



A Whisper of Freedom

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Chapter One

The ominous, glowing eyes of a human face stared up at Sophie from the embossed coin. Ancient treasure lit by harsh lamps and protected by thick glass was a common sight at the museum of art back in Boston—but this was the first piece of priceless history she'd ever held in her hand.

The coin was heavier than she'd imagined and more intricately designed. It warmed her hand with its radiance. The pure, soft, and deep yellow metal had been sought for centuries for its symbolic and real value.

Only the movement of the truck broke her trance. She took one last look at the coin, shuddered slightly, and gave it back to Philip. He glanced at her, his blue eyes resting only a moment on hers before he looked away and slid the coin into his pocket.

Sophie knew there was no turning back. Since she'd arrived in Spain a year ago, there were a dozen times when she could have escaped. But she was in too deep now. She had helped to steal Spain's greatest treasure. She'd turned her back on Michael. She'd put her complete trust in Walt . . . and she'd dragged Philip into the mess. This final adventure would either bring all things right, or ruin everything.

Warm air with a hint of moisture blew through the open window. The sun overhead filtered through the trees, creating patterns of light and shadows on the narrow roadway before them. She rolled up the sleeves of her shirt as far as she could, but sweat still glistened on her skin. She brushed back damp hair from her cheek and scanned the roadside for any sign of life. It seemed important to get her mind off the urgent. To let her worries dissipate the way the dust behind the truck tires settled after they passed.

It was no use. The roar of questions that filled her mind seemed even louder than the noise of the truck engine. And the silence of the man on either side of her told Sophie her concerns were not unique.

She glanced at Philip. His wrinkled brow and tired eyes proved his weariness. Though only inches separated them on the seat of the large cargo truck, the wall of tension seemed too much to penetrate. She whispered a silent prayer that they'd find a safe place to hide their truck for the night—and that she'd have a chance to talk with Philip, to explain her seeming betrayal.

On her other side, Walt, too, was silent as he drove, and Sophie wondered if he was thinking through their options of escape and forming a plan. She hoped so. If anyone could take them to safety and get the gold into the hands of those who would make sure the people of Spain benefited, it would be Walt.

If they succeeded in transporting the gold safely across the borders, to the hands of eager collectors, it meant more funds to buy arms. It meant hope for the battle-weary Republic. But if they were caught with it in Nationalist-held territory, the gold would profit Franco and the Fascists. The treasure had already cost so many so much.

Sophie still worried about Michael. The wound from the blast wasn't something to be taken lightly, and she hoped he'd found a doctor.

But as she thought about Michael, anger overwhelmed her worry. Her mind flashed back to the last time she'd seen him injured—dead, she had thought . . . but in reality faking.

Who would do such a thing? Who would put another person through such pain to save his own skin—or more accurately, his own hunt for treasure?

There was a time she'd believed Michael loved her, but obviously that wasn't the case. If he had, he wouldn't have left her alone in Madrid when she first arrived. He wouldn't have left her fate to the mercy of Nationalist soldiers just hours ago.

The truck's movement over the uneven road jostled Sophie's body between Philip and Walt. The truck bed, laden with the heavy gold, creaked with each jolt.

Sophie took another quick breath of the dusty air as it blew in the window. "I have the strangest, creepy sensation, don't you?" She searched Philip's stoic face. "Maybe it's just that I'm being driven through enemy territory, feeling the creaking of this truck as it carries priceless gold"—she switched her gaze to Walt—"with no idea of how or when we'll make it out of Spain."

Walt cleared his throat and glanced at her for the briefest moment. "Yes, there is danger. But perhaps the sensation is due to something more."

Sophie glanced at Walt's fingers as they tightened around the steering wheel. "What do you mean? All that I'm worried about isn't enough? Is there more danger I should know about?"

Sophie felt Philip tense next to her. He'd been silent most of the trip, but from the way he crossed his arms over his chest and set his chin, she knew he wasn't happy. The worst part was knowing she'd caused his pain.

“People have always felt small in comparison to the great universe,” Walt continued, ignoring Sophie’s question. “They made up legends and myths to make sense of the world—the Greeks with their myths, the Jews with their stories about God. The Aztec nations paid a lot of attention to omens. If the moon was red before a battle, they believed the blood of their enemies would flow. They looked for signs of danger ahead and worried their actions would be displeasing to the gods. I imagine when they saw this gold they felt the same as we do.” Walt sighed. “I can imagine them shuddering with each step, wondering if they were making the right moves.”

