

HEAVEN'S  
LIBRARY



# MARGINA

Part 1

## Chapter One: An Illegitimate Child

I was born in a small village in what you now call “Italy” not long after Jesus was crucified. My grandfather had been a Roman soldier, and upon his retirement had received a plot of land to work and live on. Junia, my mother, was his only child.

When she was 18, a young centurion passing through our town on his return to Rome took a fancy to her, and she to him. Their liaison\* was short-lived and secret, yet passionate. He visited her for several nights in a row, but after their brief affair, she never saw him again, though she was left with his memory through a babe growing within her. She knew he would not return to her. Why would he? He had a promising career ahead of him, and she was a mere peasant. Beautiful perhaps, pleasant company for a few nights, but did he love her? When he left, she accepted that she would likely never know.

Junia did not tell her parents of her plight at first, for fear of their reactions, but she prayed to all the gods whose names she knew that she—and the child in her womb—would be cared for and loved by someone. Being mere carved stone, the gods did not answer, but the true God of Heaven saw our predicament, and had mercy.

Soon afterwards, Alexis, a Greek youth who had grown weary of his home-

land, and was seeking to find action at the center of the known civilized world, was led by Providence to our small village.

To earn money for his travels, he stopped at towns along his way, where he would work for a while until he had raised enough money or had found some means of free transportation to continue on his journey. My grandfather’s farm was one such place where he stopped. There he intended to stay a fortnight and be on his way to Rome with enough coins to have himself a good time, that is, until his luck would have run out and he’d be forced to find himself work again.

However, love for my mother overcame him, and after only a few days, he knew he would not be leaving for Rome as he had planned. What he’d found at this farm was something more valuable than his dreams of Rome, and soon enough, thoughts of Rome were set aside entirely.

It was not long before he discovered my mother’s secret, which unexpectedly for her, only made him desire all the more to care for her—and for me. He discussed marriage with her parents, and they soon came to an agreement. He convinced my mother to let him take responsibility for me, and to save her honor, he took the blame and confessed the “fault” to her parents. My grandfather, a tolerant man, felt that if he was willing to take responsibility, such things could be forgiven.

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**\*liaison:** a romantic relationship between people who aren’t married

Illustrations by Kristen

*For children ages 9 and up. May be read to younger children at parents’ or teachers’ discretion.*

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Thus did I, Marina, come into the world—a simple world from my perspective. No one told me of my origins, and I grew up a happy and carefree child, blissfully unaware of the upheavals sweeping the world and threatening the Empire at the time. Later on, though, I became knowledgeable of happenings around us, and I burned with curiosity about life and people, and a yearning to learn anything new.

## Chapter Two: Teachers and Philosophies

One day when I was 16, our farm once again had some unexpected visitors: two men who said they were sent on a mission. They had traveled from the distant land of Palestine, and were headed to Rome. One of them, Elkanah, had such kind and gentle eyes that I felt I could trust him with anything, and believe anything that he said. The other, Andrew, was so zealous and passionate about his convictions in life that it was hard not to be enthralled by his words.

They spoke of many things that we had never heard of, including the teachings of Jesus, Whom they called the Son of God. *What God?* I wondered at first. Having been raised by pagan parents, one Roman and one Greek, I knew of more gods than I could usually remember the names and attributes of, so the teachings of these men surprised yet attracted me. They likewise appealed to my parents, both rebels in their own way, who were not content with the meaning of life as they had been taught

thus far, and whose struggle to discover the truth had in part prompted outrageous behavior in their younger years.

These sojourners spoke of love, of the Kingdom of God, of a future when all men would live in peace and harmony. While we had a measure of this peace on our farm, by now I understood that the world around us did not enjoy such peace. Our Roman legions constantly waged war, and tales abounded of atrocities, pillaging, death, destruction, and unchallengeable power. I saw no glory in this. I thought of other young girls like me, with hardworking parents like mine, and young brothers and sisters like my own, being driven from their homes and robbed of all that they had.

The glory of Rome meant nothing to me. I was far more ashamed than proud of what our mighty Empire had done. I was not educated or considered very “wise,” but some things had always seemed obvious to me, and I concluded that those more educated individuals gradually lose their common sense.

I had attended speeches by passing politicians and generals in our village, and had even traveled to Rome to watch one of the Emperor’s triumphs. In seeing the rich and powerful rulers of our country, in hearing their eloquent diatribes\*, I saw nothing but sickly and seemingly soulless empty faces speaking great quantities of words that did little but betray the shallowness of their speakers.

I was born with a measure of insight into the human soul. From the time I was very young, I would always know

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\***diatribe**: learned discourse

if another child was lying or telling the truth, and my parents and friends had come to trust me and count on me for this. God had planted the seed of His Spirit within me, waiting for the day when His messengers would water it and cause it to bloom.

This is what these two disciples of the Master did. I, with an eager youthful heart, along with my mother and father and younger brothers and sisters, and my aging grandparents, bowed our heads and were baptized by these disciples of Jesus, as we committed our hearts to believing in Jesus Christ. We did not know much of Him, but we grew to learn more. Andrew and Elkanah stayed with us for many weeks, in preparation for their journey to Rome. They never returned from that journey—not to our farm, or to the land of their birth. They served Christ and taught His truths within that city for many months, until they, along with many others, were captured while holding a meeting on the outskirts of town during one of the first persecutions. I heard from a traveling brother that Elkanah and Andrew died as they had lived, proclaiming God’s Words with boldness, even with their last breath.

When I heard this, my heart was torn. A few other Christians had been captured and tried before, accused of treason or some other such charge, but this large-scale persecution was, as yet, uncommon. Our two dear friends and teachers were among the first to be found, as they were active witnesses, and would not be persuaded to hide away or leave the city or their flock there because of the dangers.

One afternoon about a year after I’d accepted Jesus into my heart, I had completed the day’s harvesting work, and I sat among the stalks, gazing at the beautiful sky that was showing the first hints of sunset hues. I communed sweetly and silently with my Lord, and heard His voice.

*My child, would you be willing to give your life for Me, as your teachers have?*

I cringed, and the thought of tribulation or torment racked my spirit with fear. *Lord, You know I am ignorant. I am weak, and I still know so little about You. These ones were strong, they were men, they had experience and learning behind them—yet still, I think it was foolish of them not to hide. I admire their loyalty, but I fear that I do not have such strength within myself. In truth, I would rather hide or flee. I fear that if I were placed under pressure of torment, I might even deny my belief in You rather than suffer as they have. I feel ashamed to think such thoughts, but news of this persecution causes my heart to tremble and my faith to waver.*

*Yet you love Me, do you not?*

*My Lord, You know that I do. You have brought meaning into my empty life. You have made each member of my family happier and a better person. You have given me the promise of Heaven and eternal life. Above all things, Your presence is ever nigh to me. I can feel the love that You have for me, and I know that I am*

*not alone, and shall never fear having no friend, for I will always have You.*

*If you love Me, and if you believe in My love for you, then can you not trust Me too?*

*Indeed, I should be able to. I want to. But help me. Give me the peace and faith that I lack. Give me the strength to do what I must do. Give me the courage to fulfill whatever You will ask of me.*

His promise was given, and the seed of faith was planted in my heart. Yet things continued as they were for another few months. I worked in the fields; I sold our produce at the market; I cooked the meals; I helped Mother care for my little brothers and sisters, as well as my grandparents. I did all that I had done for years. But something was different. I was no longer the timid child I had once been. Peace and confidence replaced the deep-rooted fear that I'd felt but a few months earlier.

I was often tempted to wonder, *Will it last? Would this peace I feel truly sustain me in a time of hardship? Or will it vanish as the chaff? Will I find myself to be as weak and lacking as I have always feared?* Yet for the time being, I contented myself for the most part to obey our Lord's instructions to, "Take no thought for the morrow, for it shall take care of itself."

One day, when communing alone with Jesus, as I was wont to do each evening, He again spoke to my heart—this time in a voice that I could almost hear audibly.

*Marina, I want you to go to Rome. I have work for you to do there.*

*What? Leave my home, my family, for a place of great confusion, a place where I will surely encounter difficulty, danger, and maybe even death? Even if I could do this to myself, I could not bring such sorrow to my family, I reasoned.*

*I am your Lord and God. If you will follow My guidance and directions, I will protect you for as long as it takes to fulfill the mission that I have for you. I will also care for your family. They have faith and belief in Me, like you do, and that will get them through anything, just as your faith will carry you through whatever you may have to face.*

I could not answer Him. I did not know what to say. I felt so torn inside. I did not want to fail Him, yet a part of me didn't want to do what He asked. I could not sleep that night. I tossed and turned on my cot, then walked about the house, and finally wandered out into the fields, trying to find it within myself to at least yield in my heart. Finally, as dawn broke, I whispered with a face moist with tears, *I will do as You ask. I will go.*



### Chapter Three: Kidnapped

**L**ater that morning, I prepared to make my way to the market. My mother would have accompanied me as usual, but she was feeling unwell. I thought it better to let her rest, especially in preparation for what I was to

tell her that evening, when I purposed\* to break the news about what the Lord had asked of me. As I spurred the donkey on, prodding him to pull the heavy wagon, I questioned my decision. *Am I a fool? Have I lost what little mind I had?*

Halfway to the market, I saw a cloud of dust moving in my direction and heard the pounding hooves of what sounded like half a dozen horses. As the cloud drew near enough that the dust began to sting my half-closed eyes, the hooves slowed down.

*Perhaps they've seen me, and are kindly seeking to inconvenience me as little as possible,* I thought charitably.

"Look what we have here," a rugged, unshaven youth shouted to his partner who looked as if he had not had a bath for even longer than he.

"I reckon she may be just what we're looking for," the other replied. Behind them sat five other men on horses, all staring at me, not saying a word. I kept moving forward slowly, as the obvious leader of the group began riding alongside me. Then his friend turned his beast sideways, stopping directly in front of my path. My donkey became nervous, jerking his head back and forth, lifting his front legs, refusing to move forward. The men slowly circled me. I was trapped. *Whatever these fellows have in mind, it does not seem good.*

"Get down from your wagon!" the unshaven leader commanded. He was

close enough now that the smell of Vatican wine\* wafted in my direction.

I had no choice. I couldn't escape. Resisting and fighting would probably mean instant death. I remembered what our Lord had said: "Agree with thine adversary." Though I knew not what else to do, I could at least do that much. I slowly got off of my seat. My "adversary" descended from his beast, tied my hands behind my back, and lifted me onto his horse, then mounted it himself. One of his ruffians managed to startle my donkey enough to send him and the wagon running off the road and into the fields. Our uncomely procession likewise turned off the main road, but continued heading west, not towards the market, but past our farm (although the house was too far from the road for anyone to see me from it) ... and towards Rome.

Riding, riding, and riding more, avoiding roads and inhabited areas, and with my abductors behind me all the way, I kept repeating to myself the words of our Lord. "Love your enemies." Did He realize how difficult they were to love? Of course He did—how could I question that? I knew He had suffered so much more than I. Convicted by the power of His example, I asked Him for grace to do as He had done.

