

Faithful



By Anita-Louise Johnson

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iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:
iUniverse, Inc.
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com

ISBN: 0-595-31410-4

Printed in the United States of America

FAITHFUL

For
Pearl Dolores
(1930–2004)

To Mom, who read to me every night when I was a child and who instilled in me a passion for reading

Acknowledgments



Many thanks to Lewis Loesburg for his assistance with the Italian passages in this book, to Alba del Pilar for her assistance with the Spanish passages, and to all my friends who gave advice.

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THE PEACE OFFERING

CHAPTER 1



Château Cher, Blésois province, France, Late August 1571

“Come away from there! Well-bred demoiselles do not dangle themselves half-naked from windows for the entire world to see. We will be late if you keep dawdling. Isabella? Isabella! Come away from there now!”

Clutching a thin linen towel about her, Isabella de Turenne spun around and faced her longtime nurse and confidant. A smile stealing across her visage, she scurried over the floorboards and embraced the sturdy woman tightly.

“P’tite, I cannot breathe. Your Jeanne is too old to be handled so,” the plump *bonne* chided.

“Spare me that tale of woe,” Isabella said in mock defiance. “You can still chase me ’round these rooms and paddle me without getting winded and—”

“Enough!” the nurse decreed, waving a hand. “We have much to do before we journey to Blois.”

As Isabella relinquished her hold and stepped back, Jeanne made a visual inventory of her charge. This Catholic demoiselle, only child of Yvonne and Gaston de Turenne was a breathtaking girl on the brink of luscious womanhood. She possessed a mop of unruly russet hair, which snaked halfway down her back. Luminous silver gray eyes outlined in sooty lashes; a pert *retroussé* nose and faintly carmine tinted lips, slightly full, finished the oval face. Despite the little girl countenance, the body followed the curve and contour of a grown woman. Shedding her towel, Isabella gave herself up to the nurse’s magic, disappearing into a flurry of chemises, garters and stockings. Sometime later she emerged, an elegantly coiffed, pearl bejeweled vision, clad in emerald and black silk.

“Come admire our handiwork in the glass,” Jeanne gushed.

"Goodness! Is it really me?" Isabella squealed, folding her arms about herself while staring at her reflection.

"I did have a good foundation with which to start," Jeanne admitted, returning lids to pomades and powders.

"Jeanne, I am so happy! I cannot wait to see René." Isabella whirled around the room, the sunlight streaming through the windows, falling on her rustling skirts. "I wish the wedding were sooner. Four months is entirely too long!"

"Four months is not too long to wait for a lifetime of happiness," Jeanne said stowing more items into a small trunk.

"No. It is not, is it? You are right!" Isabella resumed her celebratory dance, pulling Jeanne into it.

"P'tite!" Jeanne puffed. "We must finish packing!"

"In time. Now, we dance!" They laughed loudly as they circled the room, finally coming to a startled, winded stop as the door opened.

"Papa, Maman!"

"Jeanne, Antoine needs you in the courtyard," Gaston said tersely. "Please go assist him."

"Yes, Monsieur le Maréchal," Jeanne replied, tucking stray hair strands into her gray chignon. She gave Isabella a quizzical look as she departed.

"Papa, that was rather rude." Isabella hugged both her parents and sensed an unusual stiffness in their demeanors. Yvonne averted her eyes to escape Isabella's gaze.

"Maman, is all right with you?"

"Yes, what makes you ask? I am perfectly fine. I...." Yvonne broke into quiet sobs, then crumpled into a chair with Gaston's help.

Scrambling to her mother's side, Isabella knelt and asked again, "Maman, what is wrong?"

Yvonne raised a hand to stroke her daughter's face.

"Have courage, child," she murmured.

Looking to her father, Isabella demanded, "What is it? What has happened? Tell me."

"You are to be wed," Gaston whispered.

"Yes. My betrothal to René is common knowledge. What is distressing Maman?"

"Dearest heart," her father said, shuffling toward her, "you do not grasp the meaning of what I utter. My mind is reeling and I am not making sense. You are not to marry René now. The King has decided otherwise."

"Not now?" she mouthed. "Is His Majesty suggesting I marry René at a more opportune time?"

