

Love Over Power

A Medieval Mystery



Jessica Dumas

Copyright Page

Copyright © 2019 Jessica Dumas

All rights reserved.

Cover Designed by Jessica Dumas.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Where Am I?	1
Chapter 2: Valencia Castle.....	5
Chapter 3: The Red Flag	10
Chapter 4: Sabina.....	13
Chapter 5: The Forest People	20
Chapter 6: Unwanted Answers	26
Chapter 7: Fight with Pissarro	33
Chapter 8: Ber and Friends.....	39
Chapter 9: Drake.....	47
Chapter 10: Ramos.....	56
Chapter 11: Madera	61
Chapter 12: King Roland	66
Chapter 13: The Twins	72
Chapter 14: A Banished Queen.....	77
Chapter 15: Princess Ella	86
Chapter 16: Kidnapped Again.....	90
Chapter 17: Jousting with Gutierrez	95
Chapter 18: Plans for Madera	101
Chapter 19: Madera Celebration.....	107
Chapter 20: Raven Races.....	114
Chapter 21: Ambassador Ursula	124
Chapter 22: Revenge or Not?	131
Chapter 23: The Plan of Attack	137
Chapter 24: Final Assault.....	142
Chapter 25: The Winner	148

Characters

- Prince Roland III, Prince of the Madera Castle and Kingdom, son of King Roland II; goes by Rojo (means red in Spanish and given to him by his friends for all the red blood he spilled)
- Sabina, wife of Rojo and Princess of Madera
- King Roland II, King of the Madera Kingdom that includes the forest people; crest is a blue roaring lion on a gold shield with two swords behind it and the flag of Spain under it
- Anniah Rangler, former Queen of Madera, banished for falling for a commoner and marrying him
- King Fernandez, King of the Valencia Castle and Valencia Kingdom that neighbors Madera
- Drake, brother of Sabina, brother-in-law of Rojo
- Pissarro, cruel leader of the forest people who live in the forest at the far end of the Madera Kingdom
- Bernardo or Ber for short, from the Madera forest
- Queen Anna, maternal grandmother of Rojo, mother of Anniah, wife of King Calvin
- King Calvin of Valdez, maternal grandfather of Rojo
- Princess Agnes, sister to Anniah Rangler
- Princess Ella, from Castle Falcon, Rojo meets while traveling to see his mother
- Queen Isabel of Falcon, mother of Ella
- King Hernando of Falcon, father of Ella
- Ethan, Rojo's half-brother, son of Rojo's mother
- Beverly, Rojo's half-sister, daughter of Rojo's mother
- Ursula, from the Madera forest village of Mariposa
- Pedro, from the Madera forest village of Mariposa
- Gutierrez, renegade soldier from the Land of the Red Serpent near the sea

The Location



Chapter 1: Where Am I?



Chapter 1: Where Am I?

As I stir from what must have been a deep sleep, I feel a chill run up my spine. I am not sure if I am dreaming or dead. Could this be the afterlife? My whole body feels numb or frozen. I try to open my eyes slowly. I see nothing but darkness. My eyes are having a hard time staying open. It feels like there is dirt or sand in them.

Motionless, I realize I am lying flat on the ground face down in the darkness. My hands are dug into the earth's dirt as if I had slid into my prone position. I ease my head up to try and observe my surroundings when a sharp pain shoots through the back of my head. I let out a long groan.

I reach up to get a feel of my head and once my hand returns to my view, it is covered with something warm and dark. Could it be blood? I put my hand to my nose and get a slight sniff of iron confirming that I am bleeding. I am bewildered as to how this happened. Did I fall? Did someone strike me with something?

I try to look around, but my vision is too blurry to see far. I can see some of the ground around me and reach out to touch the dark substance. I let out a gasp as I realize I am lying in a small puddle of my own blood!

It feels somewhat sticky which means I have been here for a while. I am sure it is coming from the back of my head. I am puzzled and cannot imagine how this could have happened.

I feel a cool breeze blowing into my face as it dries the blood drops that have spilled over upon my face. Even though my vision is slightly blurry, I look to the sky and notice it is dark with gloomy clouds in the distance and a sliver of moon peeking out from the clouds. I want to get up, but my body is not complying as I try to roll over on my back.

I must tell myself to get moving and I am finally able to roll to a sitting position. As I dust off my hands, I take a good look at myself, or at least I try in the dim light. My clothing is torn, leaving my body exposed to the windy breeze.

As my eyes adjust to the lack of light, I can make out that the land around me appears to be destroyed as if burned by spreading fires. Dark colored dirt and rocks, scattered a slight distance from one another, is all that I can make out of the landscape. I feel as if I am on a battlefield that is desolate with no dead bodies.

I sit there for a moment to gather my thoughts when I realize something horrible. I do not remember where I am from or what country I am in. My memory is gone! I try to remember something about myself when I realize I do not even know my name!

Questions are pouring out of my brain. How did I get to lay here in this deserted place? What kind of work do I do? Who is my family? It all leaves me in a curious confusion, anxiously trembling and worried, frightened like a lost child.

I take to my feet slowly, moving as if I were a man who has aged into his nineties. My muscles ache as if I had been fighting. It feels like I have been doing combat. My vision begins to clear so turning around and around, I look for a direction of travel or some means of understanding of what I should do.

My heart begins to pound with strength, and I feel like I want to weep but I must pull myself together to decide as to what I need to do. Where is my home? How far away is it? All my questions are making me dizzy. Perhaps I should lay back down and rest until I feel better. It sounded good but I must figure out who I am and where my home could be.

On the far horizon I could see mountains that appear dead and dark. Not far from the mountains, off to the right, is a forest with deep shadows and the dark sky makes it look very mysterious. My first decision on the direction to take shall not be towards those mountains or that forest, for neither appear to be a wise choice. The wind picks up strength on my back, so I turn to face it once more. It feels cooler now and gives me the push I need to meet whatever challenges lie ahead.

Appearing in the distance is a dark structure that seems to be swallowed in loneliness. I am too far away to see any signs of life

around it. But there was something enticing about it. I get a rushed feeling through my veins. I feel pulled towards it, as if destined to be there.

I lower my head and shake it in disagreement with myself. My gut is telling me that if I go there, close to where I was perhaps meant to die, there will be trouble. But I cannot resist the urge within me to find out why I need to go there. I begin to walk, groaning with every step as I limp along.

I begin to wonder about how I got to this place. My appearance tells me it must have been a long journey. My clothing is dirty, and my body is weak and bruised. I have a headache that makes my head feel heavy, causing me to walk in a disoriented manner.

The blood and sharp head pain give the indication that I had been hit over the head and perhaps left to die. Or maybe I am a traveler who had fallen and bumped my head. No matter, either way I have nothing to lead me. Every step I took, however, strengthens my body as I walk off the pain and stiffness.

While I walk, I am thinking fast and furiously trying to get answers. I check myself for personal possessions. The only items I find is an empty pouch that is wrapped around my waist, an empty sword sleeve upon my back, an empty smaller dagger sleeve upon my waist, and the tattered clothing upon my body.

I must have been robbed. I have no sorrow for losing any possessions since I do not remember having them, but I still feel the pull of the dark place ahead as if my destiny awaits me there.

My stomach reminds me that I am alive as the hunger pangs begin to consume me. I am unsure of how long I had been passed out on the ground, but I certainly have built up quite the appetite. My mouth is dry when I swallow. It feels as if I still have a mouthful of sand. I only hope there is food where I am going, but it looks doubtful.

Chapter 2: Valencia Castle



Chapter 2: Valencia Castle

As I stare at the huge dark fortress, I begin to see the outline more clearly and realize that it is a castle. Why am I being drawn to a castle? I begin to search my mind for any tidbit of information about a castle but then get so frustrated that I blurt out some swear words.

It seems as if I have been used to swearing and I wonder if that is a good thing or not. I am wondering that because I find that I have some childhood memories of being told not to use those words. But I then contemplate...who was it that told me that?

I finally make my way to the castle outskirts. There is no sign of life anywhere. Apart from the wind, I cannot hear a thing. A moat divides me from the grounds of the castle. From where I stand, I cannot see the entrance to the castle, nor a bridge to cross the moat. The wall of the castle is black as if the walls had been burned. The water of the moat looks clean and untainted. It is not clear to the bottom, so I assume it is deep.

The water looks so inviting, I decide that the need to quench my thirst must be met. But at the same time my cautious feeling tells me to test the waters first by kicking dirt in it followed by a rock or two. As I kick and toss the rocks, no movement comes from under the water, so I feel it is safe to enter.

I remove my pouch from my waist, drop my dagger and sword sleeves, and remove all the articles of clothing except for one piece of under clothing. The water is cold to the touch taking my breath away, but I quickly get used to it as I take a big gulp of water.

I splash around for a while as I satisfy my thirst and clean the blood off my head. I begin to feel rejuvenated, lying back in the water floating around. In the mist of cleaning my wounds and relaxing, I conjure up a smile for the first time since I awoke in this deserted place.

My smile suddenly changes to a startled yell as a thunderbolt of lightning strikes above. The dark clouds begin to release water,

raining down on me. I sigh, upset by the weather change interrupting my bath but then begin to swim back to the shore of the moat to get my clothing and hoping to get into the castle to find warm shelter.

Suddenly, I feel a wave of movement coming from beneath the murky water. Before I can get the chance to ask myself what that could be, a big splash of water springs up from behind me and surges up from the deep. As if aroused from the dead, I see a large snake-like creature. I did not have to think as my body starts to swim away from the creature toward the shore where I left my clothing. Before I get too far, the tail of this creature wraps around my left ankle and quickly lifts me out of the water.

Hanging upside-down, it swings me from side to side as if it were just taunting or torturing me. My head begins to feel light, my heart is racing, but for some reason, I am not afraid of this creature. It seems to want to eat me, bringing me closer and closer to its mouth of its dragon-shaped head.

Rumbling roars blow hot air out from the creature's mouth. It is the kind of sound that could make an unborn child cry. The saliva from its mouth coats me ruining the clean wash I just had, which really upsets me. Its tail whips back and forth once again, this time flinging me to the shore. I land face down into the dirt yelling out in pain.

Anger fills my body. I punch the dirt and quickly jump to my feet. I look around for a weapon. As my eyes are to the ground, the creature's tail breaks through the wind, creating a loud whistling sound, and smacks me across the face. Dazed I drop to the ground once again. The creature's blows open new wounds and I begin to bleed again. I am dazed but must gather myself together and get back on my feet.

Just before I come to a complete stance, I notice a good-sized rock on the ground just a short distance away. I look to the creature for the perfect time to dash to get the rock. The creature's tail whips at me again. I roll to the ground in the direction of the rock, dodging the creature's tail. I grab the rock and look to the creature

for a target. With all the rumbling coming from its mouth, I figure my best bet is to throw the rock into its mouth and hope it chokes.

The tail swings at me again but I dive to the ground avoiding another whipping. As soon as the tail passes, I jump to my feet, take a throwing stance, and let it rip with all my strength. The rock lands right on target into the depths of this creature's throat. A silence overcomes the creature as its eyes begin to water. Then I hear a weeping sound coming from the little space of air left in its throat to breathe. As I anticipate it falling before me, the creature dives under the water.

I wait to see if the creature is going to return from the waters but after some time has passed, I realize it is not coming back up. It is either dead or has built up a fear of me. Either way, I let out a sigh of relief, glad it has not come back. I am exhausted again but begin to put my clothing and empty pouch items back on. As much as I would like to clean my wounds, I am not going to get back into the moat.

I decide to walk around the castle hoping to find the entrance but keep my distance from the moat. Feeling as if the creature was some kind of omen, I plan to be a little more cautious from now on. My old wounds are bleeding from their scars and the new ones inflicted by the creature are raw and oozing profusely. The sight of my own blood and the overwhelming pain has me feeling dizzy again.

Still creeping around the moat, I come to what appears to be the front of the castle. I see the bridge to cross into the castle, or what is left of it. The bridge, from what I can see, is falling apart. There is still no sign of life. The silence tells me that this castle has been abandoned. As I walk, the surface of the ground gets smoother and seems to be solid, as if it were once paved in stone. My limping becomes more obvious now as I can hear my footsteps.

Just near the damaged bridge I see a large rock that I could sit on. If only I can make my way to the rock and take a rest. I get to the rock and sit down with a sigh of relief. I do not feel like I have ever been so relieved to rest. I have a good view of the front gate

that leads into this castle. The castle may have had its time of beauty, but now it appears to be ruined.

Every rock that made up the front wall was dark colored, as if they had been burnt, and slightly covered with aged vines that wind up from the moat. The gate is ten times my height and may have been strong at one time, but now it seems as if the elements have taken a toll and weakened its hinges so that the gate is hanging wide open. I could see clear into the courtyard, and still no sign of life.

While looking over the castle, I get the weird feeling that I have been here before. Many loophole openings covered the castle's front wall. To my right, hanging from the lower level is a red flag waving in the wind. My attention is now really drawn to this flag as it seems out of place. This castle looks like it has been abandoned for many years, yet this flag looks new. It makes me anxious to get on the inside of the castle.

I stand up and begin to make my way across the bridge. I get to the open gates and my first objective is to find that room in which that red flag waved in the wind. As I proceed, once again my heart is pounding, and my head is getting light. I begin to feel nervous. I feel like a coward, ready to turn back, yet I am unable to turn back. I do not want to be here, but I must find that red flag. For some unknown reason, I feel that somehow it holds the key to who I am.

Chapter 3: The Red Flag



Chapter 3: The Red Flag

As my feet carry me into the castle my mind begins to wander, as if in a trance. My surroundings are changing. I stop walking. I feel trapped in place. I now stand in a room lit only by a single candle held by a strange man standing in front of me. I have no idea what just happened or who this man could be. I am now in a large room, like a study or library, filled with books. I stare at the man.

He could only be described as royalty. Maybe he is the king of the castle. His shoulders are broad filling his uniform that is full of colors, mostly of blue and gold. Draped behind him is a cape that attaches to his royal armor. His face is covered in white facial hair matching the hair flowing down from his neck. It gives him the look of a great man at a wise age. He places his hand upon my shoulder, looks me in my eyes, and speaks to me in a stern tone. "You must decide before it is too late."