Considering the circumstances, I was pleasantly surprised at the treatment I received. Some time after darkness had fully settled, the leader, who I now knew was called Leo, halted the procession,

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\***purpose:** to intend or determine to do something

\*Vatican wine was considered especially poor quality wine in the Roman days.

and ordered his men to make camp for the night. “Camp” consisted of each man dismounting and tying up his horse, and then pulling a cloak over himself to get some sleep.

Leo untied my hands and set me under a tree, putting his own cloak over me. He turned and began to walk from man to man, seeing that all was well. He even seemed kind. Why was he living the life of a marauder\*? I had heard of such gangs of men, who stormed through the villages, stealing horses, women, and children, and selling them for quick profit, and now I was at the mercy of such a group.

Jesus whispered to my heart again during the night, assuring me that I should not fear. Had He not called me to Rome, and were these men not facilitating my quick transportation? I was reminded of the story of Joseph of old, and how it had been his destiny to be brought to Egypt as a captive. The Lord would see me safely to my destination, and His angels were with me all the way, this I knew.

I was awoken from a deep slumber by the first rays of morning sunlight slipping through the trees. I expected to be called to my feet at any moment to continue the journey, but the men around me continued to sleep, including Leo, who was on the opposite side of the large tree where I lay. Soon though, the others stirred, and they gathered around a campfire to prepare some victuals\*. Leo brought me a small bowl of porridge, and then sat down to eat.

We were a fair distance away from the others, and when he’d finished eating, he looked in my direction and spoke softly:

“I know you must think us barbarians and criminals, but in truth, though I am often drunk, I am not mad, or evil. I live not thus because I have chosen to—I was forced into this manner of living.”

I doubted his sincerity, but as we continued our trip at a more leisurely pace and we talked more, I began to understand him—even though I could not yet sympathize. He told me of his upbringing. His father had been a fisherman from Sicily, and Leo was his only family. Times were not easy, and when he’d died, his creditors had sold his boat and all that he had to try to recuperate their loans. As it had not proved sufficient, they also intended to sell Leo as a slave on one of the larger fishing boats. He had run away and since then he’d been living with a price on his head. He only managed to survive through illegal means.

His plan was to sell me as a slave to a rich Roman nobleman he knew of, who was looking for a beautiful young lady as a personal attendant for his wife. I suspected that he wanted a country girl, dumb as we were known to be, expecting that she would not ask too many questions or be too aware of the questionable activities in their household, which like most Roman households of nobility, was likely corrupt from the inside out.

Leo did all but apologize, and for a moment, our eyes met.

“What is it about you?” he asked. “I’ve never spoken to any of my captives

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\***marauder**: a person who conducts raids in search of plunder

\***victuals** (pronounced [vitt’l]): food

this way. And why did you make no effort to escape in the night? You might have managed, with all of us as tired and drunk as we were.”

I replied, “I know you may have no intention of listening to me, your captive and an ignorant country girl, but if you will, I shall tell you what I believe is the secret to happiness, even for as miserable a life as yours.”

He listened with respect as I told him of our Savior. Though I could see he struggled within himself, it only served to make his final humble confession of his desire to believe in Christ all the more victorious.

After we’d prayed together, he looked at me apologetically. “You probably expect that now I’ll let you go, but my men would turn on me for that. I’ve been good to them, and so they’re loyal to me. But if I make them turn back to the countryside to get another girl, when there seem so few to choose between these days—lovely enough ones, that is—it might all end for me there.”

“I understand.”

“You will be in a good home, and I’m certain you’ll be well cared for and have your needs provided. They’re unlikely to harm you in any way ... though of course, I know that can’t compare to freedom. I’m sorry.”

I felt no anger or resentment toward him. I had perfect peace, knowing that God’s Own hand had maneuvered him to bring me to the place where I was to fulfill my mission. In so doing, Leo had also found the truth of Jesus and His love, and I knew his life would begin to change for the better.

## CHAPTER FOUR: My New Home

**B**y the time the afternoon sun was high, I had exchanged masters and was riding in a cart in the custody of a man named Franciscus, who had given Leo a large bag of gold coins in exchange for me. As despicable a feeling as it was to be sold for a price, I was moderately comforted that at least it had not been a small price. I did not see, though, for what reason they would value me so highly, and this served to confirm to me all the more that I must indeed be following my Savior’s path, and that He would make my way perfect.

Franciscus did not speak a word to me, but upon arrival at the estate that was to be my new home, it was clear that he was the head steward in this nobleman’s household. As we passed the main building and entered the rear of the extensive grounds, attendants ran up to care for the horses and cart, while he beckoned me to follow him toward a small building directly ahead of us. There were at least four or five of these buildings, which I presumed were the slaves’ quarters.

As I followed him across the threshold, I was awed by the surroundings. They were not bare and drab as I’d expected them to be; in fact, they were more colorfully decorated than my familiar lodgings—though, of course, they could never compare to the cozy comfort of home.

“The woman who used to serve our lady occupied these quarters.” It was the first time Franciscus had addressed



me. “Unfortunately, it was discovered that she was a Christian, and the master had her sent away to prison. You have been brought here to fill her place. My wife, Viviana, who is responsible for the kitchen and housekeeping, will instruct you in all you need to know. Get some rest from your journey, and you’ll begin in the morning.”

*Unfortunately, it was discovered that she was a Christian.* ... I could not tell if he meant it was unfortunate that she “was a Christian”, or unfortunate that she had been “discovered.” Could it be that he himself was one of us? I thought it could be possible, but I knew that I must be extremely cautious. I knew I was here to be a witness, but I also needed to wait for the right time and circumstances, lest I lose all chances of fulfilling my mission before it had even begun.

I nodded respectfully, and Franciscus went on his way. I spent the rest of the day communing with Jesus, praying that He would guide me in all that I said and did, and that He would make my way plain. I resolved to arise early every morning to seek His face, hear His voice, and receive strength and preparation for whatever I would face that day. Though it seemed an ordinary lifestyle, I knew it would not be so. I was called to fulfill a mission, and I must be ever alert and attentive, lest I miss the opportunities that the angels had gone before me to prepare.

In the morning, Viviana showed me around the master’s house, telling me what I needed to know about each area as we went. Julian and Aemilia, my new lord and lady, were a wealthy and respected couple, and I had never seen

the likes of the plentiful ornaments and treasures which were prominently displayed throughout their house.

We had completed the tour and were standing in front of an ornate door when Viviana looked me up and down and adjusted my hair a little.

“I think we are ready to present you to the lady Aemilia now,” she said. “You will, of course, receive more instruction from me, but first I must make sure that she will have you. It is merely a procedure, I am sure, for I have no doubt that she’ll prefer you to the girl who’s been by her side for the past week since Aurelia was removed from her position.”

Like her husband, Viviana clearly held some sympathy for this former servant—and some disdain for the girl who now assisted. “Juliana is a kind girl, but a bit too dim-witted, I fear, to please our lady sufficiently,” she added. “I’m sure you’ll be more suitable than she. I can see it in you.”

I drew a deep breath as Viviana opened the door. Toward the rear of the room was a large bed covered with pillows, and to its right was a plush divan, upon which sat a woman who carried the air of an empress. Although it seemed that it took her much effort to impart that appearance, it suited her well.

“Step forward, and let me have a look at you!” Aemilia softly commanded. I came and stood directly ahead of her, and she smiled with what I assumed was approval.

“So what think you of Rome, little Marina?”

“I know not much of it, my lady. I am from the country and have only visited the city twice before I was brought here.”

“Ah ... well, you will have much to learn, child. Though you mustn't be anxious to learn too quickly.” She winked at Viviana, and I was uncertain as to the clearly deeper meaning of this comment.

“I'm attending a party this evening. Send her to me this afternoon to help me prepare.”

With an acquiescent\* bow, Viviana turned to leave. I followed her, to receive some hours of instruction in what the lady did and did not like, so that I might help her prepare in the coming days. I almost wondered why Viviana did not do the task herself, as she seemed so well versed in it and would easily remember a multitude of things I was certain to have to be reminded of. But I soon learned that her primary skills lay in the culinary department. Her cuisine exceeded anything I—and many others, it was said—had ever experienced, and therefore she could not be spared from what was evidently her highest calling.

Aemilia seemed to enjoy hearing the sound of her own voice, and she chattered incessantly that afternoon as I helped her prepare her clothing, her hair, her nails, her jewelry—all down to the smallest detail. Everything about her was beautiful and highly refined—her clothes, her apartments, and the society she was accustomed to surrounding herself with.

I must admit, I was soon tempted to be dissatisfied with the lot life had cast me. *Did I not deserve, just as much as she, to have been brought up in at least some luxury and comfort?* I pondered these bitter thoughts only momentarily, being soon interrupted by the lady asking

me to fetch a certain gold-embroidered headscarf from her cupboard.

Within a few hours the masters had left for the evening, and as I sat down to eat with the other servants, my spirit was troubled. I knew that Viviana, keen and intuitive as she was, could sense that something was wrong. She never said a word, though, except to encourage me to “Eat well, or I might lose my reputation!”

That night I felt beside myself with confusion and frustration. The day had started off so well, considering the circumstances. But now, at the end of my first day of service, I felt trapped and in despair. I had looked with envy upon the material things and the lifestyle of ease that the lady Aemilia had, and resented the seeming injustice of life. Jesus sweetly reminded me of the things I had been taught from His disciples, that the things of this world pass away, while the true values of the spirit were those which lasted forever.

I had anticipated that this new lifestyle would not be easy physically, and I expected to have to work hard, and even to face hardship, and in time, persecution. I was not as prepared, however, for the struggles of the heart or the mind, and the emotions that had come upon me so quickly. Now I was experiencing them, and they would return over the following months. Temptations to complain of my Lord's workings in my life were not an entirely unusual occurrence, yet they could not overcome me or dishearten me, for God's power within me was stronger than “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” could ever be.

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\***acquiescent:** passive

## CHAPTER FIVE: SECRETS

The first few weeks passed uneventfully. I grew familiar with my duties in attending to the lady, and found her pleasant to serve. She was neither cruel nor hot-tempered, and she seemed well disposed to appreciate my service.

I wondered, however, why neither I nor the other servants of the household were permitted on the upper floor of the house until the noon hour. It was said that our lord and lady had need of rest; yet the master evidently was not resting, since I soon learned that he often left the house well before the afternoon meal, presumably to attend to his duties as a member of the Senate's military committee, or to visit with his own circle of friends. I sensed that my lady must have some secret, and began to muse on what it might be.

