps. She'd rather go barefoot under the full skirt.

Maman grasped her arm and led her to the main salon.

The front door swung in and banged against the wall.

Suzanne jumped and covered her heart with her hand.

"Maman, I'm back!" Guillame's boot heels clicked across the floor. "Sorry I'm late."

Glaring at her brother, she sucked in a slow breath, catching a whiff of soap and leather polish. "You, of all people should know better than to come barging in here like that. Like the guard would do if ever…" she hissed.

His too-handsome features pulled into a mask of contrition, and he clicked his heels and bowed toward her, in apology. "*Pardonnez-moi*." He crossed to kiss their mother's cheeks. "I heard Rochambeau's *aide-de-camp* arrived at the palace." Two spots of red dotted his high cheekbones.

Maman gripped his forearms. "We have been friends with Rochambeau many years, but you must remember, he once trained for the priesthood."

Lips tightening into a line, Guillame took their mother's hand in his.

She gazed up at him in maternal affection. "If you hear anything, come to me immediately. Understand?"

"Oui, Maman."

Suzanne, after her heart settled, despaired that they had to refrain from displaying any nuances that might betray her parents' religious beliefs. A word here, a word there—they all added up and could entangle them in a trap.

Guillame came to her side and took her hand in his, an apology still in his dark eyes. "Come on, Suzanne, I'll accompany you to the ballroom, and then I'll retrieve Jeanne."

Forcing a light tone, she shoved her former dark thoughts aside. "You know she only flirts with you so outrageously because you're so irresistible…and you're my brother."

Guillame's jaw muscle twitched. He lifted the focal piece of her necklace in his palm. "Grand-mère's."

The oval jewel was magnificent, like this night would be. Finally, after all this time apart, she and Etienne would be together at court.

Maman paused in front of the porcelain waterfall wall clock. "What's taking your papa so long?" Her

silk brocade gown crinkled as she slowly moved to the divan in the main salon.

"The mirrors in the ballroom will reflect how much Etienne has changed," Guillame whispered in Suzanne's ear. "He's become as big a fool as his brother." He caught her hand before it struck him.

She glared at him. "The hall of mirrors will duplicate our love for all to see."

In the daytime, the ballroom's mirrors magnified light streaming from the wall of windows. The amplified sunlight illuminated the multitude of paintings in the vast room. But in the darkness, would candlelight do the same with their images, or had time changed their relationship forever?

"Wish Maman a good night, Suzanne, and then we're off."

She drew close, but her mother's eyes were closed. "Already asleep." She pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Guillame traversed the blue wool carpet to their mother and draped a light blanket across her. He tugged Suzanne toward the marble hallway floors and placed one finger over his lips as they exited the apartment.

~*~

The fresh night air carried hints of floral scents and the perfume of revelers en route to the dance.

Suzanne imagined herself in wedding finery, gliding to meet her intended. A gown of the finest satin, weighted with thousands of pearls sewn into floral patterns, would be topped by a coverlet of ivory damask, and studded with diamonds. The queen wouldn't be dressed in so fine a garment.

Guy rubbed his square chin and frowned. "I wish you'd rethink this infatuation with Etienne."

She'd be the mistress of a huge plantation in the Caribbean and live in a sun-soaked land surrounded by azure water. Etienne's horrid brother, Pierre, would reside at Versailles, and she and Etienne, half a world away. Shuddering, she banished all images of Pierre.

"You wish to ally with a powerful family, but they're not of our faith." Why did Guillame always have to interrupt her reveries?

The LeForts were of Grand-mère's faith and, like themselves, were *noblesse ancienne*—of the ancient aristocracy of France.

But the laughing boy she loved had grown distracted, even irritable, since beginning work with his brother.

The hum of partygoers increased the closer they got to the ballroom.

Depositing her in the archway of vines and flowers at the entrance, Guillame kissed her cheek. "I will go get Jeanne."

Not wanting to stand in the way, she spied a heavily draped corner to the right and slipped inside. She slid onto the taupe velvet bench and removed her shoes. With her feet already sore, she'd have trouble managing the night. But with Etienne's arms around her, she'd feel no pain.

Heavy drapes obscured all but a sliver's view of newcomers. Behind her, satin curtains rustled. She shouldn't listen but couldn't help overhearing the two men who conversed—one voice deep, the other higher and nasal.

"I've already taken care of the situation." The man's sonorous voice was familiar.

"The West Indies for him." The other gentleman sounded like Madame DeMint's son, Paul, a friend of Etienne's family. "But what will you do about *her*?"

