



*Cupid's
Arrow*

Mary Jean Adams

“You think you’re something special,
don’t you, Princess? Your brother seems to think awfully highly of you. To me and the boys here, you’re simply a sack of gold.”

Christiana recoiled as though she had been slapped, and a momentary twinge of guilt twisted Neil’s gut. He set it aside. Madame Saint-Ange needed to understand her position on his ship.

“With the kind of money I’m getting from this commission, I could buy a hundred women like you.”

Christiana’s eyes glittered, and she opened her mouth to say something, but Neil stopped her with his words.

“No, scrap that. I don’t think I would buy a hundred women like you. The women I bought would have some meat on their bones, brains in their head, and a civil tongue in their mouths. It’s what all men want, my men included, so don’t think you’re in any danger on my ship. We’ve only been at sea for three months, and we aren’t that desperate. You leave my men alone, and they’ll leave you alone.”

Christiana closed her mouth, but her eyes were like chips of ice.

“Do we have a deal?”

She tipped her chin in the air. “*Oui.*”

Neil turned to go.

“But, *Capitaine...*” Christiana’s velvet tone stopped him in his tracks.

He turned toward her, eyes narrowed. “Yes?”

“Although I will leave your men alone, I may well kill you before this voyage is through.”

Neil spun on his heel and headed toward his cabin. He’d be damned if he didn’t believe her.

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by

Mary Jean Adams

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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“It was the best of times,
it was the worst of times...”

~A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens

Prologue

*July 6, 1793, Place de la Révolution
Paris, France*

Look at me, you fils de pute.

Christiana silently begged André to turn her direction, if even for a moment, as he stepped from the tumbril. It was the first time she had pleaded with him for anything since the night she had awoken to a mob of Jacobins pounding at the door of the chateau. It seemed like a lifetime ago. In reality, it had only been two years.

On that night, she pleaded for her safety, for her very life. Now, with her life all but forfeit, all she longed for was a look, just one glance back at the woman he had betrayed. The woman who would gladly see him in hell.

Instead, the fool kept his eyes cast downward as he avoided the worst of the stew of mud and rotting vegetables that surrounded the executioner's platform.

Damn his black soul!

Christiana wanted André to see the joy she held in her heart for the first time in three years. It did not bother her one bit that once Madame Guillotine had her way with her husband, she would soon follow. Her death would be swift, and she would be free. Free from the pain she had suffered from his beatings. Free from

the humiliation she had endured at the hands of his *frères*. And, most of all, free from him.

Christiana fidgeted in her eagerness, and the irons that bound her hands chafed against the delicate skin of her wrists. She did not need to see her hands to know angry red welts stood out in stark contrast to fair skin that had grown even paler during the long, dark weeks of imprisonment in a subterranean cell.

The pain does not matter. Or it least it will not matter soon.

She molded her face into a study of perfect serenity. It had become almost second nature over the long months of torment, a skill she mastered as soon as she discovered André and his cohorts preferred her suffering to stoicism. She had become accustomed to denying them that which they most prized.

Inwardly, Christiana bristled with impatience. Freedom was within her grasp, yet out of a misguided sense of pity, the head guard had arranged for her to be the last execution of the day. Perhaps some prisoners still harbored hope for a rescue as they waited to climb the rough steps to their death. She held no such hope. She neither expected rescue nor welcomed it.

The guards led old Madame Fournier up the wooden steps. Her bare toe caught on an uneven plank, and she stumbled. With a sneer, one of her guards caught her by the elbow and shoved her forward. The spectators jeered in delight, and the remains of a cabbage caught Madame Fournier on the side of her face. It stuck for a moment, then fell away leaving a trail of rotting, green slime slashed across the old woman's hollow cheek.

Your wait is almost over now, madame.

Madame Fournier had been a prisoner for a long time, since long before Christiana arrived. So long that the old woman had lost interest in her fellow prisoners and spoke not a word to anyone. Seeming to have lost the will to live as well, she insisted Christiana eat her portion of moldy bread and share her meager ration of the rancid stew that served as their one meal a day. When Christiana refused, *madame* shoved the wooden bowl back at her, imploring her to eat with a resolute expression in her sunken eyes.