"No, child. You are not to marry him at all."

"Nay." She shook her head, nervously fingering the chain girdle around her waist. "'Tis a grim joke designed by the King for a bit of sport."

"I wish it were true," Gaston sighed. "You are to become the bride of Blaise de Coligny four months hence."

Blaise de Coligny. He was the nephew of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. The Admiral was a prominent Huguenot leader and opponent of the Catholic house of Guise, René's family. Her sovereign intended to hand her over, not only to a stranger, but also to a Protestant.

"This cannot be!" Isabella shrieked. "When was this plot hatched? For what reason?" She swayed a bit getting to her feet.

"Isabella, you are the light of my life. My desire is to envision you content." He reached for her. "Do not hate me!"

"Then do not let this happen!" Isabella shrank away from him.

"I swear by Christ's cross, if I could prevent it," he croaked, "I would."

"Why this? Why?"

"Since the signing of the peace of Saint Germain, unrest between Huguenots and Catholics has subsided. The monarchy endeavors to assist in keeping the calm. His Majesty and his mother believe that intermarriage will foster compromise, harmony."

"But why commence with me?" The shock of the situation caused her to shiver. "Surely a willing participant exists elsewhere. Why not a prince or princess of the blood? Such a union would be more exemplary."

"Daughter, such a union is prayed for," her father explained, inching toward her. "Our King's sister, the Princess Marguerite, is said to be considering Henri de Navarre, the Protestant prince, for a spouse. The Crown wishes many such marriages. These Protestants, it seems, have made themselves invaluable."

"And I have not?" she snapped, on the verge of tears.

"Listen, listen. Our King insists the country stay whole, fit. It cannot rend itself from within and survive. The realm has to be strong against outside forces."

"Outside forces!" she spat, anger contorting her face. "The only 'outside force' His Most Royal Highness has to be strong against is his mother!" The rage poured out of Isabella now. "This is the Queen Mother's doing! Constantly scheming. Ever on the watch for opportunities to bolster her causes. Always the bargaining. The dealing. No wonder she is called the 'Florentine

shopkeeper' behind her back. Well, I am *not* this month's purchase! Let her marry off her own children for whomever's good; it certainly will not be for theirs."

"Isabella, my heart breaks!" Gaston cried. "But what can I do? I am duty bound. As a subject and as maréchal of France, I must do the King's bidding."

"I will go to a nunnery."

"Please! This is arduous enough."

"I will run away!" She folded her arms across her chest and refused to look at her father.

Gaston grabbed her by the shoulders. "Where would you go? How would you live? My loyalty has been to the Crown these many years. I have executed countless orders not to my liking. This is the worst of them all, but it will be carried out. I am a man of my word." He took her trembling hands. "Do not think I am not grieving. Look at me, Isabella! This day I have lost my soul."

"I'll have none of it," she ground out, finally skewering Gaston with her steady gaze. "Do you hear me?" She pulled from his hold. "None of it!"

"Child! I am as vehemently against this union as you," Yvonne added, breaking her silence, "but your father is correct. We must obey. We shall not be the authors of a dispute. Let it not be said that the Turennes were responsible for another religious war."

"Are you telling me to accept my predicament? Accept this abomination?"

"Think of the chaos that will ensue. Yes, accept." Yvonne pleaded. "For all our sakes."

Isabella realized protest was useless.

"So be it," she declared in a detached voice. "I yield."

Yvonne grasped Gaston's hand as she rose from the chair; arms entwined they approached her. "We find no joy in this event," said her father. "Perhaps His Highness will have a change of heart."

"Perhaps," Isabella echoed, not truly hearing, head spinning.

"Come downstairs and eat something; you must be famished," her mother said. "This has been trying for all of us."

"Yes, yes, I am ravenous," Isabella lied.

"Cook will prepare whatever you desire. What would you like?"

"My happiness," Isabella retorted.

"Oh. W-We will wait downstairs, p'tite," her father said grimly. "Do not tarry; we depart shortly." They took their leave.

Isabella ran to the open window for air, inhaling deeply. She'd lost René. She was expected to stomach the King's decree by submitting to marriage with a

heretic. Offered as a token. Well, this token was not accustomed to submission! Her presence would mean acceptance; her absence, possible war.