Just as quickly as he appeared, he disappears making me feel like I have been abandoned somehow. The vision fades even though I could still hear the words the man said inside my head. It seems like more than just a vision. Could it be a memory? Or maybe I am delusional due to heat stroke or the creature's spit. I shake my head, trying to clear it so I can continue forward.

I arrive into a large open area. I must be in the courtyard of the castle. What may have been a great merchant area is now nothing but a destroyed area of broken stands and ruins. The central water fountain had run dry and every tree is broken or burnt. A great statue lay broken in half on the ground before me. The great statue resembled a middle-aged man in what could have been the prime of his leadership. The statue is dressed in armor and represents either the king or the castle's greatest warrior.

These visions must be trying to tell me something. Maybe my mind is trying to remind me of who I am. I drop to my knees. My head gets light again. Maybe it is just the lack of food. I slide down to the floor because I feel like I may faint, but I know I must get to my feet again to find out what is going on. After a moment, I look

to my right and notice a door. As I get to my feet, I feel this may be the entrance to where to find that red scarf or flag. I proceed to walk toward the door. It is made of damaged wood that barely holds itself together. It appears as if someone had tried to break it down with an axe.

I get to the door and open it. On the other side of door is a lengthy and dark hallway. There are doors to my left and right all the way to the end of the hallway. The only light in the hallway is from a door, farthest from me, at end of the hallway. It is just enough light to show me the entire hallway as I walk.

I am wishing now that I had counted the loopholes and windows from the outside of the castle, so I would know which door to go into to find the red flag. But a gut feeling or maybe the obvious says that the door at the end of the hallway, where the light is coming from, is where I will find that flag blowing in the wind. I take a deep breath and proceed with caution.

Quietly stepping past every door, my heart beats faster and faster. I can feel the blood passing through my heart with every beat. Every step I take builds up the climax that something is in this room. I finally arrive at the door and look in. The door has been knocked down and laid out before me. It looks like someone has forcefully entered the room.

The room is lit by burning torches stationed on the walls around the room. To my left I could see only a bed and small table next to it. The bed looks slept in for the sheets are not secured to the bed and partially hanging to the floor. As I take a closer look, I notice someone lying face down on the floor next to the bed.

I am surprised to see it is a woman. I cannot see her face, for her back is to me and she is in a fetal position. Her blond hair is long and undone. She is motionless and appears to be dead. I look up to the only window in the room. There is the red flag tied to what was left of the broken glass wedged into the windowpane.

Chapter 4:

Sabina



Chapter 4: Sabina

My attention is drawn back on the woman on the floor. My curiosity is not satisfied. I need to see her face. I approach her slowly to stand over her wondering who she may be. I kneel and reach to roll her towards me, so that I can get a look at her face. As my hand touches her side, she cries out in a gut-wrenching scream.

The shock of her scream makes me fall back. She quickly rolls and crawls away from me the best she can as she tosses her hair around, so she can clear it from her eyes. She is shaking in terror as if afraid I was going to hurt her. Her wrists are tied with rope in front of her, making it hard to maneuver her awfully long blond hair. In amazement I sit there watching her wondering if this beautiful woman is real or just another vision. Is she the woman from my previous vision?

When she can turn her head toward me, she fixes her eyes upon me and whispers, "Rojo?" I wonder if she is asking for something. I do not know how to answer her. Then she says it again in a way that makes me realize that she is saying a name as if she knows me. Could this really be? My face lit up in shock and surprise. I asked her in an anxious voice, "Do you know me?" Is that my name?

Her beautiful face turns to confusion. She lowers her head as if she is about to weep. I quickly crawl over to her and lift her chin to regain her eye contact. "Do you know me?" I repeat. "Yes Rojo, but you don't remember me." She says with sadness. As I begin to remove the rope, I reply, "No, should I?"

Her voice is in sobs as she begins to weep, and with a confused look she asks, "Why don't you remember? What happened to you? We were being held here by that evil man. We were lying here and suddenly, some men bashed in our door and carried you off." I was surprised to hear that I was here with her in this bed. I tried to explain, "All I know is that I awoke a short distance away from this castle with no memory of who I am or what I was doing out there. What am I doing here and where are the people of this castle?"

After the ropes were cut and her hands were free, she reaches up and places her hands on the sides of my cheeks looking straight into my eyes pleading. "Surely you must remember me. It is I, Sabina. You love me, and I love you." With a sad tone I say, "I do not remember you and I don't remember anything else. I believe every one of your words is true and sincere for your beauty right now gives me comfort."

Sabina reaches toward me with a loving expression, but suddenly her face changes to fear and anxiety as if she has remembered something terrifying. "We need to get out of here now. Gutierrez's men are here, and they will kill us." I am extremely confused by what she is saying and want to know who the person is with the name I do not recognize.

But before I can ask, she tells me, "Lying near that wall over there is your sword. Get it and let us leave before it is too late." "Alright, but who is Gutierrez?" I ask. A little upset with my question she urgently replies, "I will explain everything to you but right now we have to get out of here."

I help her to her feet and quickly go over to pick up the sword. The sword she had asked me to grab lay near the fireplace close to the door I had entered. As I pick it up, I see its shining beauty. It looks freshly polished.

The handle is designed to resemble a lion's head made of royal blue stone, with the mouth of the lion open in a roar. I wondered if the lion was a symbol that was part of my family crest. Swords are usually made to match the family crest, so it would make sense if that was the case. I slide it into the empty sleeve I have been carrying with me. It fit perfectly.

I take Sabina's hand and move toward the door. But then I stop and turn around, "Wait!" I had to go back to get that red flag upon the window's glass. Without much effort, it comes free and I wrap it around my waist as I run back to Sabina. I take her hand again, and then proceed to exit the door. Outside the door we run quickly down the hall and as soon as we get halfway down the hallway, the

door that opens to the courtyard flings open and there stands a man.

He appears to be a soldier of an army by the way he was dressed. When we get close enough for him to see us better, his face gives to shock. He draws his sword and runs at me as in combat. I draw my sword in defense and take a stance that seems natural. It is apparent that something is coming back to me. I can use this sword and use it well. I block his first blow. He attacks offensively and before long he is defending himself from my returning blows.

In just a few short swings of my own sword, I counter his attack and strike him across his chest. His armor protects the blow. He swings back. I raise my sword to block him, but it knocks me back to the ground. He then raises his sword in a stabbing style and before he can bring the sword down to pierce me, Sabina jumps on him. She yells, "Get away from him!" He pushes her off and she falls to the ground.

Without hesitation he drives his sword toward her as she tries to get away. Then his sword pierces her stomach as she screams out in great pain. I yell, "NO!" I need this woman! She is my only connection to who I am. If she dies, all will be lost. With anger I jump to my feet and attack him once again. Our swords clang as the knife points make contact. My body moves swifter than before. I cut at his sword arm disarming him. I then grab him around the neck and start choking him. He tries struggling but I keep pressing on his throat until his body drops limply to the floor.

I did not bother to catch my breath. Instead, I quickly move to assist Sabina. I let my sword go and place my hands beneath her to hold her up. "Sabina, are you alright?" I asked with true concern. "I love you, Rojo. If you do not remember anything, remember me please. Tell the twins I love them forever. I love you so much and I know you will someday remember us."

She snatches a locket from around her neck and hands it to me. She gasps for her last breath of air as she goes limp in my arms. I yell, "No, you can't die." I shake her trying to bring her back. Even though I just met her, I feel like I have known her a long time. I

wonder if she really loved me. I open the locket that she had handed me. Inside is inscribed, "Love Over Power – Rojo."

Even though I am lost in thought, I do not fail to recognize the sounds of footsteps above me. I do not have time to grieve, so I pick up her body and fling it over my shoulder. I reach down for my sword and run to the door. Just outside the door I see the soldier's horse. I sleeve my sword and throw Sabina's body up on the horse's back. I mount up and place her body in front of me.

Even though I am not confident of my riding abilities, I signal the horse to move in swiftness and head back toward the entrance of the castle. I ride past the weeping great statue and out the gate. I gather the horse's speed and ride across the bridge. I continue to ride through the field where I awoke earlier.

Before I get too far from the castle, a loud explosion comes from inside the castle. Then I hear another explosion. I pull the horse reins to stop and turn. As I turn, I see the large Valencia castle fall. All I could think of is the exquisite beauty it may have possessed in its time. Now it is nothing more than pieces of debris thrown across a wasteland, lost with its memories. I feel the heat from the explosions. I turn the horse back in the direction I was going before the explosions. I keep the horse at a slow pace.

This has been a hell of a day. I don't know who I am or where I am; I'm faced with a life and death battle with a water serpent in the moat of a castle that had some power over me; have some sort of visions, one of an unnamed royalty warning me to make some sort of decision and then one of a great statue that turns into a pitiful man pleading for his life.

I discover a beautiful woman who is scared to death of a man called Gutierrez. I'm now carrying the body of who could possibly have been the love of my life and may have had the key to my identify, drooped across the back of a horse that I acquired from the man who killed her. Beside of all that, the castle that had lured me to it was blown to bits and has fallen to the ground.

Somehow, I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. I begin to search the horse's pouch to try to find evidence of who the soldier was or where he came from. I stumble upon a scroll. As I pull it out, I notice a small force of soldiers riding in the southwest direction away from me, towards the forest. I have a feeling that if I am to find out anything about what is going on, I should head in that direction.

Before I mount up again, I pulled open the scroll and it reads: "You and your soldiers are ordered to find Rojo and kill him. Leave no evidence of his death. Make sure Rojo is in pain before he dies. Your reward will be high once you return his sword to Gutierrez." At the bottom of the scroll is signed the letters RII.

Now I know who wants me dead, but who is this Gutierrez and why does he want me dead and who the initials are of RII. If I regain my memory, I am sure that Sabina's death will upset me more but at this very moment, she is just a beautiful stranger to me. I tell myself that I miss her none. However, I feel it was her that pulled me to the castle. She and I must have had connection and now I am left alone again with no memories to help me find my home.

At this point, I am done thinking about it. I am just too unsure of everything and without my memory to help me discover if my inclinations are true, I don't know what to do next except I know I don't want to proceed without giving Sabina a proper burial, nor do I want to be seen by those soldiers. I am unsure of what is to come but I must track them somehow in the hope that they will leave some clue to my lost memories.

I dismount the horse and gently place Sabina on the grassy ground, which seems to be the perfect place for a perfectly beautiful lady's last resting place. I begin to gather rocks in the area. As the time passes, the sun sets and rises before I finish.

The final touch I give to her rock burial is to mark it with the red flag on top of the rocks. I hold the flag down with a rock at every corner, protecting it from the wind. It was that very flag that gave us our last moments together. I wish I could have saved her. Maybe

I would not feel this sense of loneliness if I had at least tried harder. It seems as if her death has hit me harder than I thought like as if it has taken a piece of me. What piece I am not sure.

I take another look at the locket she gave me. I rub it clean with my fingers, just to read it again and perhaps to get a feeling or memory of what it meant to her. What did it mean by "Love Over Power?" I close my eyes for a moment and get an image of her as I kiss her with passion, but the vision vanishes as I shake my head and look to the sun rising.

I take a deep breath as more questions emerge...was it a memory or my imagination? And who are the twins she talked about? Whatever the answers are, I make her a promise to come back for her if I find where her home is and where she should be buried so that she is among her family who have passed on.

I still have not had any sleep, but with a fresh day ahead of me, there is no way I can sleep now. I say a final farewell promise to Sabina to come back and I begin to mount up on a quest to find out why we were supposed to be put to death.

The thought of someone doing what they have done thus far gets my anger building up to an uncontrollable hostility as my thoughts lean toward a violent revenge. I kick the horse to a steady pace heading in the direction of the deep dark forest.

Chapter 5: The Forest People



Chapter 5: The Forest People

I have been traveling now through this never-ending forest for more than a day and a half. My energy is drained due to my lack of food and water. I am so drained that I am riding the horse with my face pressed to the back of his neck as if lying down using his soft warm mane as a pillow.

My arms are drooping over the sides of the horse, for they are too weak to hold the reins up. I feel done in and these may just be my last thoughts. The horse has also lost his energy and walks with his head down as if fallen into depression. I feel we are forming some kind of bond. He seems to know I need him so maybe I will make it.

The forest is completely shaded, separating me from the life given from the sun. The shaded green trees are massive in size. The horse is forced to walk in a zigzag pattern to make it through the trees. The wildlife flourishes in these woods. I hear insects buzzing and birds singing, the sounds of bird's wings slapping through the leaves of the trees and the scurrying of small animals as I pass.

A new sound comes to my ears. It is the welcome sound of a stream making its way on the down slope of the land. I use every bit of energy I can conjure up and push myself up to a higher sitting position. My eyes anxiously scurry around for the sight of this stream that I hear so well. The horse must know we are close to water for his head comes up and his gait increases.

We are in luck – not too far to the right I see the small stream rushing through the trees. I am too weak to steer the horse into the direction of the stream but just as I manage to gather just enough muscle to reach for the horse's reins, he turns toward the stream. I wish I knew the horse's name – I would thank him.

I arrive to the stream but before I can completely dismount, the horse plunges his head down into the water to quench his thirst. I slide down off his back with the same thing on my mind but want to submerge my whole body, so I quickly begin to strip off my

clothing to get in. Before I lay my body within the waters, I submerge my face and quench my thirst. It feels so cool and clean. Then I dust off my clothing and wash the blood from my sword. I hang my clothing and sword on a nearby tree.

The water is greatly invigorating as I submerge myself into the bubbling stream, letting the waters carry me as I float downstream for a few yards. As I am enjoying my bath, I am startled as I feel something in the water hit my leg. It is such a shock that my heart stops and I jump up. I almost panic, remembering the ordeal I had with the creature in the moat but when I look down, I see a large fish swim downstream. A smile comes to my face as I exclaim just one word, "Food!"

Since my bath has been interrupted, I now have more important things on my mind such as filling my stomach. I am not sure if I know how to catch a fish, but it should not be hard in a stream like this. As I peer into the waters waiting for that fat fish to come by again, I wonder if I ever went fishing in my past life.

