

PORT CULLIS

Brief - The best thing about Port Cullis was always its location. It was precisely where it needed to be. Not too far from the Windward Passage and not too close to Port Royal. The best thing about robbing pirates, was always their unwillingness to record their inventory. No one ever knew what they'd got, so no one missed it when it disappeared. The other brilliant thing about pirates, was their stubborn instinct not to tell anyone where they were going. That meant no one complained, when they failed to arrive...

Why Port Cullis? - I wanted to write a story where the town's folk were the real baddies and for once, the pirates came off worst. I wanted to build a death trap for pirates, a town where rules were made with no regard for their romantic, robin-hood image. It had to be a place where pirates died quietly and in large numbers. But most of all, it had to be a place who's single, simple goal, was to leave no witnesses.

Precis - Jack Landan was christened twice, once in Port Royal, & once in Port Cullis. Officially, his initials were J. L. for Jack Landan, but unofficially they were M. G. for Maddox Greene. Maddox was the name his parents gave him at the altar of their own church, in a town they themselves had founded, near the mouth of the Black River on the east coast of Jamaica. The ceremony wasn't recognised by the Anglican ministers living & working in Jamaica's busy capital. It was recognised in Port Cullis though, by the merchants & traders sweating on its frantic quayside. At last, their town's governor had a son & heir to whom he could leave his vast fortune. They called him Jack when the Jamaican authorities were in town, & Maddox when they were not. Maddox' parents were quite relaxed about the whole two-identities thing inside the grounds of their vast (& highly-productive) cotton plantation, which they'd sited a mile inland. It was the strangest thing, but no one ever pulled them up about it. The fact that their hardworking, conscientious son had two names was simply glossed over. Such inconsistencies were commonplace on the Rose Park estate, seemingly woven into the fabric of its day-to-day life. If you knew what was good for you, you kept your mouth shut & got on with your work. Hopefully Hector Price, the estate's senior foreman, left you alone to complete your task. The trouble was, every now & then, he received orders to make an example of someone. It was easy to see a flogging coming. First, any

non-resident workers were sent home. Next, the bunkhouses were locked up. Finally, the floor of the punishment yard was swept & strewn with fresh straw. Maddox put up with this sort of thing until he was thirteen, when at last he began to ask questions. But by then, it was too late. Hoping he'd acquire a taste for it, his father had let him stand in on one too many near-fatal thrashings. He'd groomed him to take over his ruthless business when he retired & there was no way he was going to start interviewing candidates from outside the family now. If Maddox was sure he didn't want to inherit it, he'd better think seriously about running away now, before it swallowed him whole. The trouble was, his father had spies planted in every community from here to Martha Brae. His best, if not his only chance to make a clean getaway, was to stow away onboard a ship bound for Europe.

Chapter 1 - The eyes of Amiri, the young slave boy, hardened. Tiny creases appeared either side of his nose. Maddox could see how desperate he was not to cry. He was astonished how brave he was being, under the circumstances. There were only a few people present, in the Punishment Yard tonight; Maddox, his father and of course, Hector Price, holding a long, leather whip as if it were a natural extension of his arm. Its frayed end dangled in a muddy puddle at his feet. Its platted handle turned slightly in his fist as he shifted his weight from one gout-infected leg to the other. Only a shallow gutter and a sodden hay bale separated Maddox and Amiri. In the half-light, you could hardly tell them apart. They were exactly the same size and shape, their silhouettes a mirror image of each other. It was only when you got closer, you realised Amiri's complexion was a few shades darker, his hair a few inches longer than Maddox'. They looked at each other for a second, but couldn't bring themselves to speak. The wind cut through their thin clothing and in the darkness, they shivered like reeds on the banks of a wide river. It was easy to imagine them spending time together in the day. They probably had a lot in common, but tonight they found themselves on opposite sides of that wide, cold river. One had been sentenced to a flogging by the estate's senior foreman, the other had been sentenced by his father to watch. The pain Amiri was feeling right now must have been excruciating. Maddox wanted to reach out to him and, if he could, help him recover his senses. But he himself hardly dared move. He worked his feet awkwardly into the mud beneath him instead. A possessive arm crept around his back as he stood there, his eyes cast down in shame. The arm was there not to comfort him though, but to stop him shrinking away into the night. 'Drink it in lad,' his father whispered in his ear. 'You'll get a taste for it, sooner or later.' Maddox felt his father hug him even closer, silently crushing his will, imposing his own dark thoughts on his. 'There's no place for weakness here,' his icy lips reminded him, 'in the Yard.'