Madame Fournier reached the platform, and the guard strapped her frail body into the contraption that would position her beneath the blade. There was no reading of *madame's* transgressions as there had been in the early days of the revolution. With the number of executions happening daily, perhaps they had had to dispense with that formality in order to get them all in before the sun set over the festivities.

The executioner raised the blade over *madame's* neck, and Christiana held her breath.

Just a moment more, and then you will be free.

The blade hovered, giving Christiana a moment to wonder what crime the gentle old lady could have committed. Her fellow prisoners agreed that *madame* had been a simple baker before the revolution, but supposition of her crimes ranged from prostitution to plotting to secret the royal family out of Paris in giant loaves of bread. Both seemed equally unlikely.

The executioner loosed the blade, and Christiana's pulse thrilled to the metallic whistle of the blade on its runners as *madame* was set free from her wretched existence.

It will be André's turn soon.

The official in charge called for the next prisoner, and a muscle twitched at the corner of Christiana's eye, the only expression of emotion she had allowed herself in weeks.

André's back remained straight, his shoulders squared, as a guard led him to the foot of the steps. She could not see his face, but she could easily imagine him glaring with his small, close-set eyes at the throng that had gathered to witness the day's entertainment. His lips were probably curled in contempt for his fellow Parisians. Curled like a snake, ready to strike. Just as they had been so often when he looked at his wife.

Christiana caught the slight flexing of André's hands, bound behind his back, and her lips twitched again. There would be no striking today. Her snake of a husband was at the mercy of this mob.

Someone hurled a rotten egg, and it landed on the shoulder of her husband's tattered and soiled silk shirt. It did not appear as if the mob felt the least bit merciful today. She almost smiled.

The faint memory of an emotion flitted through her. *Guilt? Oui*. She would enjoy watching her husband die. May God forgive her in her own last moments on Earth.

Perhaps she should have asked Father Hebert to absolve her of the sin she was about to commit. In a country doing its best to rid itself of its Catholic heritage, she had been granted the services of a priest by a jailor who had succumbed to her pleas—and probably her appearance, as well.

Father Hebert was undoubtedly one of the state priests who had sworn an allegiance to the constitution, but she was glad of his services. He had heard her last

confession just before dawn and pronounced her mortal soul cleansed and free to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Surely, it would be a sin to enjoy watching the death of her husband, but was it possible to ask for forgiveness before one sinned? Perhaps not.

Nor would the young priest think she needed absolution for the sin. The revolutionaries had plucked him from his small village in Ille-et-Vilaine in Brittany and transported him to Paris where he had the unhappy job of hearing the confessions of the condemned prisoners—those who admitted to being papists anyway. He still wore the wide-eyed look of an altar boy who did not quite know what was expected of him.

She remembered the shocked expression on his chubby face when she admitted to the sin of adultery. An older priest would have lectured her on the error of her ways before absolving her. Not Father Hebert. He asked for details.

But the intensity in his doe-brown eyes was not that of prurient interest. She knew that look from experience. Even at twenty-nine, her body tormented by hunger and an untold number of beatings, she received daily offers of salvation from prison officials. Whatever secluded spot happened to be handy would suit.

Father Hebert fervently claimed he did not believe her sin. Christiana, according to the young priest, was surely not capable of such a serious transgression. That her face remained untouched by the ravages of time and her body free from the devastating effect of the pox was proof enough for him. He pronounced it a miracle.

Christiana could not remember any catechism lesson that absolved her of sin simply because she was trying to stay alive. And since when was beauty a sign

of innocence?

When she questioned Father Hebert about it, he turned crimson and sputtered something about not recalling the exact scripture but being certain it existed.

The crowd cheered, jolting Christiana back to the present. With a dull thud, another nobleman's head rolled into the woven basket. As soon as the guards pulled the body from the platform, it would be André's turn.

Was he afraid?

She still could not see his face since he waited with his back to her for his turn up the steps, but he held his spine as stiff as a pike. From the tilt of his head, his nose was pointed skyward, as usual. André considered it a sin to show fear.

