opening extract from

Cassandra's Sister

written by

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PROLOGUE

Paris, 1794

The brightness of the sky smote Jean's eyes so violently that he stumbled. He let out a cry of pain. Then the butt of a guard's rifle landed hard between his shoulder blades, taking his breath away.

In the darkness of the prison cell he had prayed that God would save him. He had reasoned that since God knows everything, He must know that many thousands of innocent men and women had perished beneath the guillotine's blade in the last few months. God surely knew that all Frenchmen, whether sympathetic or hostile to the Revolution, were now calling these months "The Terror". But did God know how much longer the bloodshed would last? Months? Years? Until Jean's beloved France had no more martyrs to make, and no more sacrifices to offer?

Now, thrust into the waiting tumbril, his hands tied behind his back, Jean knew that praying was useless. God had not heard him.

His blood buzzed in his ears, louder and louder, in rhythm with the hammer-beats of his heart. Crouching in the corner,

he pressed his head against the cart's wooden rail. He did not want to look at that vast sky, whose brilliance, even on this cold February day, was evidence of the glorious work of the God who had forsaken him.

More and more men were pushed in behind Jean until the tumbril was crammed as full as those he had seen on his estate in the Marais, crowded with animals on their way to slaughter. Trusting beasts, desperate human beings – what did it matter whose blood was shed? Around him, each face told the same story. These men had been condemned for a careless word, or an accident of birth, or because they had tried to protect a loved one.

My Eliza! Swaying in the cart, his heart filling his chest, Jean felt the cold sweat of fear on his face.

Everyone had heard tales of heroism in the face of execution: men who struggled, defying their fate until the end; women who went meekly to their deaths, exposing their white necks to the blade with never a tremble or a cry. But Jean was no hero. He felt neither defiance nor meekness, but true terror. He could not hold up his head before the jeering spectators.

A young man, whose frail body pressed against Jean's, was sobbing. He pawed at Jean's clothes, seeking the comfort of an embrace before he was sent to his grave. But Jean, with his wrists bound, could not give it; neither could he find any words of consolation. This wretch was going to die, but so was Jean, at the age of forty-four. And did this boy have a son, and a beautiful wife to leave behind?

He tried to conjure Eliza as he had last seen her. But his imagination was flooded by the memory of her dark eyes, bright with tears. A cold drizzle had been falling on the day she

had taken leave of him after their brief stay in the English city of Bath. His little son Hastings had fretted, reaching out for the carriage which waited to take him and his mother home to London. But Eliza's lovely eyes, tormented by anxiety, had looked into Jean's. "I will return to France, Jean," she had promised. "When this madness is over, I will return." With those words she had kissed him, and stepped into the carriage.

That had been three years ago, in the spring of 1791. The Revolution had been in its infancy. Jean had still felt reasonably safe, far away from Paris at his beloved estate in the Marais. The beginning of the Terror was still years off. They had assumed Eliza would be able to take refuge in England during the conflict, returning to him as soon as it was resolved.

A vain hope. Jean raised his head as the tumbril stopped. There on the platform stood the guillotine, the instrument of his death. A thunderous, merciless noise arose from the crowd, jostling one another and holding children aloft to afford them a better view.

The contraption – what else could one possibly call such a complicated assembly of wood, metal and rope? – rose high, higher than he had imagined. The blade hung at the top. Jean gazed up at it. Angled, sharp, malevolent. Suddenly he knew he was going to vomit. He leaned over and spewed onto the cobbles the remains of the bread he and his fellow-condemned had shared that morning. Bound, he was unable to wipe the bitter taste from his mouth.

The din increased as the prisoners were hauled out of the cart and pushed towards the wooden platform. Blank-faced revolutionary soldiers tried to quell the surge of spectators. Jean saw women younger than Eliza, chanting and stamping

with joy at the prospect of witnessing his execution. *Women*, whose God-given nature was to create life, not destroy it! Eliza had been quite right. The Revolution was madness.