Just then several smaller fish make their way toward me. In one swift motion, I snatch one up holding on tightly as it fights to be free. I throw the fish on the grass to let it die as I retrieve my clothing and sword.

Since I can't risk lighting a fire to cook it, I skin it, and I sit myself down under a tree, eating away at the delicious fish I caught as if eating a raw fish comes naturally. Perhaps this is not the first time I have done this. I eat every piece all the way to the fins and it is the best tasting fish I ever had; at least that I remember having.

After finishing the fish, I still feel hungry and I can go for another one, but I know I must get moving. I lean forward pulling my back off the tree to stand, but before I can unbuckle my knees, I hear a swishing noise and an arrow strikes the tree just above my head.

I duck down but then look up to see the arrow's landing place so that I can direct my vision in the path in which it came from. The butt of the arrow is pointing straight out in front of me. I lock my

vision in that direction while reaching for my sword. As I unsleeve my sword, I move slowly trying not to startle the shooter.

Suddenly, about twenty men come running from behind a large group of trees straight toward me. The men look like savage woodsmen with some sort of animal skin clothing around the waist but no upper shirts. Their tattoos of war scars and markings give me the feeling that they are true warriors. I jump to my feet and take a defensive stance. My heart begins to beat fast, my breathing becomes irrational, and my head feels light. It seems like everyone is out to get me!

The first woodsman swings a small hatchet toward my head, but I quickly maneuver my head below it and swiftly came back with my sword to his stomach. He fell with a groan. Then the next woodsman attacks, then the next, and so on. I duck, counter, and defend myself. I seem to be able to see the woodmen's attacks before they move; always one step ahead of them as if I can see the future.

I am outnumbered but continue to defend myself. Then they appear to have had enough as they all pause and circle around me at about a five-man distance with their weapons of different assortments, drawn and ready but not charging. On all their faces is a look of anger and hate. I can read in every one of the men's eyes that they want my blood; each one wants a piece of me. I can understand after all I have done, but why did they have to attack me? I had to defend myself, which I did quite well.

One woodsman, a taller very savage-looking one comes from behind pushing his way through the others. Once he gets to the front of the group, he looks at me with eyes of hate. He stands much taller than me and his muscles are huge, unlike an ordinary man. His tattoos are the most aggressive looking of the tribe, which gives me the impression that he is a leader among his people.

He appears to have something on his mind and after a moment of leering at me in disgust, begins to speak. "You have a lot of courage, Rojo. What are you doing here? I had the woods checked

and it seems you are alone! Is there something you have to say to us or are you just being stupid?"

I'm taken back to know that he knows me, so I hold my sword high, ready to defend myself again before I reply, "You have caught me at a disadvantage. I do not know of you or your men. I have no memory of who I am and no memory of who you are or what I have done to cause you to hate me." They all begin to laugh and talk among each other. The leader who stands in front of me is laughing the hardest and loudest of them all and shouts, "SILENCE! Am I to believe your lies and trickery? Is that all you can conjure up from that mere mind of yours? Or have you lost your mind?"

Upset with their laughter at my expense, I try to explain, "A group of soldiers left me for dead in the wasteland north of here, near a castle that I am unfamiliar with and where a soldier killed a woman named Sabina and tried to kill me. I am now on a quest for revenge with the soldiers and now follow them to the south. I am unsure why they left me for dead, but I am determined to find out. The only clue I have is a scroll I found in the dead soldier's pouch on this horse I have been riding. Whatever problem you have with me, let us settle it or let me pass. My fight is not with you."

The leader listens to me with a confused look on his face and then signals for one of the savages to retrieve the horse. "Let's just see how your scroll reads," he says with a smirk. After the horse is pulled to the leader's side, he reaches into the pouch and pulls out the scroll. "Lower your sword, Rojo," the leader orders me. I hesitate but without much choice, I lower my sword but keep a firm grip on its handle, just in case.

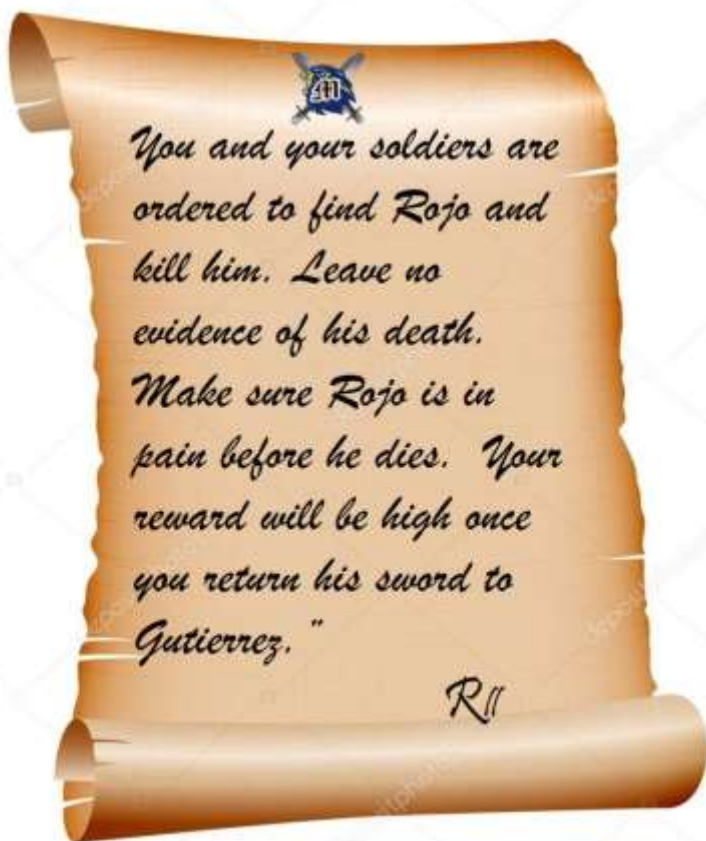
A small grin along with a confused look comes across the face of the leader and he says, "So you have no memory, eh? You have no clue of who you are, what you were, or what you have done to me and my people? And Gutierrez wants you dead? Or is it your father who wants you dead?" He chuckles a little and sighs.

His anger seems to grow probably from the thought of having the opportunity to kill the man that obviously is an enemy, but

most likely not able to kill me if I have no memory and thus not an equal mind of foe. If I am reading him correctly, I must say that I admire his restraint.

I watched as he gets himself under control to keep from erupting in anger and then speaks in a calm voice, "I want nothing more than to see you suffer for the pain you have caused my people. For years you have used them as targets and now you are my target, soon to be my prisoner. You may think you can take us all on but before you try, look behind those trees." I turn to look behind me where he is pointing and see several of his men with arrows pointed straight at my heart.

Chapter 6: Unwanted Answers



Chapter 6: Unwanted Answers

I turn back to face the arrogant leader and nod to show I understand. He continues, "I will lock you away in the prison of our caves until you regain your memory and when you can remember my face, I will set you up before my warriors and we will use you for target practice."

He hesitated as if to see my reaction and then continues, "If you try to deceive me and say you haven't regained your memory in a certain amount of time, then I will just kill you for what you are, a tyrant. I cannot imagine why Gutierrez put out the order to have you killed. It makes me wonder if he also has had it with your tyrant ways."

He begins to walk even closer to me. I grip my sword to be ready for him. He leans in close to my face and mumbles, "Maybe my name shall help you remember. Does the name Pissarro help your mind wake up?" He takes a step back and looks at me hoping to see me give a sign of recognition. As he continues to peer at me, I consider my options. It did not take me long to realize I had none. I release my grip from my sword and drop it to the ground.

I thought to plead for my life, but it was not in my heart to give in to such weakness. I raise my hands partially away from my sides to show I have no further weapons and said, "I do not remember you or what I have done to your people, but when the day comes that I do, I will be ready to face you and my fate. I am uncertain of what I was before but feel like I must have had a good reason for being the way I was."

Pissarro hands me the scroll and says, "The only reason you had was that you feel you are better than us. This will give you something to read while you rot in a dark hole." I took the scroll from his hand and put it back where I had it concealed.

With an angry command Pissarro shouts to his men, "Get him out of here!" The savages around me begin shouting and reaching for me. There must be about ten men pushing and pulling me

toward the trees from which they came. One savage pulls a cloth over my face and then I feel an exploding pain shoot through the back of my head.

When I awaken, I am face down on the ground. I do not want to raise up and find out what horrible mess I am in now, but at least I am still alive. The taste of dirt has become a regular thing to me but unfortunately getting hit on the head again did not bring back my memory. As I rub the back of my head, I sit up to survey my surroundings and it appears that I am in the back of what looks like an animal cage in the depths of a darkened cave.

I slide over to place my back against the bars of the cage to support me as I rub my head and neck. The savages must have taken a few extra punches and kicks while I was out because I hurt more than I did before I was knocked out. Dry blood remains upon my scars. Neither my weapons nor their sleeves were on me, just my clothing that is covered in dust. I remember the scroll and retrieve it. I am glad that at least they let me keep it.

My caged cell is dark except for the only light that I can see coming from a small torch that lights the area outside of the cage. The opening to this cell is made up of thick tree branches that are groomed to smoothness. It is quiet and damp as I wonder if there is a guard or anyone else in here with me. I cannot even see the entire cage as most of the area is covered in darkness. I do not see anyone around the lighted area.

I crawl over to the cage door to see if I can see anyone, but no one is there. All is dark except for the burning torch, and from the looks of the flame there is no air flow. I close my eyes and lay my forehead upon the cage door. My head is hurting as if someone is slamming a hammer on it over and over.

It is making me dizzy and I see a strange looking man sitting on the ground next to the cage laughing and pointing at me. When I open my eyes, he is gone. What was that? It gave me an eerie feeling like as if I had been here before. I do not know what I am going to do now. It feels like these savages have put some magic on me and I am going crazy.

Then I jump startled at a noise of movement from the dark. I hear a voice come from the dark part of the cage, saying, "You must be Rojo." The voice is terribly slow, weak, and slurred. I turn my head quickly in the direction of the voice and shout, "Show yourself!" I could hear steps approaching me slowly. Into the light comes a pitiful looking man.

From a short distance away, he kneels and leans in close as if he were trying to get a better look at me. His body looks starved and frail with his rib bones protruding through the skin of his shirtless chest and his facial hair is ungroomed in a tangled mess. I get the impression he has been in here for a lengthy time.

"Who are you?" I ask. He responds slowly, "That is of no importance but from what I understand, you don't know who you are. What a shame." He seems to be humored by my lack of memory. What I want to know is if he recognizes me and I ask, "Do you know me?" He ponders for a moment as if trying to get his words together and then I impatiently listen as he answers. "No, but I know of you and before I tell you anything about your past self, I have a question. What kind of person do you feel like right now?"

His question seems meaningless and I anxiously say, "I feel like a reasonable person who would like to know why everyone calls me a tyrant and why I have so many enemies. My mind is set on finding the soldiers that left me for dead. I want some sort of revenge for the death of a woman I must have had feelings for."

He then begins to laugh, which seems to delay his response and cause him to stutter, "Ah, ha! A reasonable person, ha! You have no clue to the poison you have brought on yourself. Your name is Rojo! It is short for Roland." I am surprised at the short name of Rojo but happy to hear someone finally tell me my name.

The strange man continues to explain, "Rojo means red in Spanish and you love to spill red blood. I understand that your friends gave you that name when you robbed and stole from the rich giving nothing to your own people of the forest. You are

known by many as a tyrant destroyer of lives. I know nothing about the woman that you speak of wanting revenge.”

With a slight twist of confusion on my face, I scratch my head and I ask him, “What do you mean – my own people?” The man’s face turns to surprise. He smiles, shakes his head, and sits down on the ground next to me. Once he can speak again, he says, “Wow, you really have lost every part of your memory. Your mind is gone. Ha! Have you even forgotten that you are a prince, the next to the throne of the Madera people? At least you were. All you ever cared about was having power and getting fear from your people. You are the devil, or maybe his best friend.”

I am speechless and shocked. I cannot believe what I am hearing. I did not want another question answered. I take to my feet and look down upon the man in disgust. “You must be in here for insanity!” The man lowers his head and swirls his finger into the dirt making small circles and mumbles, “I guess you can say we are in the same position. I have lived as a savage with the people in the forest but no longer wish to go along with Pissarro’s rules as he is crazy.” I tried to walk away from it all, but Pissarro did not like the idea of me just walking away. In my attempt to leave, he threw me in here to die with my thoughts.”

Still confused, I ask him, “If I am all of what you say I am, then why do I feel so sympathetic for you? I do not feel like a mad man or an obsessed criminal. I just do not feel like I could have been what you say. It just can’t be.” The man looked up at me and then got to his feet. Looking into my eyes, he responds, “You’re may be right. It probably was never in your heart. Maybe you just went nuts one day and discovered you found pleasure in robbing and raping.”

“STOP!” I shouted interrupting him. He moves closer to me and places his face right in front of mine keeping eye contact, except now he looks upset with me. He continues, “I cannot answer why you don’t feel the same as you may have, but you cannot change what you have done. It does not seem that you have chosen to be a better man. You just forgot how to be a criminal.” My anger is boiling now and before he could say another word, I punched him

in the face. He falls to the ground. He remains on the ground and looks up with a smile saying, "I see you've still got it, Rojo."

I lower my head and turn away from him. I cannot believe that I let my anger erupt by hitting him, but I cannot believe what he is telling me. I feel as if he were speaking about another man, a man that I should fear. I just cannot imagine me doing those things.

I begin to walk to the darkness of the cell and before I can take more than three steps from him, he speaks to me once more. I pause to listen. "What happens when your memory returns? Will you deny your past and be a person with some kindness, or will you accept the past and pick up where you left off?" Without responding I continue to walk into the darkness of the cell. I do not know how to answer him and no longer want to talk or hear what he has to say.

I reach the far wall opposite the entrance and sit on the ground with my back to the wall. I feel as if I just awoke from a bad dream and there is something to learn from it. I ponder on what it would be like if my memories were to return to me. I have so many questions in my mind, as well as a lot of fear of the answers. My hope is that this is not the end of my search. I wonder if it will really be worthwhile. Maybe I would have been better off dying in the dirt.