But did he feel it?

That was what Christiana wanted to know. And, frankly, what she hoped for. Even if only for five minutes, she would have him know the same fear that had haunted her every moment for the past three years.

The guard gave André a small shove to get him moving. André resisted for a moment, and for the briefest instant, it looked as if the mighty André Saint-Ange would struggle against the inevitable. If God were really on her side, as Father Hebert assured her, perhaps He would give her the pleasure of seeing her husband plead for his life. That would make her last moments on earth a delight.

But, alas, it was not to be. Christiana did not doubt his struggles were André's instinctive reaction to being manhandled by men he considered to be his inferiors. As soon as they loosened their grip on his arms, he climbed to the platform under his own power as though

attending his coronation.

The blade was raised, and two burly guards strapped André to the platform. Christiana's heart pounded against her breastbone, and the blood rushed in her ears.

Freedom. It will be mine at last.

At that moment, one of the two guards that flanked her took a step to the side, the man's massive shoulders blocking her view. She had no doubt he meant well, but she would have kicked him if her ankles were not chained beneath her skirts.

He had been the one to arrange for her to be the final execution of the day. She supposed he considered it an act of kindness to spare her the sight of her husband's execution as well. Christiana silently cursed his cruelty.

She spared a sidelong glance at the guard on her left. No such gentleness there. A wicked grin slashed across his pockmarked face, and he cheered along with the crowd for the executioner to let go the blade. But in his glee, he paid little attention to his one remaining prisoner. Christiana shuffled sideways until she could see her husband looking down at the basket filled with severed heads.

His eyes were closed as though he were praying. Christiana knew him better than to think he asked for forgiveness. It was possible he prayed for an act of divine intervention, but even that would be too humbling for the proud André. More than likely, the man just did not like the blank stares of the bloody faces peering at him from the basket.

A hush fell over the crowd, and Christiana wondered that she had never noticed it before. Perhaps

the crowd recognized that the man who lay before them, his neck beneath the blade, was not just any nobleman. This one deserved to die.

The executioner drew the blade to the apex of the guillotine and waited for the signal from an unseen official. Christiana held her breath, and the world stood motionless for what seemed like an eternity.

Then at last, when she feared she might faint from lack of air, the executioner let go the blade. It whistled as it ran down oiled tracks and sliced cleanly through André's thin neck. She only caught a glimpse of his face as his head tumbled to the basket below. His eyes were open. Christiana smiled.

Chapter One

“*Por favor, mi amigo, slow down!*”

Neil Blakely stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder at his second in command while he waited for the man to catch up.

At five foot and ten inches, they were roughly the same height, but Petey was twenty-five years his senior. At sea, Petey's energy knew no bounds, and he could scale the ratlines like, well, like a rat. But Neil's ship, the *Rocinante*, was less than one hundred twenty feet from stem to stern, and it didn't give a man much of a chance to exercise the lungs. On land, Petey's age had started to show.

“I don't have time to slow down,” Neil said. “I'm going to finish this damned errand and get off this damned continent.” His lip curled as he surveyed the town square so unlike anything he imagined when his brother-in-law had asked for his help.

Petey reached his employer, then doubled over, one hand on his knee, the other grabbing his side as he tried to catch his breath.

Despite his grumblings, Neil waited for Petey to stop rasping before he pushed off again into the crowd of Parisians filling the square that until only recently had been called *Place Louis XVI*. The French revolutionaries had torn down the statue of the beloved king and erected a monstrosity in its place, an

executioner's tool of such elegant efficiency it chilled Neil to the bone to even look at it. Now the square was called *Place de la Révolution*. Privately, Neil named it the *Place du Cauchemar*, for it would certainly cause nightmares for many years to come.

Petey gulped more air, then indicated with a wave of his hand he was ready to go again. This time, Neil slowed his gait to a rapid but reasonable pace. Not so much so Petey could keep up, but because they were getting further and further into the square, and the sweaty bodies of seemingly all the peasantry in France blocked their way. That, and because Captain Neil Blakely wasn't exactly sure where he was going.

