

## Chapter 15

### The Letter

As Maria's letter is opened, there is the sweet aroma of her perfume and a dried flower. "Oh, my dear, sweet Nicolas, how I've missed you so. Every night I look up at the moon and stars, knowing that you are looking at them, too. How I long for your touch and kiss, to be held in your tender, strong, loving arms, and to gaze into your beautiful eyes again. In coming to Spain, I have learned a great deal about our family here. My grandpa became very wealthy and has kept it a secret from the Romans. He has a small rebel army waiting for Rome to weaken its grip on Spain. He and others here will then attempt to overthrow the government and take back our land. When this happens, grandpa promises to send a boat and a dowry to your father with his royal seal assuring your parents that you will be honored and esteemed here. I sing your favorite song everyday. I'm looking forward to the day when we can be together again. Forever yours, Maria Colleen. Santana Pluvias. Sealed with a kiss. P.S. I have a special surprise for you when I see you again. I love you so much."

Bragadrina then crumples the letter and flower and then throws it across the room. "So she thinks! That little snippet! We'll see about that! Guard?" "Yes, Your Highness." "Fetch me the palace sniffer. I want to find out what kind of perfume this is. Also, bring in the scribe to re-write a little note to our dear, sweet prince and princess, and counterfeit the seals. I have an idea. I don't know where Nicolas lives, but I'm sure his butler does. He still resides at the Pluvias Castle, correct?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Splendid!" She snaps her fingers at the guard and motions him away. "Well, go fetch the scribe and sniffer!"

"Yes, my lady."

The expertly forged letter now reads, "My dearest, sweet, loving Nicolas, my family and I have fallen gravely ill. I am so frightened. I find it more and more difficult to breathe. I've been told that I only have hours to live. How I miss you so and wish that I could look into your loving gentle eyes one last time. My dying breath will be the sound

of your name on my lips. Forever yours, Maria Colleen Santana Pluvias. Sealed with a kiss.”

Bragadrina delightfully giggles and whispers to herself, “Oh, perfect! If I can’t have Nicolas’ head on this gold platter, then his heart dragged through the open sewer will do nicely. Ok, let’s craft a lovely letter of similar demise to our dear sweet princess to keep her pretty little butt there in Spain.” She eerily cackles out loud, echoing through the empty castle halls. “Hee hee hee hee, ha ha ha ha ha ha ha — ha ha ha!”

## Chapter 16

### Fugitives

Martimis Commodus is throwing a big party in honor of the visiting Emperor, Diocletian. The Master of Ceremonies announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, it is my esteemed honor and privilege to introduce you to a man — correction, a god in human form, who has traveled a great distance all the way from Rome to grace us with his presence and bless this house of Martimis Commodus The Great. He will sing for us a song for the all the ages, which he himself has written. The awesome, the spectacular, the wonderful, the brilliantly inspired, fabulous, irreplaceable, witty, and charming ...”

The M.C. rambles on, and peering over the palace garden wall is Barius and Octhamis hiding in some palm trees. “Barius, we really shouldn’t be here.” “Oh, we’ll be fine, trust me. Hey, look! Oooh! Belly dancers!” Octhamis is fixed on these scantily clad women and says, “Oooh! Whoa! Check that out! Gasp!” Barius confidently agrees with him and remarks,

“Dude, we’ve got the best seats in the house!” Octhamis laughs and replies, “Yeah! Ha ha ha! Look at that! Nice!”

The M.C. is still going on and on in the background. Barius says, “What a windbag. Sheesh!” Octhamis replies, “You ain’t kidding!”

The Master of Ceremonies continues, “... one in a million, clever, and need I say, devilishly handsome. Ha ha ha ha. His Majesty, the Magnificent Diocletian!”

The audience cheers and applauds with great enthusiasm. Diocletian is performed by an actor who portrays him as very effeminate. He's acting colorfully and flamboyantly and giggles like a girl, saying to the M.C as he pinches him on the rear, “Hee hee hee. Oh, stop, you brute! Hmm, hmm, hmm. I would like to sing this cute little song that I wrote myself. Ok? Hit it, boys!”

The actor begins to dance a little dance and sing in ancient rap fashion. “Jump back, hit myself! Ooooh! You can’t touch this! Sing it, boys! Ha ha ha! Everybody sing! You can't touch this.”

Barius almost falls out of the tree laughing and says, “Ha ha ha! Man, is this guy light in the sandals or what?” The two boys peer over the palace garden wall, laughing their fool heads off.