One day I had some leisure time as Aemilia slept, and as I tidied my personal quarters, I discovered a small scroll that had been hidden underneath one of the cushions of the couch below my window. I supposed it must have belonged to the room's former occupant, and was curious to know if it would reveal some clue concerning this young woman about whom almost everything was a mystery—for no one of the household seemed willing to speak of her, and I dared not ask, lest my own faith and loyalty be brought into question. I gingerly unrolled what appeared to be a letter, and read it slowly,

pondering the meaning of the words printed thereon:

*My sweet Lord,*

*The time is coming when at last we will be together. I have loved You for so long, and so purely, and am more than willing to do whatever You might ask of me ... yet my greatest desire and longing is to be by Your side.*

*Though I will surely miss my beloved parents, my dear friends, and the household in which I have grown, and though I know that those I love most will not understand, and many will even despise me for having chosen to be Yours, yet shall I never regret it. No, not for one moment! For all the joy that I have, all the hope that I have, is what I have received from You and the knowledge of Your incomparable love. No torments can quench that spark of devotion that You have ignited within my soul.*

*I shall meet You soon, my Lord. Until that day, may I be strong, may I be faithful, and may I be in some small way worthy to be called a friend of One so wonderful as You.*

*Yours forever,  
Aurelia*

These words stirred my heart. Could it be that this was her last written testament of her love for Christ? I did not know why, but I had a strong feeling that I should present my finding to Franciscus—not to inquire about it, but merely to inform him that I had found

this scroll that must have belonged to the former servant girl, and that I presumed it was my duty to pass it on to him.

That evening, I walked by the cottage adjacent to mine where he and Viviana stayed, and found him sitting alone on a large floor pillow, looking pensively out of his window toward the nearly full moon. I explained the reason for my interruption, and he beckoned me to come and deliver the note. I did so, and then turned and walked towards the door, but stopped when I heard a gasp, then a sob. I looked back to see tears streaming down the old steward's face. He, brought back to the realization of my presence, said softly "Go, child. And say nothing of this to anyone."

I had more questions now than before, but trusted that, as with everything in life, all that was to be revealed would be revealed—in time.



One morning, as I was carrying my lady's laundry from the main house toward the servants' area, where the washing fountain was, I noticed a rustling in the hedge bordering the rear of the estate. I paused and looked hard but saw nothing. I assumed it must have been my imagination, or a small animal.

Then I saw it again, a definite shak-ing. Looking cautiously about me, I moved slowly towards it. I wanted both to ensure that no others saw me, and that whoever or whatever was there was not going to harm me. A hand reached out through the bottom of the hedge and deposited a small scroll, then tapped on

the ground beside it as if to signal that I was meant to fetch it. After looking around again and being assured no one would see, I picked up the scroll, and hid it in a fold of my dress as I returned to my washing. I resolved to read it later, when I was certain not to be caught and reprimanded for being lax in my duties.

The day crawled by until my lady surfaced from her "hibernation," as Viviana and I termed it, and she asked me to accompany her to the market. While in the closet searching for the perfect garment for my lady—a task which it was understood would take some time due to the extensive quantity of material I had to look through—I took a moment to read the letter I had been given. I was glad I had done so just then.

*When you go to the market, look for me among the flower stalls. I will be wearing a blue band about my wrist.*

Who was this, and why were they trying to contact me? Or was this even meant for me? I determined to stay calm, and to diligently search at the market for this person.

As I walked next to my lady's litter on the way, she told me the items she was looking for that day. I heard little else, but my heart smiled when she mentioned a bouquet of flowers to bring with her to her friend Drusilla's house that evening.

I could not help but wonder, though. *How did this secret messenger know my lady's plans so well?*

**To be continued.**

# MARTINA



ISSUE 210



Part 2

Chapter Six:  
Trysts\*

**The story so far:** Marina is a young Christian girl living in Italy during the days of the Early Church. In Part 1 of her story, she was kidnapped by bandits and taken to Rome, where she was sold as a slave to the respected patrician household of Julian and Aemilia, and became Aemilia's personal attendant. She quickly discovered that the previous occupant of the position had been arrested for being a Christian, and she discovered a note from the girl, declaring her faith and love for Jesus.

However, other secrets have proven harder for Marina to crack. Why does Aemilia stay secluded in an upper room every morning? Who managed to deliver a note to her, setting up an appointment, and how could they have possibly known what Aemilia's shopping plans for the day were?

With a guard following closely behind us, Aemilia and I traipsed through the flower stalls together; each of us looking for something different. Unlike me, my lady quickly found what she was looking for. I paid the old vendor for her, and as he lifted the wrapped flowers and handed them to me, I saw it—the blue band around his wrist.

Just then, my lady turned to greet a friend who was passing by, and the vendor whispered to me, “Tomorrow afternoon at the entrance to the market, there'll be someone for you to meet.” His eyes were kind, and I felt no fear—only excitement and anticipation.

Fortunately, my lady had plans to go to the market again the following day. It was rare she went more than twice a week, and even rarer that she would go two days in a row. *How did this flower vendor know so much of her plans?—Especially when they weren't her usual custom?*

It was difficult to sleep that night, and for once, I had no difficulty rising

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\***tryst:** secret arrangement for a meeting

early. I prayed fervently until I'd received my Savior's word of assurance that I was indeed meant to follow along with these mysterious people.

To my relief, as we entered the market that afternoon, my lady informed me that she would be accompanying her friend Felicia to help her with her shopping. "I have servants enough to carry everything," she said. "So why don't you run along for a little while and do what suits you. Meet me in an hour by the silks. You will carry my purchases home."

She left me directly at my meeting spot, and I casually looked around but did not see the old man—though for some reason I wasn't expecting him to be the one. As it would have appeared odd for me to stand still for long, I drifted toward some nearby fruit stalls.

A young man in front of me was purchasing a few melons, and when he reached forward to give the coins to the vendor, I noticed his ring. I knew that ring. Could it be? He turned and I caught a glimpse of his face. He discreetly touched my hand and began walking into the throng. I followed him at a short distance, trying to appear as if I were looking at the stalls, while being careful not to lose sight of the man I was meant to follow. It was easy, for he was tall, and also, I thought, exceptionally handsome.

I left the marketplace and followed him down a deserted alley. He stopped and quickly and cautiously turned toward me.

"Leo?" I asked, although I already knew the answer.

"So it is. I'm glad we were able to find each other. You look quite different from when I first set eyes on you. Only in apparel that is—the eyes and spirit are as pure and lovely as ever."

He was warmer toward me than I would have expected; however, I did not return this friendliness. He was, after all, the reason I found myself so far from home in the first place, and while I knew God had allowed it, my initial excitement at seeing him quickly turned to suspicion and coldness. I remained quiet, and let him continue.

"So much has happened since I last saw you. I cannot explain now, but I have become acquainted with people that you would like to meet as well." He drew the sign of the fish in the dirt with his sandal, and I knew what he meant. He was part of them! Part of us!

"When are you free to meet me again?" he asked.

"My lord and lady are going away to the country tomorrow, and I must go with them," I said sadly. "The first chance I have is at least eight days from now, when we return. Most likely, they'll attend a party that week, and I could slip away then. But I do not yet know what night that will be. My lady is secretive, as well as impulsive."

"Then eight days from now, I'll be at the hedge where I left the letter, to plan another meeting."

Someone was coming down the alley, and Leo disappeared into a doorway. My lady would soon be expecting me, so trying to appear casual, I hurried back to the spot in the marketplace where she and Felicia were purchasing fine silk dresses.



The place in the countryside was lovely and the work wasn't too taxing, but I was anxious to be home again and the time seemed to pass ever so slowly. However I had now grown comfortable with Viviana and Franciscus who also accompanied Julian and Aemilia. They had become like a second set of parents to me, and I often wondered how that bond had formed so quickly. We discussed few deep things—I knew that they had their secrets, and I hoped they were unaware I had mine—but working together with them made this lifestyle away from my home and loved ones more bearable.

We returned to Rome late in the evening of the eighth day, and though I had doubts that Leo would be there at such an hour, once I was certain the others would all be asleep, I slipped out toward the secret spot in the hedge. I stood and waited. Not a sign, not a rustle.

I hesitated to make a sound, but I pressed myself close to the hedge and whispered his name. "Leo? Are you there?" Nothing. I leaned my head into the hedge in despair, and had to restrain myself from gasping

when I felt a touch on my shoulder. I turned and there he stood.

I brought Leo into my quarters, which I was fairly certain to be a safe hiding place, since no one came there with the exception of Viviana or Franciscus, whose schedules were regular, and who always announced themselves before entering. We talked through the night, and Leo told me all that had happened since the day he and his men had captured me. On his next journey, he had made an acquaintance with other Christians living out in the country, and eventually became involved with an association of brethren within Rome itself. He'd found fellowship and brotherhood among these people—outcasts of society like him—who taught him more about the God I had only briefly introduced him to.

Leo had been observing me for several weeks since returning to the city, having become quite experienced at what he called "spying." Since he knew where I had been taken, he spent many days in disguise near the estate, observing and listening to the activity at the servants' quarters through the hedge, as well as the routine of entries and departures through the main gate. When he was knowledgeable enough of my daily routine to know when and where he could contact me, he'd made his move—and how glad I was for it!

I was fascinated to hear of my brethren's active work within the city, and how many of them were in positions and households such as mine, operating clandestinely,



while still making converts and disciples as our Master had instructed us. Oh, my heart leapt at the thought of being reunited with so many other Christians, and the strength of spirit that such fellowship would bring. I was here to fulfill a mission for my Lord, and longed to witness my faith, though I knew I must have patience in my situation. Surely, I would find such strength by being among others of faith.

“God must have work for you to do within this household, or He would not have brought you here,” Leo said.

We made plans to meet in the evening three days from thence, when my lord and lady would be away, so that he could bring me to my first secret Christian gathering.

After a few hours, Leo made his way back to the hedge and disappeared through the secret exit.



## Chapter Seven: The Meeting

I wasn't accustomed to venturing out of the estate on my own, let alone at night. The guards would have forbidden it. Unlike slaves, they were paid well by Julian, and did not share our spirit of brotherhood. Trying to persuade them would have been futile, or even dangerous. One in particular, Rufus, had always made me feel uncomfortable with his suspicious and lusty stare.

I hoped that Leo's plan would work. I went to the same part of the hedge that he'd used, and found that the branches had been cut from both sides in such a way that I could pull them aside and make my way through, while leaving the appearance of the hedge intact. Leo was full of such clever tricks!

*Useful to have a former criminal on your side!* I mused, as I left the estate through my new rear door for this long-awaited event. Leo was waiting for me.

We walked a long way in silence under the cover of night. I was unable to tell in which direction we were going, as I wasn't familiar with the city in the darkness. At last, we stopped in front of a large house. Leo rapped on the door in a particular sequence, and a young man cautiously opened it. He recognized Leo and let us in.

He lifted a trapdoor in the floor, and we climbed down a ladder into a large cellar, where about 30 people, of all ages and classes of society, sat in concentric circles. The teacher in the middle was the flower vendor, and he was speaking the Words of Jesus that he had learned from one of the Master's Own disciples. I drank in every word, and could not restrain tears of joy. After awhile most of the company dispersed, each greeting me with an embrace and introduction as they departed. They were so warm, so caring—these were my brothers and sisters, though I had never met them before.

Then Leo, Martinus (the vendor/teacher), and I were left alone to talk and



pray together. Martinus encouraged my heart by telling me of a dream he had had after Leo first told him of me. Jesus had appeared and told him that His blessing was upon me, that I had been placed in Julian's household to be a witness, and that it was Martinus' duty as a shepherd and teacher to help me in any way he could.