It seemed every man, woman, and a fair number of the children in Paris had taken the day off to watch the execution of people they had no way of knowing, but whom they considered enemies nonetheless. Over the tops of their powdered, sour-smelling heads, he could see the wooden platform that held the dreaded instrument of death. Through their thick bodies, pressed shoulder to shoulder in the open square, he could see little else.

From his pocket, Neil pulled a lace handkerchief, a gift from his sister, and held it over his nose.

"My word, Captain, that is a nice bit of lace." Petey managed a snort even while wheezing.

"Don't waste your air. You know I keep this thing for sentimental reasons and not because I'm the sort who cares for lace." He grinned. "Unless, of course, it's on a woman."

"Of course, sir."

Neil cocked an eyebrow. Was Petey mocking him? Probably.

He had been there when Amanda gave him the handkerchief as a parting gift just before he took command of his first ship. She knew how much he loathed the effeminate tastes of the upper crust of society. It had been a sort of joke between Neil and his sister, but he still kept it in his pocket after all these years to remind him of her.

Petey, his second in command since the first voyage, had teased him mercilessly that evening after they weighed anchor. He hadn't meant for Petey to know he still carried the gift in his pocket. However, with the foul air of Paris and its sweaty, grimy inhabitants assaulting his every breath, now was not the time for pride.

He needed to get this business done with and get back to his ship. When he received this commission, he had been intrigued. First, by the unbelievable sums of money he had been offered to fetch a woman. The ransom befitted a king. Then his brother-in-law, Captain William Stoakes, explained the woman was his benefactor's sister, and he understood. He would pay that kind of money, if he had it, to rescue his own sister. That is, if she should ever need rescuing, which was highly unlikely.

Other than returning the chevalier's sister safely to him, Captain Stoakes issued only one other order. Neil must not get the Americans involved in this conflict. Washington already had his hands full with men like Jefferson and Paine who thought any revolution was a good revolution. According to Will, the president didn't need an inconsequential American captain aiding them in their cause.

As if he would ever do anything to jeopardize the

peace!

The more-than-generous commission and his orders aside, Neil had been eager to get his own first-hand look at the revolution that had swept France. He had, of course, heard events had taken a violent turn. It was said blood ran thicker in the streets of Paris than it ever did in his own country. The French people even went so far as to kill their king, an idea that would have been unfathomable to his fellow patriots during the height of America's revolution.

But King Louis of France had not trampled on the rights of some distant subjects as good ol' George had. If Louis were only to look out the window of his coach as it transported him and his lovely queen between his palace in Paris and those at Versailles and Marseilles, he could see the degradation of his people with his own eyes.

During his journey from Le Havre, Neil saw first-hand the starvation that gripped the people of France. Mothers with half-dead babies in their arms darted from doorways to ask for a coin. Children, little more than wraiths, clung to Neil's coat as he passed. Some asked for food, but others, too weak to speak, simply clung to him with all the strength they had left in their tiny, bony fingers.

A team of horses had trampled one child as the driver drove his lord's coach hard through the narrow, winding streets. The driver stopped the coach only long enough to see that the horses were unharmed. The curtain at the carriage window parted while the driver checked the foreleg of one of the horses. Neil caught just a glimpse of a woman's gloved hand before it fell back into place.

In the end, Neil arrived in Paris feeling some compassion for the plight of the French people and not at all certain he wanted to save a nobleman's daughter from what might be a justified death. Had it not been for the princely sum of money, and that she was a woman, he would just as well have turned down the commission and returned to America.

Now, as he looked around at the people he had felt so much compassion for this very morning, his stomach churned. He found it hard to believe these people were at an execution and not a festival. He passed entire families picnicking on baskets of dark brown bread and moldy cheese. They laughed and shouted greetings to each other. They shoved their meager fare into their mouths with dirt-stained fingers, pausing only to cheer as each head rolled.

Men in red caps and long trousers passed around jugs of what looked like wine but smelled more like vinegar. It had to be a strong drink for the scent to rise above that of the men—an earthy, acrid mixture of human sweat and manure.