“If it is my presence they want at court, then my presence they shall have.” A wicked grin broke from ear to ear. “And will they rue it!” Donning her assertiveness like armor, Isabella bid her rooms a temporary adieu, turned sharply on her heels and marched out the door.

CHAPTER 2



Blois Palace

“What is to be gained by this unholy alliance? Tell me!” the younger of the two men implored, his words and the pounding of his fists on the massive, oak table before him reverberating around the antechamber of the older man’s sedately decorated suite. “I thought something was afoot when I was summoned here.”

The man making demands was Blaise de Coligny. He possessed irrefutably sublime features and an intoxicating charm, even if the latter was lacking at the moment. Many demoiselles had lost their heads, and more, to him and were way beyond caring by the time they realized it. At the age of five and twenty years, Blaise believed life was for enjoying to its fullest. Raised by his uncle upon the deaths of his parents, sent to the best schools in Switzerland and Germany, he had acquired a cosmopolitan view of the world and felt knowledge and experience were the true liberators of the soul. There were but two fields of study of which he vowed to remain totally ignorant and wary: marriage and Catholics. He professed dislike for the former, declaring it an unnatural state, as man was not monogamous; the latter he associated with death and all things mendacious.

Rising to his full height, he was impressive. His brilliant midnight curls were cropped short; his beard and mustache clipped close. His face displayed noble aspects: high, chiseled cheekbones, a long, well shaped nose, strong chin and jaw, generous lips and wryly arched brows above the most searing green eyes. Tall and extremely broad-shouldered, the burgundy doublet and hose he wore hugged his sleek body. A small gold hoop in his right ear and garnet rings on the little fingers personalized his finery.

“Blaise, Blaise, calm yourself. I recognize your outrage. Believe me, my actions are altruistic,” Gaspard ventured, understanding he tread thin ice. Costumed in black, he was a stern faced, solemn man and his role as leader of the Huguenots was overwhelming. With graying hair and beard, the fifty-two year old marquis of Châtillon appeared older than he actually was.

“Altruistic! Dear Uncle Gaspard, do not behave so on my account. Revert to your usual self-indulgence,” Blaise snorted.

“Blaise, be quiet and listen to—”

“I shall not! I shall not stand by idly. Be offered like a sweet to an ill-tempered brat. Why this compulsion to please the King? At my expense no less!”

The older man stepped forward to lay a comforting hand on his nephew’s shoulder.

“This union will bode well for you. For all of us. We shall be in his good graces. Huguenots will be viewed in a more favorable light. Remember the accord. The monarchy is trying. Have I not been called back to court? Have I not the young sovereign’s trust and been made his Admiral? He sees me as a father. Hear and trust me. I have His Majesty’s ear in all that matters.”

“Take care he does not have your head,” Blaise tossed back.

Frowning a bit, Gaspard continued. “Even the King’s sister may wed one of us. We need some purchase, a foothold.” He pressed on passionately. “It is imperative we survive and thrive in this realm. Instead of warring with our enemies, let us wed them.”

“Survive? Thrive? That was my parents’ greatest wish,” Blaise said, looking his uncle squarely in the eyes. “Instead, they were cut down at Vassy like wild dogs by ‘God-fearing’ Catholics. Slain while they worshipped! My father was your brother. How can you solicit me to put aside my hatred for those people and take one to wife?” Blaise shook his head and rubbed his face. “I would sooner fall on my blade than carry out that madness!”

“Silence!” Gaspard bellowed. “Your wish may be honored if you do not listen. You do not have to refresh my memory. My brother’s death is recent in my mind.” Gaspard’s crimson face registered his fury. “These mediations and compromises are not for my glory, you insolent pup! Besides, your display of devoutness is embarrassing. I do not recall seeing you at the *prêche* yesterday.”

“I overslept, Uncle,” Blaise said, cracking a sheepish smile.

“Overslept. Overslept my eye! What was her name? Or was that irrelevant to the situation? I suspect for your purposes one female is as good as another.”

“Not really.” Blaise clarified. “It depends on what I’m craving at the moment. The shape of her lips. The size of her—”