“And if they’d be struck down with lightning if they weren’t?” Philip scoffed.

“Or captured before nightfall?” Sophie studied the road ahead intently. A chill moved up her arms, and she wished she hadn’t held the coin or looked into its eyes. “Of course, I don’t believe in omens,” she quickly added. “But if I did, then surely the fact that we outsmarted our enemy is a good sign.”

Philip mumbled something under his breath, then said aloud, “If we are caught, the only reason will be our foolish haste. I can’t believe you didn’t think ahead, Walt—didn’t have a plan for where we’d go with the gold once we got it back.”

As if not hearing him, Walt continued to manhandle the overburdened truck along the narrow mountain road that Sophie was sure wasn’t designed for a load of this size and weight.

Finally he glanced over, looking past Sophie to Philip. “I thought you’d at least thank me for saving your life. You’d be dead, you know, if it weren’t for me.”

Sophie could see both their points. She also knew the determination of both men and decided it best not to take sides.

The road climbed a small hill. “Besides . . .” Walt angrily shifted the truck into a lower gear as the engine lagged. “I wasn’t even sure the plan would work.” His voice was firm. “I’m only one man, and my connections only go so far. Be thankful I was able to figure out which airfield the shipment would leave from. The fact that everything fell into place surprised even me.”

Getting the truck miles from the airfield as soon as possible had been their first priority. With that accomplished, Sophie hoped Walt had plans to stop, rest, get cleaned up, and maybe find something to eat.

His voice interrupted her thoughts. “I see a creek ahead. You ready for a rest stop?”

“Yes, fine. Then we need to talk about a plan.” Philip’s fingers tapped against the door handle.

“I would love to stretch my legs.” Sophie pushed all thoughts of Michael from her mind. That was the last thing she needed to worry about. Michael had left her as he escaped to France, because she’d made a different choice . . . to stay with Philip,

the man she truly loved. And the most important thing was to set things straight with him.

Walt pulled to the side of the road and parked. The truck still took up most of the dusty dirt road, but it didn't seem to matter. They hadn't seen any traffic for the past hour, and Sophie hoped they wouldn't. Though if they were stopped, Walt could likely talk their way out of danger. His quick thinking and persuasive speech never ceased to amaze her.

The men opened their doors and jumped to the ground, stalking away in separate directions. Sophie sighed, looking out at the countryside. In other circumstances she would appreciate the fact that this was one of the most beautiful places she'd seen in all of Spain. The narrow road had been cut through a valley where rolling hills met. Trees covered the hills, and sharp mountain peaks rose on either side.

As she climbed out of the truck she noticed white and purple wildflowers dotting the grassy fields next to a burbling creek. Beautiful—a perfect place to set up her easel and pull out her brushes. But she had neither—only the few items left in her satchel. Besides, those things almost seemed to belong to some other girl in another life. She had more challenging things to worry about.

The way Walt and Philip swung their arms and stomped away reminded Sophie of two boys who'd just been pulled apart from a playground fistfight. They noticed neither the mountain vista nor the wildflowers they tromped beneath their feet.

Philip walked briskly into a field and then stopped, as if realizing he wasn't in a hurry after all. Sophie quietly followed him. She had to defend her actions, had to make him understand why it had been so important to return to Michael, why she'd turned and walked away from Philip at the train station in Madrid three days ago.

She ran a hand through her hair. Had it only been three days? A lifetime of travel and betrayal had taken place since then.

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The ground in the meadow was softer than the hard dirt on the road's surface, slowing Philip's agitated pace a bit. His head ached, mostly due to a lack of food and sleep over the last three days when he'd been held by Michael's men. Sleeping while tied to a hard wooden chair wasn't the easiest thing to accomplish. And he'd hardly eaten any of the food brought to him. Not that he wasn't hungry. The idea of being dependent on his captors—of needing them for food, water . . . life . . . disgusted him. He hated being helpless, and they reveled in that very thing.

He glanced back over his shoulder and noticed Sophie jumping down from the truck and heading his direction. He should have figured she would follow him. Anger stirred in his chest. Not just at her, but at Michael. Before last week, Michael

had been only a name, a foreboding presence. From the moment Philip first saw Sophie, he had seen the pain in her eyes. Then the man who'd hurt her turned up in the flesh.