I was curious how he had known we would meet at the flower stalls, and was fascinated to hear that our Lord had told him this, as well as the very day and time. I had often been communing with Jesus for years, and He had spoken to my heart many times; yet I had not realized that I could be so specific in my asking, or He in His instructing. I was fascinated!

I asked Martinus and Leo to pray and seek our Lord together with me, so that He might instruct me clearly as to my next step. He had told me before to have patience, and that my time would come—now I felt that time was at hand.

What He said did not surprise me: the key would be in reaching Franciscus and Viviana. He would give me a sign when it was time to make my faith known to them, the sign would take place in Julian's house.

Leo escorted me home. We stood beyond the hedge, near my rear entrance, hidden by darkness. I was loath to leave him and return to my cage. I had found a family tonight, and he was a part of it—a very special part. I was unwilling to admit this before, as I could not help feeling

some contempt toward this former criminal, kidnapper, and murderer. Yet, even in his marauding days, had he not been kinder than my presumptions? And by now he had surely proven that goodness and compassion were in his heart.

How to express my change of heart toward him now was beyond me at that moment, for the core of my being was experiencing a torrent of emotions with all that was happening ... yet I had to say something.

“Thank you, Leo, for your kindness, and for enduring so much trouble to help me and bring me into the circle of brothers.”

“I owe it to you, Marina. Not merely as penance for my having brought you to this place—which indeed we know to have been God’s plan—but mostly in gratitude for what you have done for me. You’ve changed my life. When I first met you, I did not believe that real love existed—now I know it does. For that, I thank you and your God—now my God as well. I also thank God that He sent His message of love to me wrapped in a package as lovely as you.”

I found no words to reply, yet my eyes betrayed my soul’s longing. Leo hugged and kissed me. I wished that moment would last forever. Yet the time had come to return to my life as a slave. He would contact me when he could. Until then, I must wait, watch, and trust.

It seemed like an eternity and I thought of him often. I knew, though, that my mis-

sion in this household was more important than my emotions. I prayed earnestly that I would remain attentive to my duties, and above all, that I would not miss the Lord’s opportunities for me. Knowing that I held a special place in someone’s heart, even if I could hardly be with him, comforted me, and was another touch of God’s love for me.

## Chapter Eight: The Mission Takes Shape

Shortly after, the master and mistress held a grand party in their mansion. Besides helping with the long preparations, once the guests had left and most of the other servants retired, I stayed on to help Viviana finish the last work in the kitchen.

“Did you notice, Marina, the lovely lavender tunic that Tacita wore to the feast tonight?” Viviana asked. “It was splendid, wasn’t it?”

“I’m sure it was. The ladies always look quite lovely. But in truth, I paid little attention to clothing this evening. I used to notice these things more when I first came. But now, after having spent so many days preparing the lady Aemilia’s garments, along with shopping with or for her throughout the week, I am tired of being surrounded by so much silk and jewelry and glamour. It appears her whole world

centers around these things, and it seems such an empty world, even though she has everything one could desire.”

Viviana said nothing for a few moments, and I wondered if my bait had in fact offended her. Then she smiled. “I sensed it was all beginning to get to you, Marina. I’ve felt that way myself sometimes. Not that I don’t notice things—I still spot the loveliest dresses—but sometimes I do get tired of it all. Not necessarily tired of having to work—that’s what I was born to, and a fate I’ll accept—but tired of life, of the way everything and everyone is.

“Everything is a melee of feasting and partying and endless chattering. I have little to do with such things, but I’ve been around long enough to see that all the riches in the world don’t make a person happy. I think we’re better off as we are, living simply.—Then again, I can’t say I’m truly happy either. I might have had a chance, if only...”

Tears welled up in the woman’s eyes, and as she sat down on a nearby stool, her tears became shaking sobs. I sat beside her and waited for her to continue, both curious as to what mystery would be revealed, and also hoping and waiting for the chance to tell her of my Savior’s love for her. She turned her head away from me, and when she had regained her composure, she touched my cheek. In a voice so low I could hardly make out the words, she said, “The things you say

remind me of my Aurelia. ... She was more than just a servant girl, Marina. She was my and Franciscus’ only child. To think that she might have grown to have a family, that I might have had grandchildren about my feet, had she not been so foolish. ...”

My eyes widened as this information registered, while Viviana’s were overflowing with tears again, tears which I not only saw but felt, and which moved my heart and began to fill my eyes as well. *So that was why Franciscus wept when I gave him the letter I’d found.*

“We should not be speaking of this here, Marina, and it’s getting terribly late. Let us go to our quarters.”

We left through the kitchen door and walked across the quiet courtyard.

As we looked up at the pale moon, I saw a beam of light, brighter than the moon itself, shining out of the crescent, and pointing like a finger down to where we stood. I wondered if Viviana had seen it as well, and when her eyes locked with mine, I knew she had.

*It is your sign. It is your time!* My Savior whispered in my heart.

“I’ve never seen a thing like that before. What could it mean?” Viviana asked.

“I believe it is a sign from God,” I whispered.

We went inside my quarters.

“Which god do you speak of?” she asked as she shut the door behind her.



“The only true God—the God of love, the God Who made us, the God Who created life, and Who holds the meaning of life.”

A look of recognition and excitement, set against a backdrop of horror, swept across Viviana’s face. “Again, you speak like my Aurelia.”

“Did Franciscus show you the letter I found in my apartments?” I gingerly asked.

“He did. And how I struggle to understand the words she wrote therein. How could she have lost her life for the sake of this Carpenter?”

“Viviana, I believe I can understand how her love for Him was so great that she would have given up all else in the world for it.”

“Have you found such a love yourself?”

“I also believe in the One called Christ, the Son of God, the God of love Who your daughter worshipped and loved, and for Whom she gave her life. I know that I may have to give my life for Him someday as well, but I mean to tell as many as I can of how greatly He loves them before that time comes. His love is abundant and free, and He cares for every man, woman, and child more deeply than we could ever imagine.”

Viviana looked at me with astonishment and admiration. The Holy Spirit had borne witness in her heart.

“You are so brave, child, just like my Aurelia was. I wish that she had told me

more of this herself, but I understand her caution and why she did not. Indeed, it may have been wiser, for perhaps I would not have been ready to hear it. As you must know, to speak as you are is considered treason against the emperor and the gods of Rome.

“My Aurelia’s belief in your God was discovered and reported by one of the other servants, and only when she had been taken away did her father and I learn of her beliefs. She had to leave so suddenly. We could not have visited her in the prison, lest we be condemned ourselves. Franciscus and I decided never to speak of her, nor ever to reminisce or regret, for it would both be too painful, and would also be taken as a sign by our masters of disloyalty or of being Christians ourselves.

“I have tried to act as if it were nothing, as if it did not happen. But in truth I hate Julian for having sent her away, for it was his choice. She was his wife’s maid-servant—he could have chosen to keep her faith a secret. But he was so fearful of compromising his position, and eager to avoid the rumors that might have spread about his household, and in turn him and his wife, that he preferred to send my only child to her death. The heartless creature!

“You must not speak to anyone else of these things, or you will suffer the same fate. But please explain more to me when we are alone. Teach me of this Jesus of

Nazareth, Who inspires such a love in the hearts of His followers.”

“I will gladly do so, my dear Viviana. We shall have much to speak of.” We embraced and she retired for the night.



I was in my chamber late one evening telling Viviana some of the stories I had learned about Jesus when I was a child, as I had done every night of the week, when I looked up, and there stood Leo. Viviana and I gasped, and I quickly reassured Viviana that I knew this man.

“He’s one of us as well?” Viviana asked.

“Yes, though we’re growing fewer by the day!” Leo solemnly assented. “I came to warn you, Marina. Our small group has not yet been touched, but three other gatherings within the city were discovered just last night. Nearly a hundred of our brethren have been captured and imprisoned.”

My heart was heavy. Secluded in my mistress’ service as I was, I had been unaware of such raids, though they were not a new thing. A sense of security had been growing among us.—We had all developed our undercover methods of operation well, and had scattered about the corners of the city. This incident was a vivid reminder to Viviana—if she indeed needed one—that the Christian way of life was not one of peace and safety.

I feared that she might cower and become fearful, and even expose me and Leo to save herself. But by now she had experienced Jesus’ love, and her spirit was joined to His. Her faith did not waver at this news.

Rather, she surprised me by announcing, still in Leo’s presence, “It is time that I share the news of my new faith with my husband. I believe he is also ready. Perhaps, through our position in this household, we can even be of help to you, young man, and others who are in danger.”

The room was quiet. A slight smile crept over Viviana’s face, as she looked at Leo and me and stated, “I’d best be off now, hadn’t I? May the angels watch over you both.”

I rested my head upon his shoulder. His arms wrapped about me provided comfort, and the sensation of his heavily pounding heart echoed in my own. This could be our last night together on Earth. It was not one worth wasting. We loved as if there would be no tomorrow, expressing every ounce of the passion within our beings.

We also talked of great plans and prayed that we might be strong, and that we would uphold the banner of our Lord’s love and truth, whatever the cost. One particular idea occupied much of our discussion time. During the past months I had felt that it would be unwise to convey any form of message to my parents, for I

feared that they might attempt to unsettle my position, and thus thwart my mission. Now, though, I strongly desired to pass on word to them, and I pled with Leo to do this for me. He agreed, though he knew he was risking his life. He trusted it to be a safe move if it was God's will, and we made certain of that, by bringing the matter before Him together.

Finally, after one last lingering kiss, he arose to leave shortly before daybreak. My prayers were never far from him from that night on, nor was my heart.



At times, I was privy to the discussions between Lord Julian and his politician friends, and I knew that they were convinced that Christians were a threat to the Roman Empire. They feared us. They feared that through the power of our words and our ability to diversify, we would persuade the people to rise up in opposition to Rome. We were more than an undesirable religion; we were a threat. We were a power that they had no control over. They could not get a grip on us. The more they exiled or killed us, the more numerous—and more loyal to our beliefs—we became.

I heard several conversations among Julian's circle, describing how the Empire's bold plans to eliminate us had never succeeded so far. These men were not those who hatched or carried out such plans; they

were those who sat and watched the world go by, content to discuss it from what they presumed to be their lofty vantage point. I sensed in some of them, including my master, a measure of admiration for this band of outcasts, who though seeming to be insignificant and with no military might, held the world's greatest government in fear and awe.

I watched and listened whenever I could, hoping that I might hear some information which could be used to save the lives and ministries of my Christian brethren in the city. If nothing else, at least I was getting to know these men better, and I knew that understanding the way their minds worked was important if I wanted to reach them.



Meanwhile, Leo left the city and started on his way towards my parents' village. He would be safe, provided he avoided the patrols that were now regularly covering the city's perimeter, with the intention of tracking down these Christian "miscreants," purported to be plotting to overthrow the emperor. Many believed this, and in their ignorance thought it their duty to protect their fellow citizens from such dangerous elements.