I lay down in the dirt of the cell as I reach my arms up to place my hands beneath my head for support. I am so exhausted, and all my wounds are hurting, so I do not think I can fall asleep. Maybe in time I will sleep but for now I must clear my head and concentrate on finding answers.

Apparently, my mind is not ready to sleep but my body sure is because hours pass by while I lay there passed out in the dirt sleeping. My mind has not given up on the thoughts that still find the way to me in dreams.

As I fade deeper and deeper into a sleep, a dream comes to me of a beautiful woman standing before me. It is Sabina and she looks so angelic. She wears an all-white flowing gown blowing in a wind

that I cannot feel. She starts walking toward me with her arms spread to wrap around me. She puts her arms around my waist, hugging me and placing her head upon my chest. She speaks to me and her tone is so soothing, "I love it when we have our time alone together. Soon you will rule this palace and all the land shall be yours. I love you, Rojo."

I do not respond to her. Instead, I just lean my face down to press my cheek upon the top of her head. I can feel the love between us. The comfort of her arms makes me forget the world around me. I could spend the rest of my life in this very moment. She removes her head from my chest and looks up at me.

She slowly reaches her face closer to mine expressing her lips. The space between us slowly diminishes as I await touching her sweet soft lips. The passion between us grows. It feels as if it is our first kiss. Just as our lips connect, a loud bang rattles my ears and I awake from my pleasant dream startled wondering where I am and why I am on the floor.

Then I realize the loud noise came from outside the cell. I pop up to see who is standing there, disturbing my dreams. A large man with a sword and shield is standing before the cell. I cannot see him well for the light behind him lets me see only a silhouette of him. As I stare at him, he yells, "Get up, both of you!" My memory of this day has not left me for I recognize the voice--it is Pissarro. "I have decided that I will wait no longer. Today you both die."

A group of men follow behind him to open the cell. Into the cell they come, grabbing at me with no regard to my wounds. Neither I nor my cage mate fights back as we go quietly. I figure whatever is ahead; I will need my strength to get through it if I am to get through it.

Chapter 7: Fight with Bissarro



Chapter 7: Fight with Pissarro

A sackcloth is thrown over my head once more to blind me and they drag us as if we cannot walk. It sounds like several men pulling and pushing. If they would just let me walk, I would follow but their intentions seem to be set on pushing us around. I can hear the cheering of hundreds of savages eagerly awaiting our blood.

With one last shove, I fall to the ground next to my cage mate. The dirt I land in feels soft as the sand on a beach. As they pull the cloth away from my eyes, the sunlight burns at my eyes, making it hard to see. The darkness of the cave has made my eyes unfamiliar to the light of sun. The men that dropped us to the sand back away. I take to my feet for a look around.

We are in what looks like where gladiators fight, but on a smaller scale. This must be the savage's arena, ring of sports, or for training. It is made up of sand that is soft that is a light tone of brown. My feet sink down with every step I take. The ring itself is surrounded by small white rocks. The rocks are not big enough to use as a weapon and they are spread out as if to mark a spot for about two hundred men within the circle.

A loud horn sounds silencing the wild cries of the savages. I turn around and around, watching every one of them, waiting for the first to enter the ring for combat. At a higher level I see Pissarro standing on an enormous rock. He is geared up for battle with his massive sword. His armor is dark colored with stains of blood splashed to his chest area.

I catch eye contact with him. He yells down at me, "Are you ready, Rojo. I have been waiting for this moment for a long time and now it is here. All these men around you want a piece of you, and a piece of you they shall have." For a moment, it seems as if the world stood still and silence took over all ears in the arena. I can hear my heart pounding as a small breeze blow across my face cooling the sweat trickling down my forehead.

Pissarro begins to chuckle and shouts, "Kill them!!" Without hesitation, one savage from the outer circle rushes in holding a hatchet high. He waits to get close enough to attack me. As he gets close enough, I grab at his hand that holds the hatchet pulling it down and into his stomach. The savage pauses in pain letting out a quiet gasp of breath.

I snatch the hatchet from his stomach and out of his hand. I push the savage's body to the ground. Once the body hits the ground, I drop the hatchet to the side of his body. No other savage rushes into the circle. I guess the first savage was the best and was supposed to take me down. It looks like their best was not good enough since I killed him in a single defensive move.

I look at the face of every savage I can see around me. All their faces show small signs of fear. I turn to look up at Pissarro who continues to watch above the ring and now silent. I shouted up to him, "I do not wish to kill anyone else. Let me go and I swear you shall never hear from me again. It will be as if I were dead."

Pissarro jumps from the rock and clears a path into the circle. The closer he gets, the more I can see the anger raging from his body. His muscles are tense and his grip upon his sword is solid.

Pissarro comes up to my face and spoke in his most threatening voice, "Then you shall fight me to the death." I yell back, "I do not wish to fight you. Kill me now!" Pissarro is set out to kill me, but he wants to battle. A fight to the death is all he wants.

He ponders on that for a moment and then says, "I know you have lost your memory, but have you lost your courage too?" Feeling calmer now, I respond, "No, but I have nothing to fight for. Your anger drives you." To my surprise he makes me an offer. "Alright, if you win then you may leave. Is that worth fighting for?"

I thought about the option he is giving me. It sounds good, but odds are I will be killed by another savage if I defeat him. Since I am in the negotiation position, I think I should make him a counteroffer. "If I win, then the man I shared the cage with will

walk free with me." In the mist of my request he begins to laugh. "If you want a trader's life by your side, fine. He is no good here."

I figure my odds are low, but maybe this will help the man see me in a different light. "Do I get a weapon?" I ask. Pissarro laughs and takes a few steps back. "If you think that would help." he says sarcastically.

Pissarro walks to the other side of the ring from me and turns around and around to look at all the savages that surround us. After getting a look around at his men, he pauses and raises his right hand high. He begins to shout, "If I am defeated, these men may go!"

With such suggestion made the entire clan of savages begin to laugh. I do not see the humor in Pissarro's command. I assume they are either laughing because they think he cannot be defeated, or they laugh because they do not take his command seriously.

He lowers his hand and shouts again, "Give me another sword!" A savage standing in his general area walks out and kneels before him and hands up a sword. Pissarro takes the sword from the savage's hands and the savage runs back into the crowd.

He turns to look at me. Once our eyes meet, he flips the sword in his hand landing the blade of the sword into his palm and says, "Here." He tosses me the sword in the act of making this a fair fight. He asks with a grin, "Are you ready to die, Rojo."

Without a word from my mouth I take a fighting stance that again comes so naturally. And again, my head gets light, my heart starts to beat irrationally, and the silence trance hits me once again. I hear nothing except my heartbeat and breathing patterns. I am ready. Just as soon as he attacks, I will be free from this by death or by victory.

Pissarro lets out a thunderous war cry that shakes my spirit and strikes the core of my soul; the kind of sound that would scare a lion. It certainly scares the prisoner I share the dark cage with because he begins to walk to the outer side of the ring to watch. His

war cry comes to an end and he begins to charge at me. Just as soon as his legs move toward me, my legs move toward him.

Our swords meet, ripping a loud metal crashing sound through the air. We stop holding our swords together and drawing a stare. He growls and pushes me back with the pressure of his sword against mine. Now with a few steps between us, I regain my balance.

He swings again bringing his sword high and then with a downward swift slash, I see it coming at me. I maneuver to the side dancing around his cutting strike. After missing, he takes another swing to his side at me. I raise my sword to defend against his swiftness.

After our swords collide, I take the offense by stabbing at him, he blocks me, but I strike again. His counter tactics blow me backward. My sword hits the sand almost leaving me completely off guard but instead of him stabbing at me, he runs his fist across my face, dazing me. I catch my balance quickly and bring my focus back toward him. He takes a step back and laughs at the effect of his punch to my face. I could feel the blood beginning to leak from the corner of my mouth.

I rush back at him, grabbing my sword in route. Again, I slash downward to give him an impression that I am off guard again. Just as he is about to punch me again, I lean back to dodge his punch. Once his fist misses my face, I lean in and put all the force and all the muscle from my body into a punch driven into his face. A power shot struck his face and it did not seem like he felt a thing. He just stood there laughing.

On and on our battle continues slashing at each other and countering each other strikes. Pissarro punches away at me and kicked me whenever I went down. The dust from the sand is rising slightly from the consistent moving of our feet.

I begin to feel fatigue from his unyielding strength. He continues punching at me when my guard goes down and I lose strength to

punch back. If I am to defeat him, I will have to find a way to get my sword through his body and keep it there.

Almost at my wits end, an idea comes to me. I lower my guard on purpose hoping he will punch me again instead of stabbing at me with his own sword. Sure enough, his fist smashes into my face and I let my body go flying into the sand. I keep a firm grip on my sword as I put my face in the sand so that he cannot see the position of my sword or my face expression of pain. Pissarro walks up to me standing over my backside and begins to laugh, "You didn't stand a chance against me, Rojo!"

As he taunts me, I could sense him raising his sword and holding it high above me in a stabbing style ready to kill me. He shouts, "Now die!" As he brought his sword down toward the center of my back, I quickly roll out of the way. His sword digs deep into the earth. My fighting instincts are now taking over as I pop up to a kneeling position and drive my sword through his stomach. He gasps as he holds his stomach. His body hit the sand and a small cloud of dust rose around him.

The chanting of his fellow savages is now silent. I can feel the shock of every savage as they stand watching Pissarro, their fearless leader, die defeated. My weakened state keeps me on the ground, looking towards the sky. I brought my eyes back down to look at Pissarro. His blood seeps from his stomach and mouth, dripping into the sand, creating a red mud stain. He summons up the strength to mumble his last words directed at me, "Damn you, Rojo. I will see you in the dark worlds." His last breath follows his last words and his eyes close for the last time.

Chapter 8: Ber and Friends



Chapter 8: Ber and Friends

I feel nothing but exhaustion as I continue to lay here until I can build up the strength to get up. I just took a beating that I do not feel like I can walk away from. The prisoner I shared a cage with walks over to my side and kneels down, "Are you alright? Do you think you can walk?" His questions make me wonder if he was even watching the fight. "The pain I feel right now makes me wonder if I am dying myself. Help me up," I reply.

The savage I shared a cage with helps me to my feet and begins dusting me off. "My name is Bernardo, but they call me Ber." he says. I look in his eyes and I can see traces of trust toward me now. I guess he feels as if I have just saved his life, or he is just grateful for his freedom that I just fought for. "Well Ber, you are free now. I only request that you point me in the direction to go so I may find what I am looking for."

I look around for a moment to get oriented. In the mist of the few words I shared with Ber, I did not notice that every savage around us had kneeled in a bowing position. They bow as if I am a god setting down all their weapons before them. It brings me comfort knowing I will not have to fight any of these men. If just one of them wants to attack me, I would not be able to defend myself anyway. I am in too weak and tired with too much pain.

I ask Ber, "Why do they bow to us?" He pauses before answering and takes another look around. After Ber gathers it all in, he looks back at me to answer, "They do not bow to us; they bow to you. You have defeated Pissarro, their former leader, and that makes you their new leader."

I lower my own head in sadness and shame. I do not want this. I just want to continue with my quest. I just want to find out why I was to be killed and who the man is that wants me dead. I raise my head, lift my eyes, and look over at the rock that Pissarro stood on before our fight. I begin to walk on my own toward the rock slowly with what little strength I have.

I approach the rock and begin to climb to the top. It is a short climb, but I find it difficult to pull myself up. I get to the top and I stand up to face the savages that are bowing below. I shout to carry my voice to all their ears, "I do not wish to be your leader. You do not need a leader now for you are all free men and women. Continue with your lives however you wish."

I could not think of another word to say to them, so I begin to climb down from the rock. As I reach the bottom, Ber meets me there and I ask him, "Ber, who is Gutierrez?" He looks down to the ground in thought. After a few seconds he looks back up at me and replies, "I am unsure of that name. Why do you ask?"

I reach into my pants and pull out the scroll that I have been carrying. It was damaged and wrinkled from the battle, but it still unrolls easily. After unrolling it I hand it to Ber. He takes it from my hands, and I lean up against the rock for balance and to rest.

Ber reads the scroll and then comments, "I do not know who Gutierrez is, but I do know that on the top of this scroll is a marking with a lion. It is a marking like all royal families place on their fancy scrolls to prove whom it is from." He points to the marking and I shake my head and shrug my shoulders in curiosity. I have no clue whose crest this is. With nothing else on my mind but questions, I ask, "What royal family is it for?"

Ber took his eyes off the scroll and looks at me hesitating for a moment. "King Roland. Your family, Rojo. This marking belongs to your family." My shock is evident by the amazed look on my face and my heart begins to pound. I wasn't sure what to think and am so taken back that I begin to feel faint and stutter to Ber, "Ah, are you telling me my family name is Roland and they ordered my death?"

With a look of confusion on his face, Ber has a difficult time finding the words to respond to my question. He finally says, "No, I am just telling you that this is your family's mark. It could be a fake to trap you. Someone could have stolen the scroll and wrote on it as the pleased. Did your father know Gutierrez?" I could not answer

him, and he says, "Or maybe Gutierrez forced someone in your family to write this or maybe not."

I had been confused in the past few days but now I do not know what to think as I am overwhelmed with confusion. I put my head back against the rock and look to the sky. I feel that I must still follow in my quest and find the soldiers that left me for dead. Which brings a new question to mind, so I look back to Ber and ask, "Ber, do you know how to get to my homeland?"

Ber took a step back away from me and seems frightened from my question. He takes a deep breath and responds, "Yes, but I dare not go there. I am still a savage and your people don't like my type." I can understand his fear and thoughts, but my selfishness urges me to convince him to guide me there. "Well if you think about it, my going there could just be as bad because I could be marked for death. Come with me. What do you have to lose? You will be doing some good for a man who needs help."

Ber's face changes from fear to anger and he responds in a high tone, "Help you?! You are a tyrant--a tyrant that will probably regain his memory and kill me when you remember our past. If that does not happen, you may obtain access back into your rich home and forget about me and let others kill me. I don't want you to have to decide between me and your good wealth."