Evidently, he was to be dispatched first.

The guards thrust him to his knees before the bascule. Jean trembled as they tied him to it, face-down. He felt his necktie being roughly loosened.

"Thank God," he managed to utter aloud, "that my wife does not know of this moment!"

God had, after all, shown some mercy. Safe in England, with correspondence next to impossible, Eliza had been spared the news of Jean's imprisonment. When news of his death would get to her, and by what means, Jean could not predict. Only one thing was certain: he had no need to fear that she or Hastings would be neglected. Eliza's English relatives would take care of that.

He felt the bascule tip, lowering his body into position. The metal collar secured his bare neck. He closed his eyes, and saw again the pallor of Eliza's face, and the mingling of her tears with the English drizzle.

But there was no time to wish her farewell. The blade completed its travel in less time than it took to say the three syllables of her name.

BOOK ONE

Beheaded

Eliza

As Jenny and her sister neared the Rectory the heat was going from the day. The sunshine crossed the walls of the house at a steep angle, plunging half the garden into shadow. The stock-scented air was perfectly still. Cassandra opened the gate. Full-leaved gooseberry bushes brushed Jenny's skirt as she followed her sister up the narrow path to the kitchen door.

"When do you suppose Henry will return from Basingstoke?" asked Cass.

"Soon, I hope, since it is already two hours past dinner time. But of course it is impossible to start dinner without the greediest person in the family."

"Henry is tall and strong," protested Cass. "He needs to eat large meals."

"Defend him to the last, if you will, though you are quite aware that my approval of our incorrigible brother is boundless. And anyway, *I* am so hungry I could eat the very horse he is riding home on."

Cassandra laughed. Then, abruptly, she stopped laughing. "Look!"

A carriage stood in the lane where the garden met the fields. Not a light trap such as local people used for calling at the Rectory, but a large, highway-travelling carriage with muddy wheels and dust-covered windows. Although no horse was hitched to it, its arrival was clearly very recent.

"Do you recognize it?" asked Jenny warily.

The war with France had not only taken Henry into the army, but their younger brothers, Frank and Charles, into the navy, and the sisters lived with the ever-present possibility of distressing news. A feeling Jenny recognized only too well, as if she had laced her stays too tightly, began to rise up inside her.

"No," admitted Cass. But to reassure her younger sister she added, "It is probably visitors for Papa. The parents of a prospective pupil."

Jenny knew it was not. Parents of prospective pupils did not come until later in the summer, and never from very far away. This carriage had come a great distance.

"I shall go in first, if you wish," offered Cass.

"No, let us go together."

The open kitchen door revealed the unusual sight of the housemaid standing on a chair.

"Oh, miss!" the girl exclaimed when she saw Cassandra. She began to untie her apron. "Mistress said I was to fetch you to her as soon as you came in."

Cassandra set down the laden basket their sister-in-law had given them. "Never mind about that now, Kitty. Tell me, whose carriage is that in the lane?"

But before the girl could reply Mama entered the kitchen, her best cap, hurriedly put on, covering only half her head. "Girls!" she cried. "Why did you not come to the

front door?" She caught sight of the basket. "Oh, preserves! How kind Anne is!" She advanced upon her daughters open-armed. "Come, let me embrace you, my dearest, dearest girls! Such dreadful news!"

This display of affection in the presence of a servant convinced Jenny that there had indeed been a death in the family. "Mama, tell us at once," she urged. "What in the name of God has happened?"

"Eliza's husband is dead!" announced Mama. Reluctantly, she released her daughters. "Eliza is in the drawing-room," she told them, her voice faltering. She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "Oh dear, I know not what to say!"

Jenny could not swallow the lump that constricted her throat. It troubled her greatly to see her mother's distress. Eliza, though Mama's niece only by marriage, enjoyed her aunt's great favour, indulgently bestowed. For her own part, Jenny loved Eliza well, though her affection had always been tempered with awe for her older, worldlier cousin.