*To be continued...*



# MARTINA

Part 3



ISSUE 212



**The story so far:** Marina has started attending Christian meetings in the city of Rome. She's also been reunited with Leo, and discovered that she loves him. After finding out that Viviana was actually Aurelia's mother, Marina shared her faith with her, and Viviana accepted the love of Jesus into her life.

Now, as a new wave of persecution threatens to engulf the Roman church, Marina asks Leo to deliver a message from her to her parents.

## CHAPTER Nine: Aemilia

**O**ne morning, while I was going about my duties, I heard a wail coming from the upstairs portion of the house. I paused to listen. I walked a few paces, then heard it again, and louder. I was curious, but it was forbidden to ascend to the upper floor before noon.

Just then, Franciscus approached me through a nearby archway, and I asked him if he had heard a strange sound.

"I heard nothing," he said calmly, but his countenance indicated otherwise. "Go help Viviana in the kitchen. Two of the servants are off to the market and she's in need of assistance."

Not more than ten minutes later, a pale Franciscus was at the kitchen door.

"What's the matter, love?" Viviana asked. He merely shook his head. She looked at him knowingly. "It's the lady, again, is it not?"

*So, this had happened before? Why had I not heard it until now? Whatever the happening, it must be the cause of our lady's insistence on secrecy. Did Franciscus and Viviana know what she was attempting to conceal?*

"Is there anything we can do?" I offered timidly and with some inquisitiveness.

"Go see for yourself, if you wish," Franciscus answered.

As I walked toward the stairway, I heard Viviana chiding him in the shrill tone she took on when she was tense. "You should not let the girl do that. ... Who knows what...?"

I neared the top of the steps and heard the wail again. Assured that it was Aemilia and not some bizarre creature, I tiptoed down the corridor, until I stood outside her open

Illustrations by Kristen

For children ages 9 and up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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door. There she was, slouched over a couch, wringing her hands and weeping loudly.

Although I stood where she could see me, she looked straight towards me and continued without indicating that she sensed I was there.

I observed this spectacle until Aemilia suddenly became aware of my presence. She ran towards me, hands outstretched and seemed poised to strike my face. The sight of her so distraught frightened me, but instead of turning and running, I took her in my arms and hugged her tightly.

I felt the tenseness leave her body, and she became limp and started crying again. I led her back to the couch and she did not resist.

Unafraid of the consequences, I placed both hands on her head, and pleaded for the soul, mind, and body of this woman whom I, in the line of duty, had grown to care for. As aloof as she often seemed to be, she had a heart worth loving. As I prayed, her sobbing slowed and ceased, but when I took her hand and kissed it, tears returned to her eyes.

"It comes over me from time to time," she whispered. "I was not always like this. When I found out after years of marriage that I would never have a child, and Julian decided to take on a mistress in order to bear an heir to family's fortune, I became a melancholy woman. I would spend hours alone, weeping, cursing, angry at everyone and everything.

"Why did you come up here?" she asked, reverting to her regular, more businesslike self. "In the state I was in, I could have harmed you."

"My duty is to serve you, my lady, and I intend to fulfill my duty, even if it be at a price."

"Dedication indeed, Marina. I admire your courage. And"—her voice softened—"I respect your faith. I can see that it has power. Your words were more than words. They were alive and powerful. I have forbidden the servants access to this floor in the mornings, for that is when my fits come upon me, and I have feared that word of my malady would spread. Only Franciscus and Viviana, and of course my husband, know. I see that I left the door open. If it were not for that, you would not know either."

"I will tell no one, my lady."

"Very well then. You may go."

As I left, she called me. "Marina ... thank you." I bowed and went to my chambers, where I prayed for Aemilia's soul and mind, that I might soon have opportunity to speak to her in private again, and to help her find salvation.



Three days had now passed, and I began fretting for Leo's safekeeping. I tried to be patient, and strengthened my faith by interceding for him in prayer and trusting Jesus to keep him. Yet there must have been a touch of worry on my countenance, for as I tidied Aemilia's chambers that afternoon, she walked in from the garden and asked me if I was well.

"I believe I am, my lady. Do I seem unwell?"

"A little pale, that's all. If not ill, then perhaps troubled?"

I did not trust her enough to tell her what was on my mind at that moment; yet

if necessary I could tell her of other troubles to appease her curiosity.

“I know it may seem improper for me to ask this of you, seeing my position,” I began. “But I would like to ask a favor of my lady—a promise, if you will?”

She smiled knowingly. “I suppose you are concerned that though you have promised to keep my secret, I have not promised to keep yours? If that is the case, then rest at ease. I have no reason to rid myself of such a helpful young woman.

“I have heard of the trouble others called Christians have caused ... but no specifics regarding their treachery. Yet, in your case, I have seen only diligence, loyalty, concern, and kindness. Your God must have done you some good.

“Besides,” she said, lowering her voice, “I need you. Not only for the day-to-day matters, but because I now know you are the only one with the power to cure me. I have told Franciscus and Viviana to call you if I am ever found in such a state again.” She noticed the look of concern in my eyes and quickly added, “Though I did not tell my husband this, of course.”

“I would gladly come to your assistance again if needed, my lady,” I replied, “but beyond that, I believe that you can be cured so that the seizures will never return.”

She smiled condescendingly. “I don’t think you understand, Marina, I have had this condition for many years. My husband has had learned men diligently study it, and it is known that such madness is incurable.”

“These men, though knowledgeable in their science, do not know the power of my

God,” I said. “When Christ walked upon the earth, He cast out devils, healed the lame, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. ...”

“I am not sure that I wish to know more of your Christ than is necessary,” she interrupted curtly. “I am content to know that I am safe in your hands, but I do not believe I can be permanently cured.”

“I will pray for your faith, then my lady. For if you will simply believe, nothing is impossible.”



Franciscus, a man of few words, each of which was taken seriously, walked with me out of the main house toward the servants’ quarters that evening.

“I passed by while you were conversing with the lady about her illness. I see that you believe very strongly in this Jesus, but have you ever seen such miracles take place before your eyes? How do you know that these stories are true?”

I had to admit to myself, I had seen no proof of many of the things that I spoke of. Yet I had heard them from those whom I trusted and believed. I could have been persuaded to doubt, and indeed at that moment, surrounded by the skepticism of those in this household who respected but did not believe in my God, I was tempted to question my God’s power.

“I know that the things spoken of Jesus are true,” I said with a beating heart. “Not only because I have seen His power at work myself, but also because I know the One Who wrought such miracles. I know what

He has done for me and how He has worked in my life, and I truly believe that He is capable of anything. He has done much for Aemilia, and I am certain He can do yet more. I believe more firmly than ever that He is only limited by our faith and belief. He works on our behalf when we believe, and when we do not, He waits patiently.”

Franciscus gave me a fatherly embrace. “I want to believe, yet I have not yet found anything worthy in which to place that belief. Perhaps your God is what I have sought. We will see.”

Then we each parted for our own quarters. I continued to pray that he might open his heart to receive the love of our Savior, for as yet he seemed filled with questions and doubts.



## CHAPTER TEN: UNDERCOVER ADVENTURES

When I went to my room, I met the fulfillment of my many prayers. Leo was waiting for me, alive and well. His arms reached out to embrace me and I melted within them. We did not linger, though, for I was most curious to hear his tale.

“I made it out of the city as soon as the gates opened. I pressed the beast hard, and rode to your parents’ house by nightfall. I told your father that I was sent with a message from you and he looked at me with no small measure of suspicion. The pendant was sufficient proof that I had met you, but it took a little time to convince them

that you were alive, and that I was a fellow Christian and not a spy. I told them of what had befallen you, and at the end of my tale, confessed my part in the matter. They said nothing but only cried tears of joy, until your mother broke the silence. ‘Thank you for caring for her, dear boy,’ she said.

“They wanted to come to the city at once to meet you. I told them of the great dangers, especially now that the emperor has captured so many of us, but they were confident that they would not be suspected. I don’t know what they will decide, and I’m sure they will further consider the matter, but I told them where and when you can be contacted at the marketplace. Keep an eye out for them near the fruit stalls by the Southeast Gate whenever you go shopping, for we won’t know what day they’ll appear.”

Leo and I embraced, cried, laughed, and kissed, and only when the darkness began to thin did he slip away from my grasp.

Before he did, I composed myself enough to tell him something I had overheard Julian mention to Aemilia when he’d returned from the Senate that evening. He spoke of a meeting planned for two days from then, when a committee of senators, some of the Imperial Guard, and certain spies and informants, would combine their intelligence of the Christian communities in order to capture more of us. He disclosed the meeting’s location as well. Although he was not to be a part of it, it seemed as if he was well informed nonetheless—and he couldn’t resist sharing this morsel of information with Aemilia, ever thirsty for gossip.

“If only you, or one of us,” I said, “could enter and secretly overhear what was planned at such a meeting, we could make better plans to thwart theirs.”

I had hesitated at throwing out such a challenge to Leo, knowing that he’d most likely accept it, and possibly end his life in the process; yet if we could save others and extend their lives, I felt it was worth a try.



From then on, every morning that I went to the marketplace I felt a touch of excitement, wondering if this time I’d see a familiar face. However, a week came and went, and there was still no sign of them. I had not seen Leo during those seven days either, and I constantly wondered what had become of him.

Waiting, waiting. It seemed this tedious activity comprised my entire life! Why must I always wait? Why must the future be so uncertain, and life so precarious? I had always known I was meant to trust that God had a plan, but at times I grew weary with the waiting, and anxiety would flood my mind and heart. During one such moment of desperation, I would have screamed and drawn the attention of the entire marketplace, were it not for a pair of hands that briefly covered my mouth, and then a voice that ordered me to stand still for the next few minutes. Then the hands removed themselves, and their possessor vanished into the crowd. I kept looking forward, attempting to appear calm, lest I invite any further unexpected actions.

Then I saw her. I slowly approached her, imagining that there were iron weights on

my feet so as not to appear overeager to the surrounding throngs. But once I was face to face with my mother, I could not restrain my embrace. We talked softly, but the excitement in our voices was not diminished by their low volume.

Then I saw one of the other servants of the household approaching and told my mother that I would have to move away. Just then, someone stepped out from the crowd, took my mother by her arm and walked her directly past me.

I didn’t see the face, but I recognized the gait. My mother would be safe in Leo’s care for the time being.

That night while I slept, Leo exercised his well-refined break-in skills and quietly crept into the grounds and into my room. He touched me, and as I awoke, he looked more comely to me than ever.

“Your mother has been taken to one of our safest houses!” he assured me. “And,” he added with a satisfied smile, “thank you once more for the pertinent and priceless information you provided me with. The venture was a definite success.”

I listened with wonder as he told me of how he had entered the private chambers. The venue’s regular wine bearer had been taken ill that morning, and Leo had been able to secure his place. As he poured drinks for the senators, he also heard nearly every word of the meeting. Several messengers were posted nearby, whom he immediately alerted of which gatherings and believers’ homes were known. One house was not warned in time, but scores of our brethren were able to move quickly to safety, or to avoid going to the planned

meetings, and thus their lives were spared for a while longer.