Philip replayed the moment at the train station once again. Michael at Sophie's side. Tall, handsome, walking with a commanding presence. He had placed a protective hand on Sophie's back as they moved through the jostling crowd. Philip instantly hated him—and immediately understood him. Maybe it was because if the roles had been reversed, Philip knew he might have done the same thing. He would have hurt Sophie's heart in an effort to save her life. And he would have tried to prove himself again to win her back.

It was hard enough seeing Michael with Sophie. It was even worse when the man walked into the small room where Cesar, Michael's bodyguard, held Philip. Michael tossed an orange back and forth between his hands. He didn't look cruel. In fact, he'd approached with gentle steps. "Untie him. We need to talk."

At first Cesar had refused, but Michael didn't give him a choice.

"I want to know the whole story. I want to know when you met Sophie. Tell me how close you are."

And for some reason, Philip complied. He told Michael about the accident on the battlefield and how he'd been assigned as Sophie's protector as she painted at the field hospital.

Michael listened intently, then nodded. "It seems we love the same woman. And that is no fault of ours. The problem is that I hurt her. And I'm afraid she'll never be able to forgive me." He pulled up a chair and settled across from Philip. "I'm sure that if you've been with her, you know what I did."

Philip jutted out his chin, knowing that if he angered Michael it could mean his death. He didn't care. "You betrayed her. You staged your own death. You abandoned her. And you hoped she'd leave Spain."

"Yes, I did. And now I regret it. I would kill you, but I've hurt her enough." Michael rose and strode away.

Philip hated himself because he understood. He tried to sleep that night, sitting tied to the chair, and the next. Instead, he couldn't stop thinking of what he would have done if he'd been in Michael's position.

Michael was a thief and a liar, yet it also was possible he loved Sophie—or at least thought he did. Philip tried to imagine if the roles were reversed, and he believed that the only way to save Sophie was to fake his death. She was determined and often let her heart lead over her common sense. She'd do anything to protect a friend. Anything to protect those she loved. In fact, she put herself into dangerous situations time and time again in hopes of furthering a cause.

Maybe Michael knew what Philip now realized—it took a lot to get Sophie to back down. Michael had deceived many for his own gain, but the more he thought about it, the more Philip understood his actions.

In the end Philip concluded that he'd do the same. And he hated himself because of that. He also realized that though he grumbled at Walt because of their predicament, the thing he was maddest at was his own heart.

Because deep down Philip worried whether Sophie might still love Michael as much as Michael obviously cared for her. And Philip wondered where he fit in. The answer to that question mattered far more to him than the fate of the gold.

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Sophie fixed her eyes on the grassy meadow, breathing in the scents of warm grass and sunshine. A small blue butterfly danced from flower to flower ahead of her, as if leading the way.

She watched as Philip scanned the poppy-dotted hillside, but she could tell from his set jaw and sad eyes that he really didn't see it. He glanced at her and sighed, fixing his light blue eyes on hers.

His look ripped at her heart, and more than anything she wanted him to open his arms to her and tell her everything would be okay. Instead they hung limply at his sides.

She had a lot of explaining to do. It wasn't just that they'd been apart for a month, but that she'd spent that month with the first man she'd ever loved. A man she still worried about despite all he'd done to hurt her.

“Philip, I'd like to try to make you understand.”

“Yes, please do.”

She took a step closer. “I'm so sorry you got involved in all this. I don't even want to think about the things that must be going through your mind. . . .”

He offered her a half smile, but it didn't hide the confusion in his gaze. “Well, I was praying that I'd get to see you again. I guess my dad was right—you'd better watch what you pray for.” He subconsciously rubbed his wrists, chafed raw from the ropes that had held him prisoner.

She wanted to touch him, to sooth his wounds. Instead she plucked a tall piece of grass and twirled it in her fingers, finding it easier to focus on her own hands than to risk his gaze. “I suppose God is in control. It's just that at times like this it's hard to see how.”

“Or why,” Philip added. “Why did I get pulled into this mess?”

Sophie frowned, hoping by mess he didn’t mean her.