Petey ran into a cluster of these fellows as he turned his head to gawk and forgot to watch where he was going. He bounced off the broad back of a man twice his size.

“Pardonnez-moi, monsieur!”

Neil grimaced at Petey's poor pronunciation and his use of the aristocratic form of address. He had cautioned his second to keep a low profile, but he hadn't intended for the man to blend in by attempting French. He could barely manage English when under duress.

The giant turned with all the speed of a massive

water wheel. With bloodshot eyes, he scanned the crowd behind him. Then his gaze dropped and landed on the petite Spaniard.

Petey, ever the polite one, repeated his apology. “*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur.*”

The man grinned, revealing a mouth full of rotting teeth.

“C’mon, you fool.” Neil tugged at Petey’s sleeve, propelling him forward. It would not do to wait and hear the thoughts behind that predatory smile.

A momentary hush fell over the crowd, and the whistle of a blade sliced the air as another life came to an end. He had heard the guillotine spared no one—not even children. Thank God there were no children on the platform today. He would have had to forfeit his commission and maybe his life to these barbarians as he would not have been able to stand idly by and watch these butchers murder a child.

Neil closed his lips against the metallic taste of blood and old sweat that reached him on the breeze stirring the afternoon air.

He was used to the taste of fresh blood on the wind, having served on a ship since he was a boy of eleven at the height of the war. But ships were washed down after a battle until there was nothing left to taste but the salt air and the sea. The Parisians apparently didn’t feel so fastidious about their square, and the scent of fresh blood mingled with the blood that dried upon the wooden platform and seeped into the earth below. When the scent hit the tongue, it was like sucking on a rusty chain.

“Excuse me, *citoyenne?*” Neil approached an old crone selling loaves of dark, lumpy bread. “Can you tell

me where the prisoners enter the square?"

He cursed his sister for not teaching him gutter French instead of the French of the aristocracy. One word from the old woman and the crowd would set on him.

The woman narrowed her eyes, and Neil braced himself against her perusal. Her dark eyes seemed to take in everything at once, from the tip of the red cap he had stolen, to his brown tunic, to his most prized pair of leather boots. Finally, she gave him a gap-toothed smile and batted charcoal-lined eyelids that had long ago lost their lashes. She spoke with an accent so thick, Neil had to concentrate for all he was worth to make sense of it.

"They arrive from the gates over there." She pointed a gnarled finger in the direction they had been heading. "But you have come too late to watch the procession. The tumbrils, they arrived hours ago, and there are maybe three...no...four prisoners more until the day is done."

"*Merci, citoyenne.*" He placed a coin in her upturned hand and took a loaf of bread.

"What is that for?" Petey asked when they were out of earshot.

"I think I was buying her off in case she became suspicious, but if not, I can at least use this as a weapon." Neil smacked the rock-hard loaf against the palm of his hand.

"What did she say?" Petey asked.

"She said we should wait for the princess over by those gates."

"I believe she's a countess or something, not a princess." Petey quickened his pace to keep up with his captain.

“Any man who pays that much for anything less than a princess is a fool.”

Petey cocked his head as he jogged. “Maybe so, but I’m just glad your brother-in-law had his hands full and needed us to take the job.”

“I’m not. I’m beginning to believe I hate the French. The sooner I can be off this continent so they can kill each other in peace, the happier I will be.”

Neil stopped short when they reached the gates leading into the street from the square. Hopefully, the old woman hadn’t misled him. Hopefully, he understood her French. Hopefully, he understood his orders.

Neil scowled. His missions usually relied more on his skill as a captain and not so much on hope.

His orders were the most confusing, even though they were the only directions given in English. Mont Trignon had expressly ordered him to wait at the gates leading to the square *after* the prisoners had been taken to the platform. When he asked how the hell he was supposed to rescue the woman with her head already on the chopping block, Mont Trignon had smiled a dull smile and said he had taken care of that detail. Neil’s part in rescuing Madame Saint-Ange would come when they were taking her back to her cell.

Neil rolled his eyes at the memory of the confusing conversation. Had his brother-in-law not confirmed Mont Trignon’s directions, he might have assumed the man had gone daft with worry for his sister. Or that he did not wish her rescued, after all.