He has a good argument and I may not be able to handle my feelings once my memory returns. I cannot imagine such hate between these poor savages and my royal family, but I do not want him to feel threatened with death along with Pissarro's. With that in mind I feel like I should just ask for directions, "Fine if you will not take me, then tell me which way to go to my homeland?"

His face becomes calm again and he replies, "Follow the sunset from here. It will guide you straight into the countryside of your land Madera. From there you will see your castle." After giving directions, I thank him for his help. He lowers his head in respect as he backs away from me. He turns and begins to walk toward the woods. I watch him walk away as if watching will help me remember him in case I lose my memory again. I keep staring after

him as he disappears into the depths of the woods until my hunger makes itself known with a strong rumble in my stomach.

If the forest savages see me as their leader, maybe they are willing to give me some food. I see the man that ran out and gave Pissarro his sword. I assume that he was Pissarro's personal servant. I walk over toward him and as I approach, they all lower their heads as if they did not want to look at me.

I make it over to who I assume was Pissarro's servant and ask him, "What is your name?" He raises his head in surprise and says, "Tro." "Listen to me Tro, I am hungry and need some rest. Can you help me?" I ask. Happily, he replies, "Yes, follow me." He took to his feet and turned to walk through the large group of savages. He makes a path for us to walk through the others. As he walks through the crowd of savages ahead of me, he shouts a few words in their native language and they slowly come to their feet nodding as I pass.

I follow behind Tro until we get to a small grass and stick hut. The roof is made up of long blades of grass and droops down about halfway to the ground. The hut is not much bigger than my own height but high enough for me to stand with plenty of head room.

Once inside Tro repeats, "Sit, sit, sit." I take a seat made of soft animal fur and wooden sticks. The comfort this chair brings me is impressive. I notice in the opening for a window that there are butterflies floating around in the breeze. At first, I think they are real but then realize they are made of wood and painted different colors. It impresses me that these people are so creative.

After a short time of sitting in this chair watching the butterflies, I start to feel drowsy, but I need to stay awake to satisfy my stomach before a nap. Suddenly the door opens and in comes a few women, one with a pail of water and towels made of fur. The woman carrying the water sits the pail at my side, kneels next to me, and dips a fur towel into the water. She pulls the towel out of the water and rings it out and then reaches up to wipe the blood from my wounds.

Her touch is gentle and the water so cool and refreshing. She has the most impressive blue eyes and I see parts of bright red hair under her scarf. She smiles as she finishes dressing my wounds and politely says, "I hope you feel better soon, my Lord."

I thank her and lay back in the comfort of the chair. She says she will be back with food soon and just as I doze off, she brings me a massive plate of what looks like some type of fowl along with lots of vegetables and bread. I thank her profusely as I began to eat as fast as I can with every bite tasting better than the last. I finish the plate and then she brings me more. The small group watches me stuff my face, most likely thinking that it takes more food to fill me than any other person in the world.

I cannot remember ever having such a wonderful meal and when I am finally finished, the water girl guides me to another hut that she says is a place to sleep. "Thank you for very much for everything," I say as she bows and says, "My pleasure, my Lord."

Then she simply turns and walks out as her swishing skirt catches my eye and I watch her shapely figure float down the path. I have a satisfied feeling as I climb into the bed of straw but am not sure I can go to sleep right away. I do not think I have ever seen such an intriguing woman as that one. Those blue eyes seem to see right through me.

I wonder if she noticed that she was catching my attention causing my manly urge to be stirred up. It made me question if the stories about me taking advantage of women were true. I dismissed it from my mind thinking that I could not imagine doing that sort of thing. All these thoughts have made me almost forget to get my sword. I cannot be too sure that my sleep will not get interrupted, so I place it next to me.

To my pleasant surprise, I sleep uninterrupted and awaken to the sound of early morning birds singing in the sun. I must have slept all day and all night. I feel rejuvenated. I stretch my arms out followed by a yawn to begin my day. When I open my eyes sitting in a chair near my bed is Ber. "What are you doing here?" I ask. "Well, I figured my life has no meaning anymore and I have

nowhere to go. So, I thought I would join you on your journey to your homeland. Is that alright?" he asks. I protest, "You don't have to. I understand the dangers that may lie in my path. Who knows how many enemies I will come across that want me dead?"

"I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for you and for that I owe you my life." He says with confidence. I sit up and drop my legs over the side of the bed as I stare at the ground reviewing my options. It would be nice to have a companion on my quest, but I do not want his life to be in danger. He has already made his decision so if he wants to go, I cannot stop him. "Fine then, where to?" I ask Ber. "First, let us eat. We will need our strength." He replies.

Excited about his decision, I stand up and signal with my hand for him to lead the way. He starts to walk out so I grab my sword, sleeve it, and follow Ber outside into the bright sunny day. He leads me to the hut in which I had my previous meal.

We enter and already spread out on the wooden table is a variety of breakfast foods with just enough space for two empty plates in which we can place the food of our choice. The plates are set on opposite sides of the table. Ber and I quickly sit down and eat fast. Neither one of us spoke. I am sure we will have plenty of time to talk on our journey.

I finish eating before he does as I am more anxious than him to get going. He finally finishes and without hesitation he takes to his feet. "Let's go." He urges. Feeling somewhat heavier now, I slowly rise to my feet. Ber is standing close to me with a serious look as he asks, "Can I trust you?" "Yes." I reply.

Without another word he walks out moving so fast that I need to give chase to catch up to him. When I do, he informs me, "I have food packed for us for this will not be a short ride." In reply I say, "Great. Will you be taking a weapon for protection?" "I have what I need," he said in confidence. "Fine," I reply sarcastically as I am not sure what that means.

I grab my things lying next to my horse and strap them to the horse's side. Ber's horse is ready to go so we mount up and begin to

ride toward the exit of the village. He leads me out for a short distance. Just before we exit the village he slows to a stop and says to me, "Someone wants to say goodbye to you." "Who?" I ask. Just then the water girl from last night comes silently from behind a tree where she must have been waiting. She walks up to my horse and reaches up to hand me something.

"You dropped this in the sand." She says. It was the locket that Sabina had handed me before she died. "Thank you," I say kindly. She replies with a glimpse of hope in her eyes, "No, thank you." I can see in her eyes now that killing Pissarro was a good thing for her. She lowers her head and turns to walk back into the village.

I give my horse a slap to continue in the path toward the exit. But before the horse could take another step, I pull it to a halt and turn to catch the water girl asking, "What is your name?" She stops and looks back at me. With a smile on her face she replies, "Yours if you come back."

With a smile of intrigue, I again turn my horse to ride past all the huts and out of the village. I shout out a "Go boy" to signal the horse to a gallop and ride out of the village gate catching up with Ber to face whatever adventures that may be in store for us.

Chapter 9:

Drake



Chapter 9: Drake

Ber and I have been riding for two days now, often stopping to eat or rest to keep our strength up. We have not spoken much since we left his village. It seems to be a business adventure more than a social one.

We have traveled to the outside of the forest and now travel across lands with many hills and meadows. The land is covered in the greenest of grass. At the top of any hill I can see for miles to the horizon. According to Ber, our destination is still out of sight, but it is deep on my mind as I wonder what my homeland will be like.

The night is rising, and the day is falling, so we decide to make camp for the night. I unpack my things, setting up my sleeping area. As has become my practice, I place my sword in the dirt next to the spot that I intend to sleep so that it may be ready for me when I need it. Maybe this comes so naturally because I did this also in my past life.

We go about finding firewood and get a fire burning in a cleared spot after removing the grass, leaving nothing but dirt so the fire does not spread. While we wait, we watch the orange dancing flames as our food cooks. Ber finally breaks the silence, starting a conversation.

“Why do you think you can’t remember your past?” he asked with his face at a slant. I reply, “I was hit on the head, which probably knocked my memories out of my mind.” Ber doesn’t seem happy with that answer and inquires further, “I understand that as any knock on the head can do that. Have you tried to remember? Do you think there is something wrong in your past that your mind just does not want to remember?”

I did not understand the complexity of his question, so I explain my thoughts. “At times, visions blur in my mind, but I don’t know the names of the faces I see. There is a man I keep seeing in my visions. He is an older man with a white beard, wrinkled face, but extraordinarily strong. He is dressed like a king, a king going to

war. Often, he warns me about deciding before it is too late. I just don't know what he is talking about."

"That is your father," Ber said with a grin. "I have seen him, but only at a distance," he explains. "Is that so? Why do you ask about my thoughts?" I curiously ask. Ber said while in a softer tone as if he did not want me to hear, "I don't think you want to remember."

I thought that was a curious thing for him to say but then he may have a point so I ask, "From what you told me about who I was, would you want to remember?" Ber's grin departed from his face as he says, "Yes. I would rather know the truth than to be lost without a past."

I stand up feeling as if an argument is about to start between us. His understanding of my position is not clear. I raise my tone and said, "I want to get to the bottom of this and find out what is going on." Ber laughs and asks, "Do you think you will be forgiven for your past? Do you think everyone else will forget who you were? Not everyone has been knocked on the head as you have been. Unlike you, we all remember."

I turned and walked away without another word. Ber shouted and then let out a loud laugh, "While you are out there trying to forget, get some more firewood." His sense of humor at my cost did not make me laugh but I went along with, "Sure, funny man."

I walk away from the camp site, keeping a steady pace, so I can be alone with my thoughts. I kick at the small rocks from the ground as I walk. Before I know it, I walk a great distance from the campsite. "I should turn back," I said to myself.

It is too dangerous to be out here alone, in the dark without my sword. I see a few dead sticks close by, so I pick them up planning to throw them at Ber when I return and see if he laughs at that. With a smirk on my face, I turn around to begin my walk back to camp.

As I near the campsite, I hear rowdy noises and cheering. I could not make out any of the words, but it is coming from the campsite. I begin to pick up my pace. The closer I get, the faster I run. Just as I

arrive a few feet from the camp, their words become clearer. Someone is yelling, "Beat him, kick him." I know now that Ber is in trouble and here I am without my sword.

At a distance I shout, "Leave him alone." I use the deepest voice I could conjure up; maybe it would put a little fear in their minds. "Who goes there?" One of the men asks. "Step into the light of the fire!" I step into the light of the fire and all their faces get a look of surprise. One of the men asks, "Rojo. Is that you?"

I look at Ber who looks as if he has been beaten. I turn my eyes back to the man that had said my name and demand, "Let him get up. Leave him be." All of them are left speechless for a moment. "Rojo, it is just a savage," he replies. By the tone that they are speaking, I assume they know me – not as an enemy, but as a friend. They release Ber throwing him to the ground.

As soon as Ber hits the ground, he starts to laugh. One of the men kneels to him and says, "What are you laughing at, savage?" "He doesn't remember you," Ber chuckles. "Rojo, you do not remember us? His clan, his friends, his family?" The words of this man make my blood stir as my heartbeat speeds up. At last, someone who knows me as family. "Is it true what he says? Do I know you?"

"What do you mean, Rojo? Of course, you know me. I am Drake, your best friend." Concerned about where this was heading, I told Ber, "Get up, come over here." Ber gets to his feet and walks slowly to my side, brushing off the dirt from his up clothing. The other men, about seven of them, take a position behind the man Drake.

"What is wrong with you, Rojo?" he said as he makes his way toward me slowly. "I have lost my memory and I do not know who you are." I replied. Ber finally made it to my side when Drake says in a nasty tone, "So, is this your new family, a savage?" I look towards Ber and then return my eyes to Drake. "Yes. Yes, he is."

Drake stops a short arm's length away from me and lowers his head. When his head comes up again, his eyes show a glimmer of

anger. "If I did not have so much respect for you, I would kill you. Good luck with your new family. Let's go men."

"Wait," I said to them. "I don't want you to leave. I am not asking you to leave. I just do not know who I am. If we were family once, then would not we still be? Drake have a seat. Tell me something. Tell me anything about me or my family. It would be very appreciated."

I recall the scroll and reach into my pants before he could say anything and pulled out the scroll. "Read this." I said. He takes the scroll and quickly browses through it. Drake hands the scroll back to me and sits down in the grass facing the fire. The other men remained standing. I sat down next to Drake. We both sat there in silence staring at the fire. He seemed to be waiting on me to ask him what I wanted to know.

I did not know what to ask him first. I did not know what I wanted to know and what I did not want to know. Drake must have sensed my confusion and says, "It is good to see you my brother. I thought you were dead," Drake keeps his eyes focused on the fire as I take my eyes off the fire and turn to him to ask, "Why?" He answers, "Everyone knows about what happened to you. When we found out, we set out to find you. When we found this savage lying here near your sword, we thought he had killed you and took your sword from you."

"Everyone knows about what? What happened to me?" I ask confused. "I heard that you have been banished from your own kingdom by your own father. I do not know why any more than you do. I guess asking you would be a waste of breath. There are many different rumors. Some say it was because you were in love with a common woman who was believed to have put a spell on you. Some say it is because your younger brother wanted the throne." I stop him and ask, "I have a younger brother?"

Drake goes on to say, "As far as I know, you don't have a younger brother except for me, and I do not want the throne." He continues with the rumors, "Some would say it is because you had plans that no one knew about except your father. The woman you

fell in love with, the common woman, she is beautiful." He pauses to look at me and then continues, "She is my sister, but you probably don't remember her either. That is how we became friends and family. We became brothers when you married my sister Sabina beneath the eyes of God."

I lower my head in sadness for I knew I had to tell him what happened to her now, so I reach in my pocket. Drake turns his head down to look at what I am pulling out of my pocket. I move slowly for I know this may startle him. I pull out the locket into the light.

At one glance, Drake knows what it means for me to have her locket. He jumps up in anger. He looks down at me as he tries to hold back his tears that start building up in his eyes. He shouts, "My sister would never take off that locket that you gave her. She is dead, isn't she? Who killed my sister?"

I get to my feet and place my hands out to calm him speaking in a calm voice in attempt to comfort him. "I do not know. That is who I am following now. Not far from where I awoke without a memory, I found her lying in a room of a castle, beaten up. She died saving my life when a soldier tried to kill me. As I left the castle with her body, I saw soldiers riding towards the forest. That is who I am trying to find now."