I praised our marvelous God for how He had used a simple little one like me, whom He had placed at the right place at the right time, to enable many of our brethren to live longer and spread the good news farther.

Naturally, the emperor and Senate were furious at the news, and I did my best to keep calm when Julian told Aemilia, with an amalgam\* of mock anger and reserved awe, of how the council's clever plans had been foiled, and only 20 Christians, rather than 200, had been captured. Aemilia also tried hard to avoid letting her eyes meet mine, for she suspected that I had something to do with this, yet she had no intention of betraying me to Julian.



The next evening I escaped the grounds with Leo to meet with my mother. We talked the night away, catching up on the last year's experiences. I wished my father had come too, but he had decided to stay with the farm and children. Mother had traveled to Rome with a friend from the village, whom she and my father had taught in the Christian way, and whom I also met at the safe house.

I was proud to hear that my brothers and sisters were growing up into fine young Christians. Mother told me of the many nights that she and my father had sorrowed for my loss; yet Jesus had assured them that I had been taken with a purpose and that someday they would discover it. She had taken this to mean I had died, but my father

had always had faith that I was yet alive and well.

"He told me that I had better be the one to come here to see it with my own eyes, since he believed it already." She was chuckling slightly, though her eyes were moist with tears. Leo and I parted in the pre-dawn hours, planning a farewell meeting with Mother two days later, if God so willed.

## ○ Chapter Eleven: An Unexpected Complication ○

**F**ollowing our usual custom to avoid meeting twice at the same place, I was to meet Mother at a different safe house the next time. Leo would have other things to attend to that night, so I journeyed alone, or so I thought. Mother and I hugged and embraced as if it had been many years, and I gave her a few small gifts to take home to my father and younger brothers and sisters as tokens of my love.

As I left the house and began to walk down the street, my breath went away as I was stopped by a pair of strong arms that reached out from the shadows.

"Rufus!" I exclaimed at encountering one of Julian's guards, who had evidently followed me there. "What brings you here?"

"I think a more appropriate question would be what brings *you* here," he slyly

replied. “I have been entrusted with the duty of protecting our lord and lady, and ensuring that their servants are loyal and trustworthy. One could hardly consider your sneaking out under cover of night and crossing town alone a trustworthy action.”

My only comfort at that moment was the knowledge that at least he had followed me when I was alone, and had not seen Leo as well. It was a momentary comfort.

“Take me back to that house you just left,” he commanded. “Let me see whom it was you were meeting with.” Rufus was not my master, but he was armed and I was defenseless.

I knocked on the door with a prearranged knock that signaled danger. I hoped they would be able to hide themselves and my mother.

“No one’s answering. They must be asleep,” I said.

Rufus knocked and gruffly demanded that someone answer the door. However, he was only bluffing and he knew it. He was alone and incapable to take on a single-handed raid.

“I will return you to your quarters, Marina—but this isn’t the end of this. I’ll be watching you like an eagle.”

*Watch* was all he did for the time being. The next day at noon when I came to attend to my lady, there was no sign of any disturbance in the household. I was certain he would not inform Julian until he had more substantial evidence, and that could take some time, I hoped.

As I did every morning, I helped my lady dress and arrange her hair. We often prattled

about the day’s plans or other senseless subjects, but today I was more than a little surprised when Aemilia stated that she had been considering my offer.

“I would not want to presume upon your God more than is my due,” she went on, “but if indeed He can cure me completely as you seem to believe, it seems to me there is no harm in trying.

“I’ve been thinking a great deal of late, and realize that I need more than to be merely cured of my strange ailment. Let me explain.

“The simplicity of your manner, contrasted with the wisdom and conviction with which you speak, has shown me what a sham my life has been. I appear to have everything, but I know I have nothing of true worth. Yet you, while you appear to have nothing, have what I do not have—happiness! You are a complete person, and I am not. I know it is the power of your God that makes you as you are. I have seen a good many other peasant girls, but none has made me feel envious—none but you.”

My hands trembled with excitement while she spoke. Unable to complete the task at hand, but rejoicing that a special part of my spiritual task was being fulfilled, I let her tresses fall as I knelt down beside Aemilia and took her hand. Together we prayed to the One Who was now becoming her Lord and Friend. When she had finished her prayer, her eyes were glowing as they looked into mine.



To my surprise, as I walked about the marketplace with Aemilia and her friends



and their servants, my mother approached me from out of the crowds.

“I know I was meant to leave today, but with the incident last night I feared you were in trouble and could not leave you at a time like that. I am glad to see nothing has happened to you.”

“Something *has* happened,” I said and tried to signal her to move away as I was being watched, but it was too late. Rufus stepped up and, looking at me menacingly, laid a hand on my mother’s shoulder.

“So, is this the friend you were meeting last night, my dear? Shall I introduce her to our lady?”

“I’m afraid you’d make yourself look foolish doing so here while Aemilia is with her friends,” I said, hoping to delay a confrontation.

“Well, then, I’ll just keep an eye on her for now,” he stated, “and when it’s time to return to the litter, she can come with us.”

As Aemilia and her entourage left the marketplace, Rufus followed us from some distance, my mother in tow. Aemilia, sensing something was amiss, gave me a slight raise of her eyebrows as if to ask what was happening. I remained silent. Aemilia’s friends parted, and we continued toward the litter.

Rufus approached with my mother, and I knew that whatever he had to say would be negative—it would be my word against his. However, although I believed the lady would rather trust me, Julian would be a different matter.

“My lady, allow me to introduce Junia,” I said, preempting Rufus’ approach, “an old friend from my hometown. If it does not

displease you, may she come to stay with me for a few days while she is in Rome?”

It was forbidden for captured slaves to attempt to contact a relative or friend, for our masters feared they might seek to facilitate our escape. But I hoped that she, being a middle-aged woman, would appear harmless.

“I’ll have to confer with my husband, but I think there would be no harm in it.” She gave Rufus a reproving look, which renewed my confidence that we would prevail. Prayers ascended from my pounding heart as I followed the steady pace of my lady’s litter that brought us again to the gates that both sheltered and imprisoned me.

I prepared both my mother and myself for what would ensue in the coming days by informing her of the standing of each member of the household, and left her in Viviana’s care while I returned to my duties with the lady.

When Julian returned home, he came immediately to see Aemilia, which was out of the ordinary. I asked if I should leave them alone in her chambers, but Julian said it wasn’t necessary. He seemed different—or maybe I was just starting to see him with more compassion. He was usually a hard man, and I feared him; yet I had hardly seen him as a human being. My conscience was pricked, and I realized that even he could be reached.

“There’s something I want to request of you, my lord,” Aemilia began in her most charming manner.

“And how may I help you, my darling?”

Despite having taken a mistress—who had yet to produce a child—Julian cared

greatly for Aemilia and catered to her most affectionately with an almost paternal love, for he knew that she depended on him in her state of weakness.

“What I would ask is a bit unusual,” Aemilia replied, “but I hope that you will not take too unkindly to it, nevertheless.”

“Knowing that you are always reasonable, I can think of nothing that you would request that I would deny,” he cooed.

I watched his expressions travel from gentleness to disbelief to rigidity and at last to resignation as Aemilia requested that my “old friend” remain with me for a few days.

“Very well, stay here she may, if that is what you wish,” he stated, then nodded farewell. “Until dinner then, my darling.”

Aemilia beamed with joy, and when Julian was out of earshot, she giggled triumphantly. Although my relief was less exuberant, I felt as though a heavy weight had been lifted from me.

“Your friend,” Aemilia whispered, “I presume she is also a Christian?”

“Indeed. Thank you for sheltering her, as well as protecting us both.”

We heard footsteps coming toward the room and there stood Julian’s frame in the doorway.

“I think I should like to meet this guest that we have so graciously agreed could remain in our household,” he said.

“Of course, darling,” said Aemilia. “Marina, would you call her to present herself as we sit down to supper?”

“I will,” I said, and as Julian stood aside to let me pass, our eyes met and locked. For the first time ever, I saw him not only as human, but as one with whom I could connect.

## CHAPTER Twelve: The Truth

A little later, I led my mother in through the kitchen door and down the hall towards the large dining room. She leaned on my arm, slightly distracted by the dazzling surroundings, which I had long ceased to notice, and we slowly made our way across the large and ornate chamber until we stood directly before Julian. We both bowed, and as we rose, I saw Julian’s jaw drop in shock, and he stood.

Attempting to handle myself coolly, I began, “This is...”

“...Junia,” he finished.

I was at a loss for words, as was Aemilia, who sprang from her seat at the end of the table opposite Julian and marched down the length of the table to stand beside him. She looked intently at her husband, then at my mother. “You know this woman?”

Julian stepped slowly backward and slumped back into his seat. After a few seconds, he waved his hand dismissively in our direction. “Go—the both of you. Leave us alone.”

As we turned and left the room, Aemilia flew into a rage.

“Have you even yet another mistress than those I have known of? Or is she another former lover? Just when I think I’ve seen enough, you bring this upon me? A peasant girl? You claim to love me in spite of everything and I have always believed you, yet if that look you gave



her was what I think it was, I shall find it harder to believe than ever. You loved her, didn't you? And you never told me, along with countless other things you probably haven't told me. When will you ever allow me a fraction of the trust I have placed in you? ..."

After overhearing this much of the tirade from outside the house, I said to my mother, "I tell this to you only in confidence, but I believe that my lady's mind is unbalanced. We have prayed together to God and He has healed her from her malady, but I fear that she has yet a trace of some imbalance, and a great deal of fear. ..."

"Perhaps so, Marina. But she senses what any woman would sense. She speaks the truth."

"What?"

"You heard him speak my name."

"What are you saying, Mother?"

"When Julian was a young centurion, before I met your father, he came through our village briefly. We chanced to become acquainted in ... an intimate way. We were young and it was a long time ago. Although I knew I would never forget him, I am surprised he remembered me so clearly."

"You know my master then. One never can imagine what amazing discoveries will be made next."

"There is more than that, Marina—Julian is your father!"

Every part of me felt frozen. I did not know what to think or feel, and so opted for neither speaking nor thinking. The clatter and shouting within the house

seemed to have died down as well, and the whole world was strangely silent.

"He does not know this," she continued, "although Alexis does, and he accepted you and me just the same."

My mother put her arms around me as we stood in the courtyard and seemed unmoved as she looked me in the eye and announced with faith: "Now we have the chance to show this man, who helped to give you physical life, how he can find spiritual life."

"You don't know him, Mother," I protested. "If you say any such things to him you will end our lives. He may have been kind in his youth, but he is a ruthless man now. He holds his position so dearly he would not jeopardize it for anyone, or anything. He has had servants, fellow senators, even friends, imprisoned, fined, beaten, or killed rather than suffer any form of humiliation. He had the daughter of his most trusted servants sent to die when it was found that she was a Christian. I would not presume to think he would have more mercy than that on an illegitimate daughter, or on her mother, when he finds out what we believe in."

"Perhaps not. But I believe we owe it to him to speak the truth. God surely had a plan in bringing you here, and I do not believe it can be completed without us speaking to him."