“I can’t go back now, Sophie—fighting with the brigade. They already accused me of being a traitor once. It was because of one man’s kindness that I was given a chance to try again. If I told them I was captured, kidnapped, and taken to Fascist territory by men who wanted to steal some gold coins, no one would believe me. It sounds ridiculous to my own ears.

“It’s not as if I ever planned on being here. Or planned on not being able to leave. I thought I’d done the right thing by volunteering to fight with the International Brigades, but every time I try I fail. I didn’t sign up for this, and now . . . now I’d just rather be on the first ship out of here.”

“You’re right. You came to Spain for one thing and got another.” She glanced back over her shoulder toward the truck. “More than you imagined, I’m sure. Yet I think there’s a reason you’re here, Philip. Why our paths crossed near Madrid. I need you.” She hurriedly continued. “Walt needs you too, even though he might not act like it.”

Sophie’s mind turned to something that had comforted her when she was still with Michael and didn’t know what to do or where to turn. Something that was more reassuring to ponder than omens and being captured.

“Maybe God knew our hearts, and how tender they would be for the people here.” She spoke quickly, firmly, but deep down it was as if she were trying to convince herself. “It’s an honor, if you think of it, to be trusted with so much. It kind of reminds me of how Jesus’ mother must have felt—overwhelmed with the responsibility of such treasure given to her, yet in a way thankful that God would put her in His plan. Not that this gold can in any way be compared with God’s Son . . . or our cause as worthy as His, but you know what I mean. I don’t think it’s any accident that we ended up in Spain, or that we are now in control of this treasure.”

“I see. I should accept everything that’s happened . . . and be grateful?” His eyes narrowed. “Just accept it as God’s will? I’m still getting used to the idea, but you’ve had a lot more time to think about it.” He turned his head. “Time to think about the gold, I mean.”

“Yeah, well, those last days with Mi—” Sophie caught herself. “I went back because Walt asked me to. He told me that finding the gold could help the people of Spain. I didn’t realize how long it would take. More than that, I never expected to see you at the train station. Never expected you to see Michael and me together. I never wanted to hurt you like that.”

Philip’s eyes darted to hers. They narrowed, and his look jabbed at her heart.

She wished he would say something. That he’d yell at her or confess his hurt. Anything would be better than this mute anger. Suddenly a new fear crept out from her darkened mood. What if they couldn’t get past this? What if he couldn’t forgive

her? She searched his eyes for a hint of the affection he'd once shown. The comfort he'd given her when she had no one else to turn to.

"I have thought a lot about it. The gold, that is," she said. "And I think that it's worth it. If my actions can make a difference for the people of Spain, it will be worth all the hardship I have to face. But I never intended to hurt you."

Sophie turned and walked back toward the truck, hoping Philip hadn't seen the tears pooling in her eyes. She saw Walt coming around the side of the truck and moved in his direction, certain that she'd abandoned whatever budding relationship she'd had with Philip the moment she'd allowed Michael's arms to embrace her at the train in Guernica.

"Time to head out," Walt called. "We don't know how long it will take Michael and his friends to figure out they've been duped. The farther we can get from the airfield, the better."

"Do you know yet where we're going?" Philip asked him.

From the look in his eyes, Sophie could see Walt didn't.

"Not exactly, but I believe we're heading in the right direction. This back road is working for now. It has little traffic and plenty of tree cover to hide us from the sky."

"Do you think they'll send out a plane to find us?" Sophie scanned the sky.

Philip answered for Walt. "I'm sure they'll use whatever resources they have. It's not like they'll just shrug their shoulders and let us get away with this."

Walt shook his head. "I'm not sure how quickly they can pull together people to search for us. Our advantage is that Michael trusts very few people."

He opened the passenger door for Sophie and helped her inside.

"Everyone who did Michael's bidding did so by his trickery. Even the men who drove the trucks carrying the stolen gold knew nothing of the cargo. They were paid off and are living handsomely somewhere far away from the front lines."

"But this road will take us to safety, right?" Sophie found her spot in the seat and was soon sandwiched between the men.

Two doors slammed shut, and Walt started the engine.

"Well, it's not the most direct route, but it's taking us away from the seat of Nationalist control . . . and toward our best option. I think our best chance is to try to make it to Barcelona. I have good contacts there. I know we can get the gold out through their ports, but in any town closer . . . I'm uncertain what type of help we can get."