Artemis Dunoless, has been demoted to a palace guard. He hums to himself while listening to the entertainment standing outside the garden wall taking care of personal business at the wall, away from his horse. Upon finishing his business, he sees the boys above him and yells out,

**“Hey, who goes there?”**

The boys jump from the wall and onto his horse. The horse gallops away. Artemis chases after them, throws a rock in vain and yells at the top of his lungs. **“Stop! Bring back my horse! Stop! Bring back my horse!!!!”**

He slows to a discouraged stop and frustratingly shakes his fist at them. The boys keep going and hear his voice fade away into the night. **“Hey! Bring back my horse! Augh you little twerps! When I get a hold of you I’m gonna — Oh, man! Bring back my horse! When I catch you, I’m gonna kick your little...”**

He continues to rant and rave as the boys fly like the wind out of the city and into the desert wilderness. Octhamus is quite shaken up by all of this and says, “Oh, man, we’re in big trouble! He saw us! We’re dead meat, Barius!” Barius says, “Dude, we better lose the horse!” Octhamus yells at him. **“You know what the penalty for stealing a royal guard’s horse is, don’t you?”** “No. What?” Slapping Barius up the backside of his head, (Smack!) “Ow!” **“Death, you moron. Don’t you know anything?”**

Hey, I’ve got an idea. Let’s go live at the monastery where Nick lives.” “What, and become Christians??? Are you crazy??? We’ll end up in the gladiator pit or fed to lions for a mid-morning snack.” “Hey, listen, if our fathers don’t kill us, the authorities will.”

Octhamus is a little more together now and advises Barius wisely. “Ok. We’ll have to change our names. I’ll be uh, Brother Phillip.” Barius scratches his head and thinks for a moment. “Ok, uh, cool. I’ll be-e-e-e-e, — Brother Joseph. Forget ditching the horse. Hey! This horse looks familiar. Ariel? Is that you, girl? Whoa. Hang on! Hole in the road!” They jump a ravine-washout cutting across the road almost eight feet across and barely visible from the light of the moon. Octhamus pats her and laughs. “Yeah. It is you. Small world. Nice jump! Good eye, old girl!”

As they ride up to the monastery, eighteen-year-old Nicolas sees them while he is out working in the garden and calls out to them. “HELLO, can I help you? Barius? Octhamus? So good to see you!” Both of them are acting as though they were really up to their necks in hot water and answer him reluctantly.

“Uh, yeah, hi, Nick.” Octhamus sheepishly grins and says, “How’s it goin’, man?” Nicolas knows they have really gotten themselves into the thick of trouble and sarcastically prods them. “So what brings you guys out here?” He examines their minimally-armored horse, recognizing Ariel, and gives her a small handful of grain and an apple. He pets her and talks softly to her while they think hard to try and make up some cockamamie, lame story.

Octhamis stutters out as they both dismount, “Oh, we, uh — thought — maybe — um, uh ...” Barius confidently interrupts, lies through his teeth and boldly states, “We decided to become Christians. Uh ... Yeah, that’s it. Christians. That’s what we wanna be. Uh huh! Praise the Lord!”

Octhamis sees that Nick isn’t going for it. He grimaces as Nick grills them hard this time. “Uh huh. Yeah, right. Come on guys, it’s me. You can’t fool a fooler. What happened? Ariel? I’ll be, it is you. How ‘bout that? Well now, let’s see here, hmm, Roman horse, minimal armor, a Roman brand mark, ok, I’ve got it now! Let me guess. You’ve become Roman soldiers. How am I doin’ so far? Don’t lie to me, Barius. I know you’re lying when I see your lips move!” Barius hides behind a shield, seeing that Nick is armed with a handful of almost-ripe apples.

Ariel eats another one and happily swishes her tail while Barius confesses, “We’re in big trouble, Nick. We were checking out the palace babes at the emperor’s party — a-a-a-and we stole that horse.” Octhamis slaps up the backside of Barius’ head again. (Smack!) “Ow! Stop that!” Octhamis reprimands Barius. “I knew I should’ve stayed home! Barius, this is all your fault, you idiot, dork brain, fool!”

Nick’s eyes got really big and then laid into them ferociously. **“You stole a palace guard’s horse????!!!!????** I see. Well, that’s — just — great. If they find her here, we’ll all be in big trouble. Are both of you insane? I suggest that we take her outside of the gate and let her go. Agreed? Fine.”

Nick finds a ripe, juicy, sweet apple, and they gently lead her out the gate. He lets her finish her apple, a sack of oats and some clumps of grass. He advises her quietly in her ear, "Ariel, listen to me, old girl. There are no horses way out here, and you will get very lonely. No, you can't stay with us. She buries her nose in his tunic under his armpit as she always has since she was orphaned at birth. He pats her on her neck and then slaps her on the rear. She kicks the dirt, and off she goes.