"So what do we do now?"

Mother closed her eyes and lifted her head to Heaven to receive the answer.

"We wait, Marina, and we pray."

*To be continued...*

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ISSUE 214



# MARINA

Part 4

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: FURTHER REVELATIONS

**The story so far:** Marina has discovered what Aemilia's mysterious illness was, and together they've prayed for her to be healed of it. Marina was also reunited with her beloved mother Junia, whom Leo managed to contact and to bring to Rome, but their meetings were discovered by one of Julian's henchmen, an unfriendly guard named Rufus. To try to defuse the situation, Marina introduced her mother as a friend, and had Julian and Aemilia agree to let her visit for a few days.

When Julian and Junia met, however, it was obvious to all watching that there was an old chemistry between them. Junia confirms to Marina that she did indeed know Julian when she was young, and she reveals that Marina is Julian's daughter.

The ante has been upped in this tale of danger, secrets, and love, yet there is much more each character has yet to discover and decide before the curtain falls.

At the sound of an unfamiliar knock I climbed out of the bed, put on my robe, and cracked open the door to find myself again faced with a man whom I now saw more differently than ever.

"Come in, my lord," I said, trying to appear calm.

My mother meanwhile had gotten to her feet and lit a candle, which cast a glow on her worn but lovely features, and again he looked at her as if in a trance. "Won't you sit down, Julian?" she said.

I backed away to sit on the bed, watching the interaction before me with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, and fear.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Mother normally took control of any situation, but in keeping with instructions from Above, she waited.

Finally, Julian cleared his throat several times and spoke in hushed tones. If I had thought he spoke caringly to Aemilia earlier that day, I had seen but half of his capacity for tenderness. "I've tried to forget you, Junia, and I thought I had. But as soon as I saw you, I realized that something between us has made you an eternal part of my life.—The truth is

Illustrations by Kristen

*For children ages 9 and up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.*

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that I cared for you, though the demands of my family and career made it impossible for me to confess it.

“Tell me, though, how did you come to be here? I would not think that you were looking for me. It would seem you’d have a family by now.”

“I am glad you still have such softness in your heart, Julian,” my mother said. “Indeed, though I have raised a family of my own, I’ve also always kept a place in my heart for you. I know we were foolish, and I’ve forgiven you for what happened long ago.

“I never intended to seek you out, though I am glad that we have met again. The true purpose for my visit to Rome was to find my daughter, who was mysteriously taken from me a year ago. I heard that she was taken to this very house, and I sought her out at the marketplace that she apparently frequented. I had worried for her, but am glad to find her alive, well cared-for, and in capable hands.”

“Your daughter? Marina? Living in my house all this time?”

He took the candle from my mother and holding it before me, studied my face while I studied his in return.

After a few moments, he said to my mother, “She has your beauty and charming manner, no doubt. Many times I wondered if I had seen her before. ... Now I know why.”

“She also has her father’s looks and strength of character—of that I’m sure.”

“Indeed? What sort of man is her father?”

“Her father by law is a Greek named Alexis, whom I have married and by whom I have borne eight children. Her true father, however, is a certain Roman nobleman whom I loved many, many years ago.”

If there had been light in the room, I am certain I would have seen Julian’s face growing paler by the second. He again returned to my bedside with the candle and looked at me yet more intently.

“If any other woman would tell me such a tale I would think it was blackmail or an attempt to gain favor or riches. Yet I do see some resemblance. She is the right age ... and I am certain that you, Junia, would not lie to me.”

“No, I would not,” she said simply.

“What do you intend by telling me this? You could have kept it a secret from me, even from Marina, and you have until now. I see no spite or vengeance within you ... yet neither is there any hope of our memories being revived, tender as they may be. So, why? Why?”

“God told me that it was the right thing to do, for your sake, dear Julian.”

“What God?” he asked with suspicion.

I took my cue and spoke boldly. “Christ, the same God that Aurelia, who used to live within these walls, worshipped, and for Whom she was willing to lose her life.”

Julian stiffened, and his familiar hardness overtook him.

“I will have no talk of such things within my house. I forbid you to speak of this again, with me or my wife or any in my household. I will send for you in the morning.”

He turned and left. My mother began weeping. I knew it was not because of fear for our future, but because the love of Christ was welling within her for this man’s soul. The same love that had allowed her to forgive him for having abandoned her now implored her to give him a chance to find Christ at risk of her own life. I was willing to do no less.



“I shudder at the thought of further revelations facing you, my dear,” Julian said to his wife as my mother and I stood with them in their chamber the next morning, “but my conscience has pricked me to inform you of yet worse news.”

“Worse news?” said Aemilia, her eyebrows arching with suspicion.

“It concerns this woman whom Marina brought to us.”

“Now she’s just ‘the woman’? I thought you were quite taken with her.”

“Marina is her daughter.”

Aemilia caught her breath but remained composed. “Interesting,” she said.

“Yes. And she kept this knowledge from us up until now.”

“Not surprising under the present circumstances, my dear.”

“On top of that, Aemilia, I have been informed, by her and by Marina, that they are both Christians.”

“Christians, you say?” Aemilia feigned surprise and smiled sardonically. “Surely, that is the least noteworthy revelation we have had in this house lately! Does it even matter?”

“Do you not understand, Aemilia? Have you not heard of the Christians’ dastardly deeds against our Empire? How they are traitors committing all sorts of treachery? Would you have such women in your own household? Would you continue to trust a servant who may at any moment turn on you and destroy you?”

“I will not have you speaking so about Marina!”

Aemilia gasped, surprising even herself with her own boldness, but she went on. “I trust her more than anyone I have ever known. She has been a good servant, she has cared for me well, and as far as her service to me is concerned, she has proven her loyalty.”

Julian commanded, “Ask her to prove her loyalty now! Ask her to deny her beliefs and proclaim her devotion to our gods.”

“I would not ask her to do such a thing, when I am not willing to do it myself!”

Julian stood stunned as his wife continued.

“This servant girl here has cured me of my spells. She has brought joy into my life—into my heart that had died long ago.



I did not tell you of this, because I would have then had to inform you of the source of her power, which is this same God that you speak against, the God that has now become my God.”

“But that’s not the worst of it, Aemilia. This woman seeks to shame me and my good name by claiming that I am Marina’s father.”

Aemilia said nothing. After a minute or so she stood up and walked towards the window.

“And what cause have I not to believe ‘this woman,’” she said with surprising but ominous calmness, “when it seems that all else she has brought with her has been devastating truth? What cause have I to trust your word, which has been proven false before? What cause have I to believe that you would not conceal your child as you have for years concealed this affair?”

Gazing at Aemilia with fury and disbelief, in a hollow tone of voice Julian dismissed my mother and me.



## Chapter Fourteen: The Wait

Getting Mother to safety was urgent. Her family needed her. Julian could have me arrested at any moment, or at least put under constant guard, and if Mother was with me we’d surely

be taken together. It was hard to convince her to leave, as she was determined to reach Julian. Yet, was I not the one called to this household? Was it not my mission, given by our Master?

It was difficult for Mother, but with our Lord’s confirmation, she agreed to depart, which left me to an uncertain fate that we both knew I would accept. I helped her through my hedge exit, praying that she could make her way to a safe house and out of the city.

I needed Leo now, but avoided praying that he would come to me, as I feared putting his life in the same danger as mine. I prayed until I fell into a deep sleep.

I awoke with a start to find the lady Aemilia sitting beside me on my bed. To my surprise, she reached out and gently brushed aside one of my locks.

“Marina, any child of Julian’s I am pleased to call my own.”

I sat up speechless.

“While my heart finds no pleasure in Julian’s deceiving me about his past deeds, I can still only feel love for the child resulting from them. Indeed I love you as my own daughter, and could love Junia like a sister, if only for having given you life.”

We held each other. It was too precious a moment for tears or words.

I broke the silence. “What will Julian do now that he knows?”

“I don’t know. He’s locked himself in his chambers all day, refusing to eat or to speak

to anyone. But we must protect Franciscus and Viviana.”

I did not respond, as I did not want to confirm their brotherhood if she did not know of it already.

“I know not for certain if they are Christians as well, and indeed I do not care to. I do know, though, that you and they have always been close. Julian does not realize this, but he will suspect them if given reason.”



The next evening Julian had still not emerged. I had not spoken to Franciscus and Viviana, as I was trying to protect their security more than ever. Aemilia had gone to the market with her friend Silvia to keep up appearances, and I felt alone. I called out for the arms of true comfort, which gently rocked me into a deep but short sleep, as I was awakened by footsteps approaching my bed.

*Would Aurelia's capture be repeated?* I wondered.

A warm and comforting presence, however, lay behind me, and as he stroked my hair, I knew that today was a day of destiny. I was comforted to know that mother was safely transported out of Rome by none other than my lover, who now held me as I had been so longing for.

Quite a while later, a sharp knock, which did not wait for a reply, brought in Rufus, once so intent on discovering me.

“So, Marina ... here you are ... and a *man* as well? Well, well, well...”

He slapped and spat on Leo, who was now sitting naked at the edge of the bed. Even in such a position, Leo was not a defenseless man, but he sat quietly and calmly.

“No, no, Marina, you haven't escaped my eagle eye. Nor have you, you filthy dog. Julian will hear of this. He'll reward me handsomely for it too.”

I did not want to fuel his anger with the taunting knowledge that Julian already knew I was a Christian. Besides, I still did not know what Julian himself had planned to do with me.

Rufus left a guard outside the door to ensure that Leo and I did not depart, and jaunted off to present his discovery to our master.

Meanwhile, Leo and I could only lie together, hold each other, and pray. The guard posted outside our door decided at some point to invite himself in, having had enough of the outdoor heat. He sat silently on my couch, watching and listening as we prayed and talked. At length we asked him what he thought about Christ, about us as Christians, about Rufus, about Julian, and about the emperor.

“I normally don't give such things much thought,” he replied. He looked down, then his eyes rose to again meet ours. “I hate Rufus. I hate the Empire and its pompousness. Anyone and anything that defies it, as you do, I admire. Yet I could never say such or I would lose not only my pittance

of a wage, but my life.—As you two no doubt will.”

“Is a life devoid of meaning, and lived in cowardice, so desirable to hold on to?” Leo inquired.

There, locked in that little room awaiting our fate, we found and rescued one more lost sheep.



Later the next day, I was surprised when Julian entered my chambers, a few pounds thinner, but looking every bit his normal self. He glanced at Leo, and then ordered the guard to escort him out so that he could speak with me alone.

First he informed me of his duty as a Roman to have me arrested and tried as a traitor.

“You may think me heartless, as many do, but I am not. I am resolved, knowing that you are my daughter and how much my dear wife loves you, to attempt to have you spared. If it was up to me now, I would leave you be. You have done no harm to my household, and have in fact brought improvements—my wife’s new-found health of mind being the most notable.

“However, since others have discovered your faith, I cannot keep it a secret in my own house. Rufus’ craftiness is a trait I have cultivated in him, but which now I fear will be used against me.