Cass picked up her skirts decisively. "Come, let us join them."

The evening sunlight beat so strongly on the windows that the drawing-room resembled a splendidly lit stage. Upon the instant they entered Jenny was transported back to Christmases past, when Eliza had encouraged her young cousins to act plays at the Rectory for themselves and their relatives. Every boy and girl in the house had joined in with such enjoyment that Jenny often regretted that they had all grown up and could no longer behave in such a fearlessly inelegant way.

Eliza was now *very* grown up – over thirty – but as she stood before the window, her mourning dress no less exquisite than any other outfit Jenny had ever see her in, she still

held something of the bold theatricality which had enchanted them years ago. The bright light made it clear to Jenny, however, that anxiety and grief had made their mark on her cousin's once resplendent beauty. Eliza was still delightful to look at, but her face looked pale, almost white, against the brim of the black bonnet that recent widowhood demanded. The brown of her eyes, a deep brown like Papa's, remained the same, but the expression they had held in her youth, which Mama used to call "tigerish", had gone. She looked, Jenny realized, diminished.

"My dears!" Eliza took her cousins' hands and kissed their cheeks. Jenny remembered how the same scene had taken place in this very room, two years before, when Eliza's adored mother had died. Then, as now, Eliza had quit London and sought sanctuary in the country vicarage with her mother's brother and his family. *What do we offer her,* wondered Jenny, *which her friends in London cannot?*

There were three other people in the room. Papa stood with his back to the unlit fire, his feet planted some way apart. Asleep in the corner of the sofa lay Eliza's son Hastings, watched over by Madame Bigeon, who acted as Hastings's nurse and Eliza's *bonne*, as elegantly dressed as ever but pale with exhaustion. Her eight-year-old charge, afflicted since birth by a weakness of the brain and great physical delicacy, was not an easy one.

Jenny's heart would not quiet itself. She longed, yet dreaded, to hear the story of what had happened to Jean Capot de Feuillide. Revolution and war, two such vivid players on the stage of history, might seem far away from her quiet family in their rectory in the Hampshire countryside. But they were not.

Mama went to her husband 's side. "George, the girls do not yet know the entire story."

"*I* shall tell them, Aunt," Eliza cut in. "I cling to the hope that the more times I say it, the less terrible the word will sound." Releasing Cass and Jenny's hands, she resumed her place by the window. "Guillotined, my dears," she said, giving the terrible word as little consequence as she could. "Three months ago."

"Dear God!" breathed Cass, her eyes filling. She sank into a chair. "May the Lord have mercy upon his soul."

"He went to Paris," explained Eliza. As she spoke, her fingers gently smote the window-frame in a rhythmic accompaniment to her words. "He should never have left the Marais, but he needed money. He had to see his bankers. When he was there he heard of an old friend who had been wrongly imprisoned for conspiring against the Revolutionary government, and tried to help him. Foolish, foolish Jean! Of course he was arrested too. He was tried, found guilty of the same crime as his friend and guillotined within days."

The shafts of light had lengthened as the sunk sank; the room was shady. The sleeping Hastings gurgled and blew, shifted, and was quiet.

"However, I have the comfort of knowing he did not languish in prison for months, as some poor wretches do," continued Eliza. "His end, once set in motion, was swift. I received news of it from the bankers in Paris. They had written several letters, but correspondence from France is so haphazard these days..."

She could not go on. She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

"My dear Eliza!" Papa, his face stricken, went to her side. "This is too distressing for you."

But she shook her head. "No, Uncle, I shall finish the story."

"At least sit down then," requested Papa. He called for Kitty through the open door, then turned back to Eliza. "You have not rested since your long journey, nor taken any refreshment. Would you not be revived by a glass of wine?"

"Very well. Thank you."

Eliza's legs had lost their strength. She sat down quickly on the chair to which Papa had led her. "Here, let me remove your bonnet," said Cass, concerned. "Oh, Kitty, would you bring Miss Eliza some wine?"