"I know what to do." The first man emitted an earthy laugh.

Suzanne edged closer.

Madame DeMint, her godmother, was supposed to arrange—or at least encourage—the betrothal for her and Etienne. His family's sugar plantation was in the Indies.

"Her parents will never agree, already refused once." Well, that couldn't be about her, for her parents consented to the match. Papa wasn't happy, but he'd allow the union.

"They won't be given a choice."

Suzanne clenched her jaw in frustration, trying to discern if the gentleman was *Monsieur* DeMint. Returning to the bench, she sat and pulled the slippers over her silk stockings. Then she exited to the salon as spectacularly adorned guests glided past.

Framed in the entrance to the ballroom, Jeanne Trompier's blood-red gown clashed with her auburn hair and with Guillame's mustard-colored vest. Her friend's buxom figure was glued, like heavy toile wallpaper, to her brother.

Suzanne's head began to throb, but the curls prevented her from rubbing her temples without dislodging them.

Jeanne's clothing displayed that she was a woman.

Suzanne's bodice suggested otherwise. Now her silk dress seemed insufficient, a lady's gown on someone with the silhouette of a child. At least Maman had allowed a modest pouf of gauzy material secured on her hips, an illusion.

"Suzanne?" Etienne appeared at her side, bringing with him the scent of sandalwood and cloves. He kissed her hands, sending tingles to her fingertips. Etienne's satin waistcoat was beaded and trimmed to perfection. His dark eyes promised her everything as he promenaded around her, his eyes appraising her attire before he stopped in front of her. He took a step toward her. "Why are you alone in this corner? You cannot flee from me tonight, my darling." Suddenly, Etienne's hands settled warm and possessive on her hips.

She stiffened and pushed them away.

He laughed and held out his arm for her. "Did you notice?" He ran his fingertips along the seams of the inner garment, the tailoring exquisite, emphasizing his trim form.

She smiled but refused to comment on his physique. The blue and gold complemented her ensemble well.

"Was the vest made to match my gown?" Her heart leapt in anticipation, but Etienne's smile was enigmatic. Squelched, she looked down at the floor.

Abruptly, he turned her, clasping her waist with hard fingers. Her breath caught in her throat, and she searched his face to gauge his intent. Saying nothing, he led her into the ballroom.

She tried to absorb every detail of this golden treasure, the room transformed by night and candles into a glittering vision of its daytime glory.

Etienne's firm grip pulled her on as he wove through the crowd.

"Gaudy peacocks reflecting in the pond, *n'est pas*?" Etienne gestured to the row of dancers in the mirror.

Tension eased from her as they shared a smile of agreement. They continued past the many paintings, too quickly for her to get but a few details. Heavily carved with intricate woodland designs, the gilded frames of the pictures detracted from the aristocrats portrayed in them.

Ten paces ahead stood a cluster of young men, his new friends, ones her brother despised as milksops.

"Good evening, gentlemen." He pressed his hand against her back.

"Bon soir." All echoed the greeting. Amusement flickered on their smug faces.

Her throat closed. He didn't bother to introduce her.

She'd hoped for a hint at his intentions. Suzanne opened the beautiful fan from Grand-mère, hoping that as she hid behind the pierced wood treasure, its motion would chase away her tears.

Etienne hadn't even acknowledged that they were together.

One, a tall blond man, dragged his gaze up and down her figure as if assessing whether more was there than he could see. Swiping two flutes of champagne from a passing tray, he called out, "*Merci."* His Scottish burr mangled his pronunciation and she almost giggled.

She was tired of being considered inconsequential.

Etienne had always remained attentive until recently, when his self-preoccupation increased. Perhaps he didn't like his friends' gawking, for he practically dragged her away from them.

She scurried to keep up.

He stood with her for a moment, aloof.

She sensed her brother's gaze and searched him

out, finally alighting upon Jeanne, surrounded by a bevy of admirers, their hair powdered to perfection. Their heavy perfumes alone cost a fortune.

Etienne frowned and narrowed his eyes. "Your friend is indiscreet." His tone suggested disgust tempered by another emotion.

She blinked back the tears that threatened. So few friends remained at court. "My brother said he would talk with her this evening." She waved her fan before her face, grateful for the cool air it stirred.

"*Your* brother?" He pointed at Jeanne, who was kissing Etienne's older brother, Pierre, full on the mouth, his lace jabot dipping into her bodice.

Suzanne's body tensed as Pierre rose, cocked his head at her, and gave a lascivious wink.