“I am afraid there is no hope of sparing your...” He struggled to find the word to describe Leo, for he could see I loved him. “I, as a father, would not have chosen this man for you, but as a man of passion myself, I can respect your attachment. However, he will surely be tried and sentenced, but you have but to stand before the courts and testify that you are not a Christian, and I will vouch for you, sealing your safety.”

“If it were a matter of betraying my lover to save my life,” I softly said, “I could never do even that much. Yet, all the more so, I could never betray nor deny My heavenly Lord, and Friend, to save my earthly life that is but a passing cloud in the sky of eternity.”

“Marina, as a father, as a man with a heart, as a man who loves his wife and seeks her happiness, I beg you to reconsider. I will come again tomorrow.”

“You are welcome to come again, but if you wait for me to reconsider, you waste your time. Christ is my life, and without Him there is no life. Consider your own emptiness and sorrow. Do you yourself not long for the love and freedom that you see in my eyes, in my mother’s or even in your own wife’s eyes? You, sir, are the one who must reconsider.”

He said nothing and left.



“So, my lord, have you decided what to do with the Christians?”

At the sound of Rufus' voice outside on the pathway, I ran to the window and watched. Five days had passed, and he had encountered Julian leaving for the Senate.

"Keep the servant girl and the young man in their chambers, until I have decided what to do," Julian replied.

"Forgive me for saying so, Master," said Rufus, "but it's obvious what is to be done. They are to be arrested and tried as traitors!"

"Perhaps so, my good man. It is a matter of timing, though. We of the Court and the Senate understand these things."

Rufus was not easily patronized. "Very well, my lord. If, however, no action is taken against these traitors within three days, I will have to arrest them myself, even if I risk being expelled from your service and pay."

"Don't be rash, young man. Trust my judgment."

"I do, sir, but I am bound by duty to the Empire."

"Very well, I shall double your pay, and have you arrest the boy," Julian said wearily. "Then you will leave off chasing the girl."

"I will do no such thing, my lord. I would sooner call you yourself up before the Senate as a traitor—and you know I have ample proof to do so."

It seemed that Julian felt powerless for the first time in his life. Had he never

been threatened before? Had he never had a secret in his life laid so bare, putting him at another's mercy? Had he never before encountered a man so hungry to maintain his honor and pride that he would not accept payment as a substitute?

I assumed Julian was at least comforted in knowing that Aemilia's conversion was still a secret, for neither Leo nor I would expose her, yet it was apparent to me that his options were running out.

"You may officially place the girl and boy under house arrest," he finally said with a note of heaviness. "I will arrange for them to be brought to trial on the morrow."



## Chapter Fifteen: The Trial

**T**he next day, Leo and I were brought before the magistrate. As usual, when scandal touched the houses of the powerful, news of the trial had spread quickly, and a large crowd had gathered within the court, and a yet larger throng outside. Prefect Claudius, a sturdy, thin-faced man, entered the hall and sat in his throne-like chair.

The court scribe read the usual accusations against us as Christians and traitors, then Claudius called the prime—and only—witness.

“Rufus, chief guard of Lord Julian’s estate, come forward.”

With a smug expression, Rufus boasted to all of how he had tracked down a man who had been sought after as a run-away slave-criminal (by now he’d figured out some of Leo’s past) for many years.

“...Now, to add to his lengthy list of crimes worthy of punishment, this corrupt man has turned to the false God of Christianity, making him a traitor to Rome, for he refuses to accept the divinity of our emperor, whom we as loyal subjects must all serve. If all his other crimes were not enough to sentence him, surely this merits his death.”

“What have you to say to defend yourself, young man?” Claudius demanded. I sensed in his voice that he had condemned a Christian too many times.

“I did indeed, in the past, run away from a hopeless existence of slavery, and made an unrespectable life for myself, taking innocent people—children, youths, women—away from their families and selling them as slaves to help fill the greedy lusts of Roman nobles. To this charge I must plead guilty.”

“Is that all?” Claudius inquired after a pause.

“No, it is not. During my marauding years, I met the woman who stands beside me, and she turned me from my life of crime. She instilled in me a respect for humanity, a desire to serve and help oth-

ers, rather than merely using them to my own ends. For a year now, I have done nothing worthy of being brought before this court. I have long abandoned my former life, which I will be the first to admit was immoral.”

“That is preposterous!” interjected Rufus. “To escape from your punishment because you’ve ‘changed’? And even if so, what have you to say of your Christian faith?”

“Good Rufus, I am the one who questions the prisoners,” said Claudius. “What have you to say, Leonius, to the charges of being Christian?”

“My Christian faith has made me a new man, a better man. No longer violently rebelling against authority and stirring up trouble and strife among my fellow citizens, I live a peaceful and simple life. I have not harmed or offended anyone that I know of.”

“You offend *me* with your treacherous words!” Rufus bellowed.

“Calm!” Claudius ordered. “Let us move on. Now soldier, what have you to say of the girl?”

“She is his accomplice. They have met together repeatedly in secret, and knowing of his crimes, how can she not be suspect of the same? Ask her, your vastness—see if she will not admit to her treason.”

Claudius sighed and looked in my direction. “What have you to say for yourself?”

“I would ask my accuser to find anything I have done to prove my disloyalty to my master and mistress, to Roman authority, or to the emperor,” I answered half timidly, half daringly.

Unexpectedly, Lady Aemilia stood up.

“I have somewhat to say,” she said, and all eyes shifted in her direction. “This young woman, Marina, has been my faithful and trustworthy attendant for well over a year. She has served me well, she has been loyal, and I, as a noblewoman of Rome, find no fault in her person or her actions. I would request that she be released.”

Julian stood up beside his wife. “I brought this young woman to trial on the virtue of a report from my trusted guard. However, I would also state that I have seen little today in this courtroom, or in my household in the past year, to convince me of any wrongdoing on her part.”

“She cannot be released if she confesses to being a Christian,” Rufus shouted as his veins bulged and his face reddened. “Ask her, your greatness.”

“Marina, have you ought to confess?”

“A few things, your honor. I confess that I have fallen in love with a man who was once a criminal. I confess that I was his captive, brought by him to the household where I now serve.” Murmurs of surprise ran through the crowd. “I confess that I have at times resented my loss of freedom. Yet I also confess that I have

come to love my lord and lady as if they were my own parents. I confess that I have been a faithful subject and loyal citizen of my country and have done nothing that can prove the contrary.

“I confess too that I am a follower of Christ, the Son of God, and that as much as I love my master and mistress, my father and mother, and as highly as I esteem this court and the rulers of Rome, I esteem the love of Christ and the paradise that awaits me far more than this passing phase we call life.”

Quiet came over the place, and Rufus looked impatiently toward Claudius, who sat brooding.

“Have you not heard enough, your magnitude? Will you not sentence them?”

Claudius motioned for Rufus to be seated, and then called us to step forward.

“Leonius, Marina, I find myself in a quandary. Clearly, you have been good and noble citizens—or at least you have, young lady. However, our laws forbid the spreading of the false teachings of Christianity. Nevertheless, if you both will promise to speak no more of these things, and Julian and Aemilia vouch for you, I will allow you to live. What have you to say to that?”

“Your eminence, you cannot let them go so easily!” Rufus shouted.

Claudius ignored his protest. “Lord Julian, if these two will make such a

promise, will you take the young girl into your custody and watch her to see that she obeys the laws of Rome from this day onward?”

“I would.”

He looked at us, questioning, almost pleading for us to take his offer. Yet how could we?

“I cannot promise to refrain from ever speaking again of the One dearest to me in all the world,” I said softly.

“I, likewise, would rather live but a day on this earth as a Christian than a lifetime without God’s touch in my life,” Leo added.

“Then you have pronounced your own sentences. You will be taken to the Mamertine Prison until the games at the arena a week from now, at which time you will meet your death.”

Lady Aemilia arose again and caused a greater stir.

“If you take her, then I will go as well.”

Julian sprang up to intervene. “Your honor, forgive this outburst. My wife is unwell—she is in fact mad at times! She knows not what she speaks!”

“I am not mad, your honor. I was once, when the emptiness of my life drove me into a rage. Now I am whole, and all because of this girl, and because of her God, who is now my God as well. I cannot stand by and let her reputation be tarnished while mine remains intact, when I

am as much of a believer in those things you call treasonous as she is.”

“The session has ended, the accused have been sentenced. This case is closed!” Claudius shouted nervously, wishing to end this spectacle.

“See them, your grace! See how corrupted our city has become because of these people!” cried Rufus. “One of our finest noblewomen has been seduced and misled. Let us rid ourselves of these pollutants. Let us bring the lady to trial as well, or who knows how far this poison will spread?” Few in the courtroom were supportive, but a few was enough.

Claudius dismissed the court and called Julian and Aemilia toward him. “Julian, Aemilia, I’ve known you for years. I consider you my friends, and my equals. This is madness going on here. I can’t sentence you to die the common death of a Christian servant, Aemilia. Julian, talk some sense into her.”

“I cannot, your honor,” he whispered. “I cannot shake this faith she has, for I have seen what this God has done for my wife. I have seen the power of His Spirit. I have felt the change in me since I was privileged to be in the company of Christians, including this young woman, who is my own illegitimate daughter.”

“Why did you not say so? On the strength of that alone, I am sure I could have found a way to pass a different judgment!”

“Even if I myself confessed to being a Christian?”

“Oh, Julian, you have always been so cunning. What has become of you now? You leave me no choice. Go home, reconsider, and we will meet in court tomorrow to settle this matter.”

“I will not reconsider, Claudius. For I know what I must do. I once, through ignorance, betrayed a young servant named Aurelia, for which I repent. But now I cannot betray my daughter, or the truth of her faith, which I am ready to embrace as my own.”



Seven days later, Leo and I walked hand in hand, with Julian and Aemilia arm in arm behind us, moving bravely toward what those around us who saw only one dimension perceived to be our destruction. But we, and others who knew the truth, realized we were partaking of the ultimate honor of life—being

received in death into the arms of God, making a bold statement to the world of the infinity of truth and the power of love.

While many that day looked on us as defeated or demented, yet more felt the truth of our words. They did not march out to the arena with us, but they carried that faith in their hearts to their homes, friends, families, shops, and courtrooms—until there were more Christians in Rome than there were pagans. We won, little by little, from the inside out, through our faith and fearlessness in the face of death. Through life, and even in death, we knew the meaning of love, loyalty, and liberty.

As we approached the center of the arena, we heard the roars of the lions transformed into a heavenly symphony that not only entered the ears, but the mind, the heart, and every pore of the body. We rose in ecstasy to the land above, the Land of No More Sorrows.

## The End

*Endnote: Before sentence was passed on them, Julian and his wife took care to set their affairs in order. Their main act of contrition was to free Franciscus and Viviana, and then bequeath their entire estate, properties, and wealth, to them.*

*In the years to come, these two faithful believers, with the knowledge and silent consent of Prefect Claudius, operated one of the largest and longest-lasting safe houses in Rome—a place where Christians could meet, rest while passing through the city, or hide in times of trouble.*