Neil stretched his neck to see above the heads of the crowd. Squinting against the sunlight that glinted off the blood-stained blade, he tried to separate the few

remaining prisoners from the only slightly less motley spectators.

He hoped his unknown partner in this rescue knew what he was doing. He didn't look forward to facing the chevalier's wrath should he fail. Since he had already gone to all this trouble, he didn't particularly want to forfeit his lucrative commission either.

Petey nudged Neil in the ribs with an elbow. He jerked his head toward three men in brown robes so long they swept about their feet. They stood away from the crowd, as though not wishing to be sullied from the contact.

Priests. Neil groaned. It was the only way.

With a silent signal to Petey, they crept around the men, then quickly dispatched the two largest priests with a rap to the head.

The third man, shorter and slighter than either of his counterparts, turned. He glanced at his fallen comrades then regarded Petey and Neil with hopeful brown eyes.

"Are you here to help *madame*?" His soft, feminine voice was strained with emotion.

Damn fool of a priest. He's in love with the woman.

"Yes, we're here to help *madame*." Neil kept the irritation out of his voice. "Do you plan to try to stop us?"

Perhaps the simpleton thought he was up to the task.

"*Non, non,*" the young man protested. "Here. Take my keys. They will unlock her irons."

He shoved a ring of keys into Neil's hand then struggled to assist Petey in dragging the still

unconscious bodies of his comrades into the alley.

“But please, you must hurry,” he said, huffing while he tugged at the wrists of one of the men. “She is so innocent, and she does not have much time left.”

“Innocent, you say?” Neil eyed the two unconscious men.

“Yes, she is innocent.” The young priest shook his head so hard his chin wobbled.

Neil gave a nod to Petey.

Petey nodded his understanding, then bent to disrobe one of the priests. The priest turned to Neil, his face so pale his freckles stood out in stark relief. Neil took the opportunity to knock him out with a fist to his jaw.

“Why’dja do that?” Petey asked, his dark eyes accusing as he tossed a priest’s robe to Neil.

“Three reasons.” He held up the course brown fabric that looked more like a blanket with holes cut into it than a garment and eyed it with distaste. “First, ’cause I wanted to.”

He took a sniff, then recoiled.

“But he’s a man of God!” Petey protested.

Neil snorted and pulled the robe over his head. “More like a boy of God, and a French boy at that.”

Petey tossed him the rope sash the priest had used to secure his robe about his waist.

“Second, I did it because he’s obviously in love with the princess, and boys in love have a way of doing stupid things.” Neil tied the rope around his waist and tugged the knot tight. The robe chafed his skin even through his tunic. “I didn’t want him doing something that gets us both killed.”

Petey looked up from tying his own sash. “How

would you know what boys in love are capable of? You ever been in love?"

"Not a chance!" Neil snorted, but a wicked grin crossed his face. "I've been in lust though, and that's close enough."

Petey put on the stern face he used when he intended to overlook the fact Neil was his commander. "Some day, Cupid is going to pierce that stone heart of yours when you least expect it. Then we'll be seeing who does stupid things."

Neil laughed. "If Cupid should get me with his arrow, I'm asking you as my second in command to shoot me with a real bullet. Knock that arrow right out of my heart."

Petey shook his head. "What's the third reason?"

"If he turns up missing keys without a single knot on his noggin, you think them damn Frenchies will believe he didn't have something to do with the princess's escape?"

Petey followed Neil out of the alley. "So you are a kind man after all."

"I wouldn't count on it," Neil grumbled over his shoulder.

Neil and Petey, disguised in priestly garb, rejoined the crowd in the square. As they jostled and elbowed their way to a small rise that allowed them to see the platform, they were met with a surprising amount of hostility. The people of Paris evidently felt no compunction against pushing a priest. When he had had enough, Neil picked up one man by the scruff of his neck and hurled him out of the way. After that, they were given a wider berth.

They took their position at the front of the crowd

that claimed the rise just as guards led a tall man up the steps.

“Do we go now?” Petey whispered.

“No, her husband has to die first.”