Barius says confidently, "I'm Brother Joseph." Nick wags his head and looks at the ground for a moment and kicks a small rock across the ground. "Guys, it's not that easy, but I'll help you get oriented if that's what you really want to do. Otherwise, there's the gate! Unbelievable. Sigh. Follow me. Guys, I want to tell you of a dream I'd had recently. I've not told this to anyone. I have no idea what it all means. Jesus the Christ, the one spoken of in the sacred books, anointed me and spoke to me, then, placed a strange hat on my head. I awoke drenched in sweat. Thrilled and at the same time, frightened. I ran to our library and discovered that it was a bishop's hat worn by church leaders of secret believers in Christ." They all just look at each other perplexed and shrug their shoulders.

Barius and Othamis are a little more at ease now, and Barius says in his upbeat manner, "Whoa, that's pretty weird, Nick. Cool, so, when's dinner? We're starving." "We're fasting this week. No food, only water. Sorry. No one eats."

"Huh? No food? Fasting? What? For a week?"

"Ha ha. Had you going."

## Chapter 17

### At the Monastery Orphanage

By the time Nicolas turned nineteen, he had acquired quite a reputation for himself for healing the sick, coming to the aid of the poor, and stood in defense of falsely-accused Roman officers who were headed for prison and ultimately death for treason. He acted as their legal counselor and proved to the courts that they were innocent. He secretly paid off debts of honest hard-working people in the Church with families about to lose everything to tax collectors and creditors. It didn't take long for the people to figure out who bailed them out. He had a limited bit of his father's wanderlust in him and ventured out every now and then to spread the gospel of Christ. His father taught him how to sail a ship when he was a boy. How he loved to feel the salt air in his face. Only God and those closest to him knew how much he wanted to sail to Spain to find his precious bride's grave, so to give her a proper blessing, but he had no idea where she or her family may have been buried or how much the disease wiped out the population. It would have been an effort in futility in his mind. He thought that she, being poor, would have most likely been buried in mass graves with her whole family and never to be found.

Phillip heard of the Asian lands and when he read about them he found out how vastly different they were in customs and language. He had a burning desire in his heart to reach out to them and bridge the gap somehow. He learned of a place in the Asian lands called The Silk Road. It spewed out hordes of banished people from their homelands in China and Russia and was a major trade route stretching for thousands of miles. Many of these people built small villages and outcroppings along the way. After a joyous send-off and blessing ceremony with everyone there at the monastery, Phillip set out on his journey, which took him months on the best camels Nicolas had. With expert guides and bodyguards, he found his way to Taxkorgan, a region of scattered tribes along the Silk Road.

Nicolas and Joseph went sojourning for many months after Nick's nineteenth birthday and, while they were out at sea, a fierce and sudden storm came upon them. A few hours into the heavy storm, they all prayed fervently with Nicolas as he is ordering instructions to the strong and experienced crew. They diligently rowed and steered as hard as they could into the howling storm, keeping the boat's bow heading into the wind and waves so to avoid capsizing. The storm subsided, and they heard voices of several men faintly yelling for help afar off.

Nicolas had a device where he placed a large round specially shaped piece of glass in one end of a tube and a smaller piece of round glass in the opposite end, which enabled him to see further distances.

Everyone was amazed with this very useful device as they were with his magic North-finding kit and portable pocket sundial. Through his vision magnifying tube, he saw a small group of men clinging to a large broken piece of a boat with every bit of their strength. Nicolas' crew turned the ship about at his command and rescued these men. Everyone rejoiced in this miracle rescue, and news of this heroic deed spread across the land.

While Nicolas and Joseph were away, Uncle Nicolas, who was the current Bishop and Abbot of the temple, fell seriously ill. Since he was well up in his years, the illness overcame him, and he passed away in his sleep. The monastery became chaotic, disorganized and was in total disarray. They all argued and quarreled amongst themselves over the smallest of things.

The church leaders in charge all gathered in prayer and fasted, asking God to help them decide who was to be the new Bishop, since they all disagreed as to who it should be. One night as they slept, they all had exactly the same dream. They dreamt that a mysterious man walked in the door, and the voice of God said to them that this man who walks in is to be ordained as the new Bishop, no matter whom he is.

So the church leaders decided that the first man to walk through the door will be the new Bishop. That very day, Nicolas walks in. He and all of the resident priests stared at each other for a moment. The men's mouths were wide open, and their eyes were in a shocked gaze for a few seconds. Nicolas was expecting hearty hellos and warm greetings, which didn't happen right off. Perplexed, he then looked around him and said,

“What?” Joseph walks in, and in his upbeat, happy-go-lucky tone of voice, while munching an apple he just picked said, “Hey dudes — how’s it goin’? Where’s the grub? We’re starving!” Joseph whispered, “Hey Nick, what’s up with them?”

Nicolas whispered back, “I have no idea. They act as though they’d just seen a ghost.” He then asked aloud, “Ehem, oh, yes, uh, and a nice hot bath would be most welcome too, my good brothers!”