Fanning herself, Eliza expressed her gratitude and resumed her account.

"I received all the bank's letters, bundled together, only yesterday, though Jean was ... it was in February that he died. You may imagine my feelings as I read them. I summoned Madame Bigeon at once and asked her to make Hastings ready for the journey. My first thought was to come into Hampshire, where I have always been so happy." She paused, and looked tenderly at the sleeping child. "Hastings will be an Englishman now. The chateau at the Marais has already been sold, and Jean's tenants turned out. I have nothing left in France."

"Then it is as well you have plenty in England!" said Mama with feeling. Again Hastings stirred, and Madame Bigeon soothed him.

"You must stay with us as long as you like, my dear," said Papa.

"You are very kind," said Eliza, with a graceful dip of her

head. "I would very much like to. But I fear my affairs in London will not allow me a stay of more than a few days."

Kitty brought the wine. As Jenny took the glass to hand it to her cousin she saw that the maid's eyes were glossed by unshed tears. She squeezed the girl's hand. "Thank you, Kitty," she whispered.

It was hardly astonishing that Kitty should be affected by the news. She had no personal duties to perform for Eliza, but, like everyone else in Steventon, she must have been struck by the story of the fatherless English beauty who had married a French aristocrat. The heroism shown by the husband of "Miss Eliza" in remaining in France during the appalling events of the Revolution had provided the household – and the village – with gossip enough for every inquisitive ear.

When Kitty had gone Papa walked around the room, sighing. Jenny knew he was praying. "I shall make a sermon on Sunday about the ineffable mystery of God," he announced at last. "We must believe He has a reason for taking de Feuillide from us, and derive comfort from that. My dear," he said to Mama, "do the servants know the truth?"

"Only that Monsieur le Comte has died in France."

"Then let us tell them no more for the present. We shall have prayers later." He looked steadily at Eliza. "Trust in God, my dear. I shall be in the study if anyone should want me."

He bowed, and kissed Eliza's hand with the old-world courtesy some people admired, others ridiculed, but Jenny rejoiced at. She fiercely loved her father and all his mannerisms. This blow to his beloved niece, daughter of a no-less-beloved sister, would fall heavily on his heart.

When he had left the room Cassandra went to Eliza, who had begun to drink her wine. "May I bring you something to eat?"

"No," replied Eliza distractedly. "I thank you, Cass, but..." When she leaned forward to put down her glass, something caught her eye. "Oh! A horseman is stopping here. Another visitor?"

Cassandra looked out. "No, it is only Henry."

The click of riding-boots on the hall flagstones was soon heard. A masculine voice, obliterating poor Kitty's attempts to speak, called for Dick to bring a bucket of water for the horse.

"Fine afternoon for a ride, Kitty! That will do, my boots are clean. Look, not a speck on them. Family down? They have waited dinner, I hope."

When Henry saw Eliza through the half-open drawing-room door he snatched off his hat, put it under his arm, opened the door fully and stood before the company. "Cousin Eliza, what a *very pleasant surprise*! To what do we owe—"

"Henry!" interrupted Mama. "Eliza is not here for a social visit."

"Do not scold him, Aunt," said Eliza. "He has yet to hear my news." She was regarding her son. "Might Madame Bigeon take Hastings upstairs? He will wake soon, and must have his bread-and-milk."

"Of course," said Mama. "Jenny, would you ring for Kitty?"

"Mama, may I show Madame upstairs?" asked Jenny, glad of the opportunity to leave the company. She felt dazed. No, that was not quite right. She searched for a word that described her feelings, and it came to her: *thinned.*

Like watered milk. Eliza's story had entered her soul and weakened her resilience, never very great, to the harshness of the world.

Henry, silenced, watched as Madame Bigeon expertly lifted the child. Jenny longed to run to her brother, hang on his arm, see the realization in his eyes as they fell on Eliza in her widow's weeds. But these were the actions of a child no older than the boy in Madame Bigeon's arms. Instead, she spoke again to her mother.