As I speak, his tears begin to roll down his face. He tries holding them back as it is not common for men to cry. He wipes the tears away as anger and a mark of revenge begin growing across his face. He lets out a growling sound like a mad dog as he starts to pace back and forth in front of me.

I am unsure of what I can say to console him. I figure I should let him get his anger out. He kicks grass into the fire as he begins to get quiet as he turns the grief inside. I figure when he is ready to speak, he will let me know. I am still in shock to hear that I have a brother.

His pacing begins to make me nervous. "Listen, we are all headed in the same direction. We have a similar interest. To find those soldiers and get some answers." He jumps in my face and says, "Some answers? We should want blood. No talking, just

killing. I see you are not yourself. You loved Sabina so much that if someone else would have told you she was dead; you would have killed that person just for speaking such sadness.”

Now I feel shame. I have been more interested in finding my past. I was not thinking about Sabina’s fate. Even after what he has told me, I feel bad that I still do not feel the kind of feelings of love that he says I had for the woman I buried. She must have been special, and I just wish I could remember her and the life we had together.

“Fine then, I’m sure I know which soldiers you seek. They are your soldiers. Or I should say, your father’s soldiers.” I can see Drake is frustrated at me. I do not understand why I have a lack of response to what he has told me. I should be outraged but instead I am just mystified by his saying the soldiers were sent to find me by my father. Why?

“We will ride at first light. We are a day away and should be there by nightfall tomorrow. Let us rest, we will need the energy.” Drake, upset from my lack of sympathy, sighs, and walks away from me. He storms out of the range of light from the fire. From the darkness I hear him say, “I miss you, Rojo.”

I do not know if he will wait to return by day light, but I hope he does. I walk over to where I set my sword. I lay down and as soon as my head hits the ground my thoughts begin to go wild. I think about being banished. I think about Sabina. I think about a father I do not remember who Drake says hates me and I think about me. All of which I know nothing about, but tomorrow I hope to start getting answers.

So many questions fly through my head. What could I have done to get banished and why was Sabina to be killed along with me? Who is hiding what? Why has my father forsaken me? Every thought I can conjure up bring questions after questions. Frustration builds in my body making it hard for me to get comfortable enough to sleep. But after what seems like hours of thinking for so long and so hard that I begin to tire and fall into a deep slumber.

The day's light rises, and the night sky disburses as the sound of morning is upon me again. I look over to my sword for comfort of its appearance. It is still there, nothing has changed. I stretch myself into a sitting position feeling the chill in the air. My legs and arms are cold from the night temperatures. I yawn and look around. Drake's men had not returned in the night. They are all scattered around the dead fire. I do not see Drake though and wonder where he may have gone.

I stand up and take a good look around all the grassy hills. With the wind to my back, I can see Drake with his back to me some feet away, staring at the horizon of hills. I feel like he needs my support, so I start walking over to him and standing next to him, I say, "Drake. I apologize for last night. I did not mean to be...." Drake interrupts me, "No, I should apologize. You are not at fault for your lack of memory. I know if you had not lost your memory, we would be side by side on a killing spree. We both have our reasons to head back to Madera. We might as well go as a team."

At the end of his apology he turns to me and looks me straight in the eye with a smile. He walks past me back to the campsite. I lower my head and smile. I begin to feel like I have hope. I follow behind him. Once we get to the camp, he orders his men to wake up. Ber hears the commotion and arises.

"So, what is the plan?" Ber asks. "What do you mean? We are going to Madera right!?" I ask. "Yeah but a savage, a banished man, and a clan just can't go walking into the city together. As soon as someone recognizes us, we are done for." He was right. None of us would be allowed into Madera, so I ask, "What do you suggest?" Drake interrupts our talk and says, "I have an idea. It is a bit out of the way, but we can go to the Monk's home in Ramos and steal some of their robes. We can use the hoods to cover our faces and appear as Monks. No one will try to stop religious men from entering the city."

His idea is a good one, but my gut is telling me that it will not be that easy; however, there does not seem to be an alternative, so I agree by saying, "Sounds good." The men get rowdy in excitement. We all gather our belongings. I pull my sword from the ground and

sleeve it to my backside. I feel more confident with family by my side and I am ready to deal with what may come in the next adventure.

Chapter 10:

Ramos



Chapter 10: Ramos

Drake and the men all seem happy to be going on a mission as they follow me at a good pace across the trails leading toward the sunset and this place called Ramos. We ride all morning and by noon need to take a break to water the horses and rest with something to eat. Ber pulls out two roasted chickens and a loaf of bread to divide among us.

We sit under a large oak tree enjoying the food as we take in the attractive scenery of green hills and valleys. Once done eating, some of the men lay back as if to take a nap. It is very tempting to join them, but we must get going so I shout the order, "Let's Go! We need to get to Ramos by nightfall."

After hours of riding toward the sun my eyes start to burn, and my head feels like it will explode. At last the sun starts to set and gives us a break so I motion for the men to stop their horses and turn to Ber and ask, "How much further is this place?" Ber replies, "Not much, maybe five miles." I turn and tell the men to take a break. "The horses need water and we all need to rest a bit before we continue."

Once we all dismount, Ber brings out some bread with cheese and cuts up the cheese and some apples to make a filling meal. I take a walk to relieve myself and notice a small stream running down the hills. I tell the men to bring the horses and then I say, "We should all take a quick dip in the stream to rejuvenate ourselves." They all become excited like children as they start stripping off their clothing and jumping in the water.

Ber comes up to me and says, "This is a real treat for us. It's been a long day of riding." I agree and then bring up something that has been on my mind all day. "Do you think it is really necessary to steal from the Monks? Maybe they would agree to borrow us their clothing if they knew why we needed it."

Drake must have been behind me when I asked Ber about the Monks as he comes beside me saying, "My brother, what has

happened to you? The knock on your head must have turned you into a soft woman. The Monks are not going to lend us their hooded cloaks." I shrug my shoulders and say, "I just don't want to make trouble for men that serve God." Drake's expression is of shock and amazement at his brother's concern for something he would have never thought twice about before. All he could say is, "Wow, you have changed!"

After the sun sets completely behind the hills, I tell Ber to get the men ready to mount up, so we can be on our way by the light of the moon. We slowly make our way to the outskirts just of Ramos. It appears to be a small quiet village of a few huts, but I do not see the monastery. I feel like it is probably on the outskirts of the village. It should not be that difficult to get in and out in a hurry.

I pull the reins back to bring the horse to a halt and then ask Ber if he knows where the Monks are living, and he points to the south side of the village. I tell him to take the lead and he suggests that only two or three men go with him to get the garments. I agree that he has a good idea and motion him to go.

Ber chooses three men to go with him as Drake and I lead the rest of them to the south end of the village to wait for them hiding behind some large pine trees. We wait for about ten minutes when I see motion of some sort beside the Monk's monastery.

Ber and his team are running toward us carrying piles of clothing. I was amazed at how fast he was able to get them. As soon as they get to us, I grab the garments from him and throw them on the back of my horse as the other men take the other garments. We quickly and quietly mount up and ride out of the village without anyone realizing what just happened.

As soon as we are clear of the village, I order them to go faster to get as far away as we can before stopping to set up camp. Ber and I have already put some ideas together as to how we will approach Madera and we now need to plan out our next move. I wish I did not have to rely on Ber, but his knowledge of the grounds will be needed as I have no clue what the place looks like. As far as Drake being any help, he says he needs to take his men to a village some

distance from Madera to help one of his allies, so he will not be able to go with me.

We need to figure a way to get into Madera without anyone seeing us. Then I realize that the best thing to do is for me to go by myself to speak to my father alone to see if I can resolve things with him and not involve anyone else. It makes me a bit nervous since I do not remember my father and will be going on just the visions that I have seen of him. I repeat over and over in my head what he said in the vision I had at the burnt castle. "You must decide before it is too late."

What must I decide? Why would it be too late? I must stop going over these questions over and over. It is about to drive me crazy as there just are no answers. Even though I am nervous, I am looking forward to going to where people should know me as family even more so than Drake. But what if my family shuns me? Afterall, I have been banished for some reason. What about the Madera people? Did I let down my own people? What if it is too late as he said? Too many questions swirling around my head is giving me a headache.

Ber leads us up a steep hill into a cave which is to be our camp for the night. He tells us that he found this cave some years ago while he had to hide out from some men who accused him of stealing their horses. He explains how you can go far back into the cave and light a fire without it being seen on the outside. What a perfect place for us to stay while we get our plan together. After we have a bite to eat, the men settle down for the night.

Before going to sleep, I pull Ber to the side and tell him my idea of me going alone to try and speak to my father. He said, "You don't have any memory of this man and you want to confront him just like that?" His comment makes sense, but I insist by saying, "This is my battle and I need to find out why I am banished and if there is a way, I can remove it, I must find that out for myself. No one can do it for me." Ber disagrees again but then goes on to say, "You have a point and if I can't change your mind, I will help you with how to get inside without being caught by the soldiers."

Ber has made me feel more confident about facing tomorrow so I get my bed ready for a good night's rest, placing my sword beside me, and curling up with my small piece of blanket that the water girl had given me. Of course, it took me a while to get to sleep with all the questions continuing to swim through my mind.

As I toss and turn, I am wondering what I could do to calm myself when my eyes fall on the Monk's cloaks. I am not sure if I am a believer in prayer but decide to ask God for some direction and courage. Before closing my prayer, I asked for His mercy to forgive me for all the horrible things I have done in the past that I do not remember. That sure did something to calm me as I drifted off.

Chapter 11:

Madera



Chapter 11: Madera

The next thing I hear is some type of bird call. I peek out from under my blanket and see a slice of sunlight as it pushes its way into the cave to warm the chill out of the air. The birds are fluttering around the opening of the cave as they sing their morning greetings. I feel like this is a good sign of good things to come this day as I stand and stretch. All the men are still sleeping, and I let them be for a while as I walk out to greet the morning.

As I am standing there, I get the dizzy feeling that I had before with the visions. I see a full-figured glamorous woman walking up the hill toward me with her hands outreaching as if to welcome me. She has a beautifully woven gown of gold with red trimming with a gold and red hat that looks like something a queen would wear. She is smiling so sweetly as the sunlight shines on her radiant red hair. Then she stops and bends down as if to greet a child as she says, "Rolly, my baby, come to me. I love you so much."

I am struck with a sense of love but then she is gone. Could that have been a memory of my mother? I am still dizzy as I walk back to where the men are sleeping. I fall back to my blanket as Ber looks up and sees that I am not doing too well. He asks, "Are you alright?" I am not sure how I feel but say I am fine but think I just saw my mother in a vision or memory.

Ber looks shocked and then hesitates for a moment and says, "How do you know it was her?" I told him she was full-figured, in a royal dress, and called me Rolly. "Was that what she called me as a child?" Ber shook his head saying he did not know but knew that she had not lived at Madera for some years. I asked why, and he said my father banished her for falling in love with another man. No one knew where she had gone to. I was beginning to believe that my father was not so nice, and I could understand why I had been just as bad.

Just as I was going to start getting ready to go on my ride to Madera, I felt something swiftly pass by my head. I turned to see what it was and see a large flying creature coming at my head

again. I duck and yell at Ber to get my sword. Just as he hands me the sword, I see another one dive into the darkness below in the depths of the cave. They look like giant bats and they are multiplying. They are moving so fast, I do not know how I am going to knock them down, but I keep trying as the other men wake up and grab their weapons to help me out.

Ber does not seem surprised by this and starts yelling for everyone to get their gear and go outside. Apparently, he has dealt with these monster bats before and as soon as we get outside, they disappear back down into the darkness of the cave. I shout at Ber, "You could have warned us." He just smiled and said, "I figured you all needed something to get you moving this morning." I did not find it funny since one of them scratched my face. Ber was still chuckling as he showed me where I could wash my face in a small pond nearby.

After I cleaned up, I asked Ber what he and the men were going to be doing while I went to Madera. He said that they would keep their distance but be ready if I needed them. I asked, "How are you going to know I need help?" He pulls out a red piece of cloth from his pocket and waves it in the air saying, "Just put this out any loophole or window facing the north and we will see it and come." It was a red flag and it struck me as odd that he would have the same color of flag or scarf that was my signal to find Sabina, but I didn't question it as many people carried red or yellow scarfs to match Spain's flag colors.

Ber then told me how I would be able to get into the castle without being noticed as myself. First, he had to go into the village to get something for me to use as a disguise. I waited with the men and played cards while he went to get what I needed to fool everyone at Madera and be able to get inside to speak to my father without any soldiers around. About an hour later, Ber came back riding on a wagon being pulled by a donkey. I was not too sure about me riding on this ridiculous looking thing, but I was determined to be able to make this work.

I hide my sword in the back under some straw and throw some dirt on my face and clothing as I mess up my hair and then bid

them all good day. I am sure I look the part of a servant delivering some goods as I ride down the road following the directions Ber had given me to get there. As I approached Madera, I was mesmerized by the size of the castle and the surrounding lands. This was all to be mine someday once I was made king.

It was so unbelievable that I almost forgot the role I was playing as I approached the gate. There was just one watchman who came up to my wagon and asked, "What goes here?" I say under my breath that I have potatoes and wheat. He looks in the back of the wagon and I am afraid he's going to look under the straw, but he just pokes a stick into it and then nods his head waving me on to go across the bridge.

I pull the wagon up next to the back-kitchen door and realize that it somehow looks familiar. Then I go to knock on the door, and I wait. With a loud scratching sound, the door opens and there stands a plain but pretty servant girl who is staring at me like she cannot figure out who I am. I say, "Potato delivery." And she comes running out to get the potatoes. I check my surroundings to make sure no one is watching, and I walk up close to her and act like I am interested in her. She is flattered as I help her put potatoes into a basket and then carry them up to the door for her.

When we get to the door, she turns to take them, but I say, "No, no, I take in for you." She is flattered again and lets me step inside as easy as that. Once inside, I look around and feel like I have been here before. If only I could remember when.