The memory of Pierre's touch, once locked away, sprang forth. Suzanne shuddered. "What is he doing here? You said he'd be occupied the entire evening."

Etienne shrugged, but his narrowed eyes darted around the room. "Probably here on business. Or to ruin my good time."

Stomach in spasms, she turned away from the twosome. "I know I should try to get along with Pierre." *And to find a way to ignore the way he looks at me.*

"Just stay away from him." The irritation in his voice surprised her.

She swallowed. The noise of the partygoers seemed a cacophony in her ears. The desire to go home overwhelmed her. Turning, Suzanne caught Jeanne's triumphant smile at Etienne. What had Etienne confronted her friend about? Clearly, Jeanne thought she won some point with him.

Etienne rubbed his top lip with his thumb, a habit he had when he felt guilty.

She shivered. This evening wasn't going at all as she had planned. Overhead, the painted figures on the ceiling mocked her. *You'll never get him to marry you*, they taunted. She wanted to shut out all the overwhelming scents of the perfumes, the sight of so much exposed flesh, and the vulgar speech she overheard in passing.

"Let's get a drink." Edging them over to the large engraved bowl, her escort snatched two full silver cups.

Suzanne filled a plate for them with orange slices and cheese.

Etienne handed her a drink and plopped a strawberry into his mouth. "I'm hungry."

The vile scent of the punch suggested someone had poured spirits into it, but she desperately needed to quell the lump in her throat. She took one tentative sip. The liquid burned all the way down, and her eyes flew open wide.

Etienne raised an eyebrow.

"My apologies. I forget you don't partake." He patted her on her back.

Hurriedly, she consumed a few of Etienne's berries, hoping they would take away the foul sting. She swallowed the overripe fruit, disappointed in the strawberries' deceptive appearance.

Etienne squeezed her hand and led her around the edge of the ballroom, avoiding the mirrored wall. He swept her out onto the dance floor.

Suzanne refrained from gaping at the rows of diamonds gracing the long necks of several other women.

When the dance ended, Etienne leaned in. "How many vaults do you suppose were opened so that

treasured gems might be displayed this evening?" His wistful tone reminded her that his mother's jewels might be passing by them, worn by whoever had purchased the collection.

She wanted to say she was sorry his father had almost ruined his family financially.

Etienne would have to ply a trade. He still had position, maintained his title, and had many friends at court, but the Marquis de LeFort needed his sons to be successful businessmen.

"Didn't your necklace belong to your grandmother?" Etienne's dark eyes roamed her face.

"Oui." Smelling lily of the valley, now in bloom at Grand-mère's estate, Suzanne turned her head, but couldn't locate the wearer of the scent.

Etienne kissed her fingertips, led her to the row of women, and then sought his place among the men.

The music began.

Grand-mère's necklace jostled against her as she and Etienne executed their portion of the dance together.

"*Belle*," he mouthed at her, and her cheeks warmed.

Through each new baroque dance, Suzanne gained confidence as she and her partner completed their steps. Minuet after minuet, they continued. The row of dancers swirled in colored silks, glistening jewelry, and high bewigged heads. Only moments seemed to have passed when, with surprise, she noted the candles being lowered.

"I hope they change the chandelier tapers to something casting more light," she called to Etienne as they passed each other in their steps.

He laughed. "Unlikely."

Suzanne wanted to wrap a finger around one of the black curls that framed her companion's perfect face. The most handsome young man at Versailles, Etienne belonged to her. And soon he would be her husband. All that remained lacking was his request for her hand. Her feet were on fire from the pinch of the slippers, but she mustn't leave now. *Not yet.*

Someone tapped Suzanne's shoulder and she turned.

Guillame. His face, paler than usual, with perspiration beading above his tight collar, caused her brother to appear as though he were being pursued.

Suzanne's stomach squeezed into the size of the oranges on the trees in the garden.

"Care to dance?" Guillame offered his arm and glared at Etienne as if daring him to deny them.

Etienne bowed toward Guillame and headed to a cluster of his friends.

Guillame took Suzanne's elbow and guided her onto the ballroom floor. The slower dance music held a hint of its rustic roots.

"Let's do one of our country dances, so I can speak with you, Suzanne." This wouldn't require that they change partners.

They moved to an open area of dance floor, enough space only for them to perform the steps.

"Stand on my boots," he commanded.

Peering down, she saw they were clean. But she'd anticipated they might not be. Their many forays into the countryside came to mind. Suzanne hesitated before he lifted her. One arm fit comfortably around her waist, and the other against her arm, their hands clasped.

The best épée swordsman at court, Guillame