"If you please, ma'am, I shall stay upstairs until dinnertime." Mama nodded reluctantly, and Jenny turned to Eliza. "Cousin, I beg you to excuse me."

"My dear, of course."

Jenny's longing for solitude had never been so strong. She had neither the patience of Cassandra nor the social ease of Eliza. She could not bear to hear the story of the guillotining repeated for Henry, then to pass the time until dinner in murmured condolences and news of mutual acquaintances.

Madame Bigeon was too fatigued to talk. She asked to be brought bread-and-milk for the boy and soup for herself, with a little bread and wine. Then she retired behind her door.

In her own room Jenny, with inexpressible relief, flung down the bonnet which still hung around her neck, peeled off her gloves and unbuttoned the close-fitting jacket she wore over her dress. How she hated these inconveniently fashionable jackets, so hot in summer and too short to offer any warmth in winter. And where was her parasol? Abandoned in the kitchen, probably, to be tripped over by Mrs Travers, the cook, who would blame Kitty for leaving it there. Not for the first time the thought occurred to Jenny

that it was little wonder that men scorned – or, worse still, were unaware of – women's true mental abilities, when all they saw and heard of the lives of the female sex was concerned with tight clothes and trivial objects.

She knelt on the tapestry cushion on her side of the window seat. She and Cass had each adopted "my side", as children will, when this little sitting-room had first been presented to them, and they had never broken the habit. Jenny's eyes felt hot. She rested her brow against the cool window pane, which faced away from the sun. The trees at the end of the garden looked black against the twilit sky.

Her heart somersaulted. The trees – tall, still, silent – brought to her mind a vision of that symbol of man's hatred and destruction, the guillotine. She could not make it disappear. Her brain was alive with questions she could neither ask aloud, nor expect to be answered. What had been Jean's thoughts as he mounted the scaffold? Did he have the chance to write a last message to Eliza, or his family in France? Did he break down, or face the blade proudly?

Jenny did not know when she had ever encountered a more distressing thought. She wished she could be calm about it. But the combination of an energetic imagination and a sympathetic nature made her agitated sometimes. And Cousin Eliza, so often the antidote to this woeful tendency, was now its cause. *Jenny, you are making Eliza's bereavement into a drama of your own,* she scolded herself. *Your vanity knows no bounds.*

"God give Eliza strength!" she whispered. "And show me how to act in her presence!"

As the daylight crept away Jenny went on sitting there on the window seat, her head bowed, her hands in her lap, as if

she were at church. But she was not praying; neither was she aware of time passing. She was thinking, thinking...

When Kitty came in to inform her that dinner was ready she had not even taken off her boots. "Oh, Miss Jane!" exclaimed the maid anxiously. "Do you not want your slippers? And you still have your jacket on. Let me get your shawl."

Jenny allowed Kitty to help her off with the boots and jacket. "Kitty..." she began.

"Yes, miss?"

"You went to school, did you not, here in the village? You know your letters?"

"Yes, miss."

"Do you ever read novels?"

"Novels, miss?" Kitty, inspecting the soles of Jenny's boots, sounded uncertain.

"Yes. Mrs Radcliffe's, for instance. *The Romance of the Forest*?"

"Oh! Yes, miss, I've looked into that one. Not when I was supposed to be at my work, though, miss, ask Mrs Travers."

"Of course. Those boots are perfectly clean, you know. The lane is quite dry. Do you like romances, or stories which frighten you?"

This time Kitty's bewilderment at being questioned by her young mistress overcame her. She tidied away the boots, folded the jacket, bobbed a curtsey and fled.

Jenny hugged her knees, wondering, wondering... Then she stirred herself, slipped her feet into her soft leather indoor shoes and went to the looking-glass on the wall. A round face regarded her, framed with curls crushed by her

discarded bonnet. *You are here, in your room, safely surrounded by those you love*, she told her reflection silently. *But where does Jean Capot de Feuillide lie now?*