The residents then snapped out of it and finally greeted them happily telling them of this amazing circumstance and of his uncle’s passing. After dinner, Nicolas received his ordination blessing, and the newly styled Bishop’s hat was then ceremoniously placed on his head.

He recalled and told of his dream to the brothers and knew that this was a special and Heavenly calling for him. This was very unusual to ordain someone so young, and the youngest man to ever be ordained as a boy Bishop.

## Chapter 18

### Ten Years Later

Almost ten years later Nicolas received word from an Asian merchant trader that found out that Phillip was killed when they passed through the area where he was living on the Silk Road. A formidable clan of bandits and killers knew that these small villages, outposts, and camps were vulnerable. They were easy pickings. Men who resisted were killed. Animals and valuables were just taken. Relics, sacred items and historic scrolls were destroyed in an attempt to wipe out the memories of the people. Those who survived were taken as slaves. Some managed to escape and hide in the forest. Orders were given by the lead thugs to not violate any virgins this time, because they have a new client paying three times the price for virgins heading for human sacrificial altars. Devil worshipers converged in a secret place known only to pirates and villains as The Cove.

This particular Asian tribe that Phillip lived with is known to be a fierce and devastating fighting clan with all sorts of weaponry. Much of it was well hidden in caves. Thank the Lord for that!

The Asian tribesmen returned home from their hunting trip to find their village obliterated. Some badly wounded villagers left for dead survived the carnage to tell what happened. They all were grief-stricken and determined to find their lost ones.

Tracking experts were summoned by Chief Ling Chin Wong to decipher the direction the tracks had gone. Chief Wong frantically digs through the collapsed and burned debris of his home finding his sweet loving wife's charred remains and completely loses his mind. Grabbing his hair, he falls to the ground and screams at the top of his lungs. "AAAAHHHHH!!!! NOOOOOO!!!!!"

Digging through the ashes, he looks for his daughter but only finds her burnt dolls and clothes. "Feng Jen! Feng Jen!" Slowly he gets up, composes himself, spins around and issues commands to gather up and find their lost people.

The commanders are mounted on horses and followed by dedicated warriors on foot. After burying the remains of those killed in the raid, they quickly give their respects and prayers. It's time to move. The search is on. Chief Wong commands.

“Gather up! Attention! Everyone, we will find our lost families! Swords!” All of the soldiers respond, “*Sir!*”

“Spears!”

“*Sir!*”

“Archers!”

“*Sir!*”

“Kwandos!”

“*Sir!*”

Poison darts!”

“*Sir!*”

“Everyone come with us or stay here. We are not coming back. Move out!”

“*Sir!*”

Phillip was making successful strides in diplomatic relations with the venerable Chief Ling Chin Wong and the surrounding tribes in the area until he was killed. Reports came in of the slave traders shipping port and the marauders responsible for this tragedy, along with the precious maps in which brave souls willingly risked their lives to obtain for Nicolas.

Under normal circumstances, Nicolas would pay the asking price for slaves, and then let them go, but this day was a little different. That evening at dinner, Nicolas stood and announced to the ordination celebration for a new priest into the monastery some terrible news.

“Everyone prepare yourselves. We are going on a little crusade.” Joseph perks up. “Sounds like fun. Count me in. Where are we going?”

“We are going to disrupt the slave trade to rescue Brother Phillip whom has been taken as a slave by devil worshipers.” All of the other monastery staff gasp and crouched in fear. Joseph stood up and rolled his fist in the air. “Cool!” Brother John speaks up. “You’ve gone mad! Have you completely lost your rosary beads? Are you out of your mind? Nicolas, in all due respect, do you have a worm crawling around in your head eating your brain? Look at us. We’re all weak and frail. You’ll get us all killed!” Nick barks back at Brother John. “Well then, I suggest we all get in shape and start training.”

Nicolas remembers back to his younger days at swordplay with palace guards, his father, personal self defense, fencing and sword instructors. He goes to a large oak chest, unlocks it, and takes out his father's sword. Finding the sword covered with rust and cobwebs, he cleans it off, sharpens it, oils and polishes it until his smile gleams back at him. Quite satisfied, he begins to practice vigorously.

After a month of training and conditioning, Nicolas feels he and most everyone is ready to embark. They gather for the departure at the gate.

Brother Paul contends, "Nicolas, we must turn the other cheek and let go of the matter. Let our prayers to God take care of the situation." Lightning strikes the bell tower, and then Joseph says, "Dude, what a wimp!" Nicolas walked up to Paul and said, "You obviously want to stay here. Tell you what, you pray here and we, with God's mercies and power, will rescue a few lost souls. Hmmm? How does that sound to you? If anyone else wishes to stay, now is the time to decide." Brushing some dirt away and straightening Paul's robe, Nicolas pats him on the face lightly and says, "We'll let you do the cheek turning for us! I think we're ready now. Let's go!"