“Is that her husband?” Petey inclined his head toward the man being led toward the platform.

“How should I know?”

Mont Trignon had described his brother-in-law as a tall, thin man with a pinched face. This man was tall and thin, but he could not see his face. Even so, France seemed to be filled with tall, thin men with pinched expressions. It was as if “pinched” was in fashion this season.

“Supposin’ that is her husband, what do we do once they execute him?”

Petey’s incessant questions had become as irritating as a fly buzzing about his cheek. Neil shrugged him off.

“You don’t know?”

“We wait.” Neil could almost hear the buzzing.

“Wait? How long do we wait?”

“I don’t know. I was told that for this mission to succeed, her husband must die.” Neil kept his eyes on the man ascending the platform, his pointed chin held perpendicular to the wooden steps.

“And then we rescue her?”

“No. Then we wait some more.”

Petey mumbled something, then dropped into a silence that signaled acquiescence, if not full agreement, with the plan. The buzzing started to fade. It didn’t last long.

“You will forgive me, Captain, for saying that this plan of yours does not sound well thought out.”

"It's not my damned plan," Neil spat.

He had to agree with Petey though. The plan was as asinine as anything he had ever heard, but it wasn't his plan. If Petey would just shut up for a moment, he might be able to figure out a way to collect on his commission even if the woman died. After all, if he followed his orders, he could hardly be held accountable for her death.

While the guards positioned the tall man under the blade, Neil tried to sort out how this plan of Mont Trignon's could possibly succeed.

Just then, a petite, blonde woman stepped into view. There were few enough fair-haired women in France, and from Mont Trignon's description, this had to be his sister. He had described her as pretty. That was an understatement.

"*Dios Mio.*" Petey made the sign of the cross. "*Es un angel!*"

Neil rolled his eyes. Leave it to Petey to be awestruck by a pretty face. However, Petey probably didn't realize how close he was to the truth. Christiana's surname, Saint-Ange, meant something akin to angel. Of course, if he told Petey that, the old coot would probably wear out his tunic crossing himself.

"Angel, huh?" Neil laughed. "I don't know about that, but she does seem pretty inhuman to me."

"What do you mean, sir?" Petey's jaw hung slack, and his eyes were round as though he couldn't believe his captain could speak such blasphemy.

"Well, if that is her husband, she doesn't seem too bothered by his execution. Look at her. There isn't the slightest hint of emotion on her face, and she doesn't

look away. What kind of woman wouldn't look away?"

"That is unusual." Petey sounded unconvinced and still a bit awed.

A dark cloud blotted out the sun, and Neil shivered as a chilled breeze swirled past them.

"Damn right, it's unusual." He glanced up at the darkening sky. "If I had a wife, I would want her wringing her hands and crying if I were about to die."

"Perhaps it is herself that she is thinking of. She is next to be executed. Or perhaps he is a man who does not deserve hand-wringing and crying." Petey regarded Neil meaningfully. "There are some who do not, *Capitán*."

Neil ignored Petey's thinly veiled rebuke. "Oh, no, wait. I think I saw her lips twitch. Ah, yes, it must be because they're raising the blade. Then again, no woman would smile at that. Perhaps she has an itchy spot on her cheek, and with her hands bound, she cannot reach it."

"I think perhaps she is courageous." Petey's chin jutted out.

Neil shook his head. For an old Spaniard, Petey could be the most romantic fellow at times.

Out of ways to taunt each other, the two men waited in silence with the rest of the crowd for the blade to fall. It flashed in the sunlight that had momentarily crept out from behind the clouds. In the end, it took no more than a second to end the life of the man who had the misfortune to find himself beneath it.

"*Dios mio*," Petey said, with an even deeper reverence now. He crossed himself again.

Neil almost joined him. But it wasn't the terrible sight of the beheading or the cheers of the crowd that

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had them dumbstruck.

Christiana smiled now, a smile that was almost wicked in its innocence. Her silver-blond hair was loosely bound about her head, exposing her long elegant neck, and the sun shining down on it gave her an otherworldly glow.

But was she angel or demon? And what the hell had he gotten himself into?