It looks like the girl is by herself for which I am thankful for, but I still need to make sure, so I walk over to the door going to a pantry and check inside quickly. She reaches to take the potatoes from my hand, and I bend down to kiss her. She gets flustered, but I am determined to win her over so that she will go along with me instead of fighting me.

I ask her if the old man is home and she nod to say yes. Then I say, "I need my pay." She says she can get it for me, but I tell her I must ask for extra because my boss needs it to get the extra supplies he wants. She hesitates so I kiss her again and she just about melts

as she shakes her head and says for me to go inside. If she were here when I was acting as Prince, I am surprised she does not recognize me but then she may have never seen me close up, so she would not recognize me.

Now that I am inside, I need to guess on where my father would be since Ber could not help me with this part. I walk down a long hallway that leads into the dining room and then I see the stairway. Even though I do not remember this place, it seems like second nature to me to know where the rooms are as I come to a sitting room right off the stairway. I then quietly climb the steps and at the top of the stairs are large doors that look like they lead into a library or study and I knew that my father would be there.

I took a deep breath as I was wishing I had my sword in hand. I took a step inside the huge room and looking around did not see anyone. I'm guessing I am wrong as to where he may be but he must be somewhere nearby so just as I'm about to turn around, I hear a deep angry voice say, "What are you doing up here, boy?" It appears that he thinks I am the helping hand that delivers from town. I am frozen as I stumble on my words trying to think of what to say.

Chapter 12: King Roland



Chapter 12: King Roland

The man who I think is my father and the king of Madera then walks around to face me, and I try to hide my face as he grabs my arm and pulls me toward him. I put my head down and I hear him gasp in shock as he says, "Roland? Is that you? Where have you been? Why are you in this ridiculous looking attire?"

For a moment I am pleased he is not angry at me but only at my looks. I am still not sure what to say but manage to get out, "Soldiers tried to kill me." He seems concerned and wants to know what soldiers. Now I am really confused. Why would he ask me that if he wanted to kill me?

I tell him I do not know anything except that I woke up out in the desert with a cut in my head and no memory. He seems shocked and wants to see my head. I show him where the bump still is and ask him, "Tell me the truth. Am I a banished Prince?" He takes a step back and with surprise asks, "What? You are my son, the Prince of Madera and no one has banished you. I have been worried about you for months after you disappeared seven or eight months ago. Then days ago, Sabina disappears after she tells me she thinks she knows where you are but is afraid to tell me more as she said it was too dangerous. Do you know where she is?"

I bow my head to avoid eye contact and he asks, "What's wrong? Where's Sabina?" I could not believe it, but a tear came to my eyes as I whispered, "She's dead." He gasped a sad sigh and asked me what happened as he went to the liquor cabinet and poured me a large glass of whiskey as I told him the whole story. As I was telling him, I had a dizzy spell but this one was somehow different. He caught me as I almost fell to the floor. Overwhelming but clear memories come flooding into my brain. I realize that he is really my father and I had really lost the love of my life, Sabina, my wife.

More memories come flooding into my brain like a huge river dam has just broken. The memories of Sabina are so overwhelming that it is making me feel sick to my stomach. We were truly in love.

No one had ever had such an impact on me as she did. How could I have let her die? How am I going to go on with my life without her? Even though I was or am a mean S.O.B., she knew the soft side of me—the side that showed love and compassion. She was my everything and now I feel so lost and alone. I feel like crying on my father's shoulder like a little boy.

My father is watching me with a look of concern on his face as these memories come back. I feel like I am going to pass out and stumble to a chair. My father comes over to my side and puts his hand on my back as he says, "It's going to be fine, my son. Now that you are back where you belong, we will be able to stand together against our enemies and keep our kingdom." I am not sure what he means. Memories of my father and his empire have not all come back to me yet. However, I have a feeling who his enemy is.

After a few minutes, the dizziness passes and I am feeling better, so I ask him, "What enemies are you speaking of?" He is a bit surprised at my question but then goes on, "I see all your memories have not come back. I am speaking of the Redlaws. They are the most powerful kingdom in this land, and they are trying to take over all the smaller kingdoms by burning and destroying what they have." I understand now because of my experience at the Valencia castle that had been burned. This leads me to a question I wonder if my father knows the answer to, so I ask, "Do you know why Sabina was at the Valencia castle?"

My father walked over to the window and looked out for a moment and then with sadness he replies, "She was with you when they took you both so I'm not sure why she was there. Did she tell you anything before she died?" I felt tears swelling up again as I said, "Only that she loved me. I had to bury her out in the wilderness. May we please bring her body back here to bury properly? I promised her I would if I could." My father shook his head in agreement as he said, "Of course, son. I loved her like a daughter and want her to rest in peace at home next to your grandmother and grandfather."

I then got up the nerve to ask him about what Ber had told me about him sending soldiers after me, "Why do the forest people

think that you sent the soldiers to kill me? And who is Gutierrez?" My father's expression tells me that he is surprised at my inquiry. "I have no idea except that rumors fly about as fast as ducks fly south. Gutierrez is our enemy, the head of the Redlaw troops and a very evil man and he may have been the one to start that rumor." It all makes sense now and I know what my mission will be soon. My father needs my help to save Madera and her people.

I then ask my father what he plans on doing about the situation and he seems perplexed but vows to fight to the death to save his kingdom. I offer to help in whatever way I can. He thanks me and then tells me, "We must celebrate your return. Even though it is not such a joyful homecoming for you, we are thankful you are alive and well."

I feel like a piece of bravery has returned as I get up the nerve to ask him about my mother, "Could I invite my mother?" My father's eyes widen, and he stirs around for a moment as if trying to think of what to say. Then with restrained sympathy he says, "Only because you want her to come, but you have not seen her since you were a child. I'm not so sure she would come." I tell him I understand but want to try to be in her life even though she has hurt him terribly. He says that is my choice as she is my mother and he will not try to keep her from me anymore as he has done in the past.

The whiskey that my father gave me seems to be making me sleepy now and I put my head down on the table just as the pretty servant girl steps in to announce that dinner is being served. My father tells her who I am, and tells me, "Remember Maria?" She laughs with some embarrassment as she welcomes me back home. A good meal sounds wonderful and it should help me get some strength back. My father comes up to me to help me out of my slump and gives me a big hug. It makes me feel comforted and glad to be part of a family that cares.

After a tasty dinner of fish, porridge, and cornbread, I feel like going to bed, but I needed to go back and let Ber know what has taken place and that he and the men can go home. My father does not want me to go anywhere for which I can understand but I

assure him I only must go a short distance and will return within a short time. He walks me outside to the stable and has the stable boy get a horse ready for me.

He opens the door to a stall to show me his pride and joy racehorse, asking, "Do you remember the black stallion you gave me, Raven?" I am searching my brain and vaguely remember he had racehorses, but I do not recall seeing a black one and sure do not recall giving him this one. "No, I do not recall him." He has a gorgeous long mane and looks as if he could beat any other horse with such a muscular build. I ask, "Has he won any races?" My father laughs and says, "Just about everyone he has run. You will have to go make sure you are here for the next one."

As I mount up and ride down the road to see Ber, I reflect on why I do not remember a lot about my father. It dawns on me that I was always too busy to spend time with him. I feel like I need to change some of my ways of the past before it is too late. What did I just say to myself? Before it is too late! That is what my father said to me in my vision.

Perhaps he has been trying to make me see this for some time. After all, he is getting older and will not be around forever. But then I contemplate, what did he mean when he said, "You must decide before it is too late." Decide what? Was there something my father is not telling me? Do I need to decide about my life? I will have to bring up the subject when I speak to him later.

As I ride close to the camp where Ber and the men are staying, it seems way too quiet and dark. I am glad I grabbed my sword before leaving as I am getting a creepy feeling that something is not right. I do not ride into camp but dismount behind a bunch of trees and make my way quietly toward the camp. I see some smoldering fire about to go out and then stumble over something soft.

It is too dark to make out what it is but when I bend down close enough, I get a whiff of the iron blood smell of death and realize that it is the body of one of the men. As quickly as possible I search for others and find four more bodies. Then I hear a gurgling whisper calling my name and recognize it as Ber's voice, so I follow

the sound until I come to him spread out with blood pooled on his stomach.

Ber is dying and I cannot do anything to save him, so I try to make him comfortable. I ask, "Where is Drake? Is he here?" Ber attempts to wave his hand to tell me, "Gone." So, I ask, "Who did this?" He whispers "Gutier...rez." I put my ear next to his mouth and ask, "Why?" He whispers with effort, "I do not tell where you are." With the effort to say that, he lets out a long breath and does not take another.

I am so angry! More deaths by that no-good son of a bitch! I want to find him and make him pay for what he has done to Sabina and now Ber and his men. This man who has been like a brother to me did not deserve to die this way. I use the energy from my anger to dig a grave for the six men and mark it with stones. I pull out the red scarf he gave me and place rocks to hold it. I grieve for this man as I go back. To me he is not just a savage but a good man who deserved to live like any other man of any other background.

By the time I get back to the castle, the morning light is coming over the hills. I sneak in the kitchen door and as I climb the stairs, I am trying to remember where my room is. As I creep down the hall, a door opens, and my father appears. He seems upset and asks, "What took so long?" I apologize and tell him about my friends being killed. He slams his fist into the wall and yells, "Damn you, Gutierrez! How many of my people are you going to kill? No more if we can help it." I let him know I agree by saying, "No more!"

He walks me up the hall to another room that I now recognize and am so looking forward to my soft bed. I am overwhelmed with a fleeting memory of being a child as my father tucks me in. Instead of tucking me in, he pats me on the shoulder and says, "Do not you worry son, we will figure out what to do about that serpent Gutierrez. But for now, you need some rest." Even though it is morning, I bid him a good night and then splash some water on my face from the face bowl and wash my hands. I am too tired to even undress all the way as I fall into the cloud of my feather bed. I must have been asleep before I hit the pillow.

Chapter 13: The Twins



Chapter 13: The Twins

During my sleep that lasted most of the day I had a dream about Sabina being with child. We were so happy as we prepared the nursery area and pondered on names. I told her it was a boy and she argued it was a girl. Finally, after she got so big she couldn't walk, she went into labor and after hours of waiting for her to give birth she kept crying my name, but I didn't know what I could do to help her.

I turned in my sleep and the dream continued. We were worried she was not going to be able to have the baby and everyone was running around trying ways to get her to give birth. She agonized for what seemed like two days, but a new midwife came just in time to get her to stand up and somehow that helped the babies come.

I could hear the baby crying and crying when I realized that I was awake, and this was not a dream. I keep hearing a baby cry in the distance and sat up to listen more carefully. Why am I hearing a baby cry? Did she really have a baby? Or am I still dreaming?

Just then my door opens, and my father enters pushing a baby bed on wheels. What is this? He says joyfully, "Wake up, wake up, someone here to see you." I cannot believe my eyes as I jump up and see a baby kicking and crying in the bed. I look at my father with wonderment and ask, "Who is this?" He says with a big smile, "This is my granddaughter." And hands her to me.

I have not held a baby for ages and not sure what to do but manage to pull the little camisole tightly around, so the kicking would stop. By then my father has turned around and is reaching into the bed again to my disbelief, there is another baby who is asleep. "Father, what is going on here? Whose babies are these?" He says grinning from ear to ear, "Can't you see the resemblance? You are holding your daughter, Larissa and this is your son, Lawrence."

I almost passed out! "You are joking!" and exclaim with laughter. I do not remember having and children. My father got

serious and said, "Sabina had them while you were gone. She almost died having them and didn't want to live for a while after they were born because you were not here to share the happy occasion with her." I was shocked, "Gone where?" I do not recall the months before I woke up half dead but apparently, I was not here for a few months. So, the dream I had was a memory.

The rest of the day I held my son and daughter as much as possible between feeding, sleeping, and changing. They were so perfectly beautiful. Larissa had red hair like her grandmother, and Lawrence had black hair like me. They were so tiny but then they were twins and only a few weeks old. My father had pulled their skirts up and shown me how each one had a birthmark on their upper thigh, the girl on the left and the boy on the right.

When he pointed them out, he asks, "What does that look like to you?" I couldn't make out what he was seeing so he says, "It's two tiny crowns. Which means they were meant to be a king and queen someday." I was amazed and so thankful that Sabina had left me children to remember her by. It was very comforting to my new grief for her.

The next day Drake came for a visit. As soon as he came in the door, I had to ask, "Why didn't you tell me I had two babies?" He shrugged his shoulders saying, "I didn't think you would believe me and figured when you got your memory back, you would find out." I laughed and accused him of being jealous. We had a fun day together like brothers do and he apologized for not being there for Ber when he needed help. I told him it was not his fault and asked him how his quest worked out. He had to tell me all the details of the fight and then we had dinner and he went home.

Drake had brought us some good news about Gutierrez. There was a war waging across the sea and Gutierrez had joined up to fight, so he would be gone for some time. I secretly hoped he would meet his demise there and not come back but that was probably wishful thinking. Still it was like a burden had been lifted except that it did not make me feel any better about Sabina. I missed her terribly and every time I held the babies, I would see her dimples on their cute faces and yearn to touch her again.

Every night it seemed like I would have a different dream. Some were good about Sabina or the babies, but some were dark and gloomy with serpents and dragons or violent fighting and killing. I wasn't sure why I would have such horrible nightmares, but I still had not uncovered my memories for during the time that I had been missing between right before the babies were born and after I found myself left for dead. My mind must not want to remember the details. Where could I have been?

My father brought to my attention one day that he could see how I had changed into a more compassionate man. I was surprised and asked him why he thought that. He just said, "Well, you used to be more interested in fighting and taking power than in your family." It was not the first time I heard this as it reminded me of what Pissarro had told me. I asked him if he thought it was a good thing or not and he agreed it was a good thing but then added that when the time came for me to be tough again, I would have to take charge. I said I would and hoped I would not let him down.

Ever since I kissed the servant girl in the kitchen, she has been flirting with me and I am not sure what to do about it. She is extremely sweet, but my heart is still aching for Sabina and I do not think I want to get involved with a servant girl. Not that she is not pretty and smart. It would just bring up a lot of issues being from different parts of society just as it did in the beginning with Sabina. I had met Sabina while out riding and did not know what family she was from and by the time I found out, I was already in love with her.

My father had fought with me repeatedly about her. He wanted me to marry a princess from a faraway country who would have brought us a lot of revenue from foreign goods. It was also a good political match, so I understood why he did not want me marrying Sabina. He liked Sabina but just did not want me to marry her. I argued that I did not know the princess and had no idea if I would even like her once I met her. After Sabina and I married in a private ceremony, he would not talk to me for a long time and just ignored Sabina. I guess having the babies brought him out of his angry mood.

We felt like it was a good time to have a celebration as my father had suggested when I came home. I was really looking forward to seeing my mother. We had tracked down where she was living through her relatives. Unfortunately, she lived some distance away. If I sent word by messenger, she might not get the invitation in time, so I was thinking of going myself. My father did not want me to, but he understood if I was truly set to do it. I could not wait for her to meet her grandchildren that she did not know she had.

Chapter 14:
A Banished Queen

Chapter 14: A Banished Queen

It was a bright sunny spring day as I left to go find my mother. I had never been to where my aunt said she had moved to, so I had to bring everything I could to be prepared for whatever may come my way, including my favorite horse, Gold. It was rather exciting to be going on an adventure to the south side of the country where the sea was said to be so big that you could not see across to the other side. My mother was supposed to have a small cottage by the sea.

My mother, Anniah, had left Madera when I was six years old. I did not understand then why she had to leave, and my father did not tell me what she had done to deserve to be banished until I was over 18. I remembered that when my father told me, I was terribly upset and left home for a while trying to find her. I had gone to her mother's home some miles away.

Grandmother Anna lived in a modest castle and was married to my grandfather, King Kalvin of Valdez. They were glad to see me and were nice but said they did not know where their daughter had moved to and would tell me if they found out. They never let me know anything, so I guessed they knew but were reluctant to tell me. After I met Sabina and wanted to marry her, I tried to find my mother again without any success.

I had also asked my grandmother where my mother's sister lived, and she was willing to tell me. I was hoping her sister, Agnes, would know something, but she said she had not heard from her in years. When I went to visit her sister again recently, I told her about the children and she was so happy for me that she agreed to tell me where my mother was living and even gave me directions on how to get there as she had been to see her last year.

Since I am in my late 20s, my mother would be in her late 40s and I am afraid I will not recognize her if I do find her. What if she does not want anything to do with me? She probably does not want anything to do with my father and he would not blame her for not wanting to come for a visit. But I had to try for the sake of the children and for my peace of mind. I do recall many nights of

crying in bed as a child after she was gone. My father never mentioned her name and I often wondered if he missed her.

I want to know the story behind why she did not love my father anymore and what was so great about the man she fell in love with. As I rode, I tried hard to remember what she looked like. All I could remember was her long curved bright red hair and soft warm hands. I wondered if she had green sparkling eyes like many red heads had and hoped that little Larissa would have. She was too little to be able to tell yet if they were going to be green or brown like mine.

I then realized that I had let Gold slow down as I was daydreaming about my mother, so I gave him a small kick in the side and off we went. I had three days ride ahead of me, so I had better get moving. I was pushing Gold to the limit and before long we were at the edge of the giant Ebro River. This river was wide and deep, but I did not see where to cross it, so I had to ride downstream for a while to find the crossover.

By the time I got to the other side, the sun was dipping behind a mountain, so I started looking for somewhere to camp for the night. I was tired and sweat soaked. A dip in the river sounded wonderful. As I walked down to the river, I saw a horseman crossing where I had gone. As a sign of neighborly courtesy, I put my hand up in a wave and he waved back briefly. I stripped down and jumped in with a big splash. Not realizing how deep the river was, I have a moment of dread as I remember the dragon or serpent beast that came after me in the moat at the Valencia castle. I had to push my way back up in somewhat of a struggle gasping for air as I finally was able to get to the top of the water.

I had not noticed that the man crossing the river had come over to where I had gone in and was waiting for me. As I pulled myself out, he shouts, "I wasn't sure you were going to make it out." I laugh and say, "Just a bit deeper than I thought." He asks, "Do you know how to swim?" I shake my head, "Oh yes, but not in such a fast-moving water." I then ask him to join me for a bite to eat if he has the time.

He accepts the invitation and follows me to my campsite. We introduce each other. He says, "I'm Lopez, the Blacksmith from Catalonia." I see that he is not royalty but from the area, so I introduce myself just as Rojo, the carpenter from Madera, which was not a lie since my father taught me a lot about carpentry. We shared a small meal of cheese, fruit, and bread and after talking for a while, I told him I was tired and was going to lay down. As I put my sword next to me, I invite him to stay if he wants for which he seems happy and agrees as he got his belongings from his horse.

As the morning sun appears to welcome another day, I roll over to see if Lopez is up yet, but I see he has left me. He probably had to be on his way early. I am still tired and feel like rolling back over and going back to sleep but I know I need to make good time today so I can be back home within a week. I jump up with a yawn and begin to roll up my cot. Then I am looking around for my bag of supplies but do not see it anywhere. I let out a yell, "Damn it, I've been robbed!"

I cannot believe it. Even though I did not let on that I was royalty, he still robbed me. Now I am going to have to hunt down some food for the day. I look around to see what may be available and see the river. Oh yes, I can catch some fish. I walk to the river with my knife and sword in hand. It takes me a while to catch anything since the water moves so fast, so I walk upstream to find where the crossover is and see the sticks caught alongside it. It will be easier to catch something here and after a few tries, I have a few fish to take back and cook.

I am still angry at myself for letting Lopez rob me, but it is just a lesson not to trust anyone while traveling. I will be more careful next time. The fish are smelling good and I gulp one down and save the rest for later. I pack up and mount Gold to be off for another day's ride. Maybe I will come to someone's home that will feel sorry for me and feed me.

Gold seems to understand me so well. His performance is outstanding as he runs across the meadows and trails without complaining. I decide not to stop for long at the noon hour. I am still riding along the river, so I let Gold get his fill of water and I

drink as much as possible before mounting up again. I need to keep an eye out for something to use to put water in since we will need to steer away from the river soon and Lopez took my water bag too.

Up ahead I see a cluster of modest huts and what appears to be a small village. I am so thankful for this opportunity to find more supplies. As I ride into the village, I see a few villagers walking about so I raise my hand to greet them and they return the greeting. It seems like a friendly little village. I see a marketplace that most likely sells supplies and pull Gold to a stop, so I can jump off to tie his reins onto the riding pole.

As I walk into the establishment, I almost run into a fair maiden who at first glance, looks like Sabina and I gasp for a minute. She looks up at me and smiles with a flirtatious look as she asks, "Est-ce qu'on s'est rencontré?" I am taken back for a moment but then realize that I am close to the French border so many here may speak French. Since I know a little French, I think she has just asked me if we have met, so I shake my head no but cannot think of anything to say in French.

She has the most beautiful porcelain face with greenish colored eyes and her figure is so shapely for such a young woman that I am mesmerized for a moment. She then lets out a tiny laugh and says, "Perhaps you speak Spanish better." I shake my head yes. She then says in Spanish, "I think I would remember you if we had met before." I am speechless but smile and stammer something like, "Hello, I am Rojo from....uh." She smiles again and says, "Hello, nice to meet you. I am Ella from Falcon." I stumble on my words, "Nice to...to meet you too."

What is wrong with me? Am I that tired? Ella then looks me up and down as if to see if I am worthy of her attention. She appears to be a villager in her attire but carries herself like royalty. She then asks, "Do you live nearby?" I say, "No, a day's ride north." Is it my imagination, or does she seem to be disappointed as she says, "Be sure to come back again." I like that she says to come again so I just say, "Sure." She turns and walks down the street for a few steps, turns and waves to me. What? She is waving, and I am just staring

at her. I finally try to wave but by then she is walking away. What magic spell is she putting on me to act so foolishly?

I fumble through buying some supplies not even paying attention to what I need. When I go outside, I do not see any sign of her and wonder if she lives in this village. She said where she was from, but I cannot remember. I ask the next person I see on the street what the name of this village is, and the rather stout woman says it is Falcon. I then ask if an Ella lives here.

The lady thinks for a moment and then says, "You mean Ella with the blond hair that I just saw walking home?" I was grateful she knew and say, "Yes, yes." She tells me that Ella lives at the Falcon castle up on the hill. I thank her and walk back to Gold, store my supplies, and mount up.

On my ride out of the village, I am wondering if I should try to see her again. What a beauty she is but after speaking to her, I do not think she looks that much like Sabina. How can I be thinking of another woman when I am still grieving for my wife? I must get Ella off my mind. I am heading toward some hills that look like it will not be so easy to ride like I did yesterday. Since I spent way too much time in the village, I eat some fish for dinner as I ride until the sun is setting, and I slow down to find a spot to make camp.

I make sure my camp is hidden away where no travelers will come by and roll out my cot for a long-awaited rest. It has been a long day and I just want to pass out but visions of Ella pop into my head and I get restless. Thinking about Ella is crazy. I force myself to think of Sabina and my babies and how much I miss them. I drift off soon to the sound of crickets chirping.

I awaken to the sound of birds singing as I realize another day has dawned. I need to get up to get something to eat and be on my way. As I stuff my mouth with a slice of bread, I keep hearing her coy voice when she said, "Be sure to come back again." Why can't I get her out of my mind? Should I come back this way on the way back home? I know I should not, but something is telling me that it is important for me to see her again. Or is it just my libido that wants to see her again?

With two-thirds of the way behind me, I urge Gold on as much as possible to make it to my mother's by nightfall. I only stop for a few minutes to water Gold and let him rest for a while. I do not know what my mother's place looks like or where exactly it is, but I am sure I can find it by asking around. The directions that my Aunt Agnes gave me were not that clear. All she said was that I would know the place when I see it.

I push Gold to go over the rocky hills and valleys until I feel like he is going to give out on me. I must stop and water him, but I have not seen any water for some time. Just as I come over another hill, I see some sheep grazing and know there must be someone living close by. I am grateful to see a large spread out farm on the horizon, so I encourage Gold to keep going, "Come on boy, not much longer." Gold knows what I mean and keeps up his even pace until we come to the gate that has a sign above it that reads Rangler.

This is it! This is where she lives. I am surprised that I just happen to come upon it so easily. Aunt Agnes said she married a rancher by the name of Rangler. I am rather impressed by the large area that has either sheep, cattle, or horses grazing on the very thick green grass. I ride up to what looks like the main house and dismount Gold. I would have liked to take a bath before getting here, but it is too late to worry about that now that I am here at last. I take a deep breath and knock on the door.

A young girl answers the door and asks who I am. I tell her my name and ask her if Anniah is at home. She answers, "Yes, please come in and I will tell her you are here." I now have a knot in my stomach in anticipation of my mother who I have not seen in over 20 years. I walk in and the girl asks for my hat and coat. After she puts them on the shelf, she says to follow her and then directs me to a chair in a sitting room. I wait as I think up all kinds of ways that this may not go well.

After a few minutes, I hear footsteps and in through the door walks a woman with reddish hair. She walks up to me and asks, "May I help you?" I realize that she does not recognize me as a grown man. After all, she has not seen me since I was six when I had curly brown hair that later turned black. I am not sure what to

say at first, so I tell her I am a traveling man seeking a place to rest. She looks me over somewhat and asks, "What is your name and where are you from?" I thought I had better use my full name so there would not be any misunderstanding. "My name is Roland III from Madera."

For a moment I was not sure if she heard me but then she put her hands over her mouth as she tried to contain her tears. "Roland? My son, Rolly?" I shook my head saying, "Yes" and walked over to her as it looked like she was about to faint from the whiteness that flushed into her face. I helped her to a chair and sat down next to her.

She grabbed my hands and looked into my eyes as she cried, "You are not just saying that are you?" I answer, "No I really am he and I have been searching for you all my life." She tearfully says, "I am so sorry to have left you with your father, but he would not allow me to take you since you were a Prince to be a King someday. I did not think I would ever see you again. This is so wonderful!" She begins to cry again.

I consoled her as I said, "I understand, and I do not hold it against you. I just want you to know I want you in my life. I want you to know your grandchildren." Her eyes open wide as she excitedly exclaims, "Grandchildren! No really? How many?" I tell her about Larissa and Lawrence and how their mother died. She is sympathetic and then gets a sad look as she says, "Your father won't let me come to see them." I assured her that he would.

Even though I did not remember my mother very well, something about her made me feel warm and loved. How I missed that feeling. She then asks me to stay for dinner and says, "I want you to meet my husband and your half-brother and sister. They are not here right now but will be home soon. I can't believe how handsome you have grown up to be." I began to blush at her compliment. It made me feel like that little boy with his mother again.

I ended up staying for three days loving every minute with my mother and her family. My brother, Ethan, is 18 and loved to hear

my stories about my adventures after losing my memory. My sister, Beverly, is 17 and looks just like her mother, and loved taking care of all their animals. I could have stayed a lot longer but knew my father would be worried. When I told my mother I would be leaving the next day, she cried and hugged me for a long time. We had a big feast that evening and the leftovers went in my supply bag for my trip home.

When it was time to leave, I asked my mother for the third time, "Are you sure you and your family can come to our celebration next month?" She assured me that they would be there. I mounted Gold and slowly rode away, waving good-bye to them all. When they were out of sight, my eyes were getting heavy with tears. My emotions were so mixed, but I also had an overwhelming sense of accomplishment. I have finally found my mother!

Chapter 15: Princess Ella



Chapter 15: Princess Ella

Seeing my mother and how happy she is with her family made me sad in a way. That is the kind of life I wanted. A happy life revolving around a wife and children with relatives to visit and enjoy fun times with. One thing I was grateful for was that my mother did not know the side of me before I lost my memory. I do not think she would have liked me that way and I swore I would never be that man again.

The more I thought about her family, the more I wanted to go see Ella again. Perhaps there was a chance of her being the one I could share my life with since I do not have Sabina. Having children without a wife to be their mother is just not right and if I could somehow find another woman to be their mother it would be worth it even if I didn't love her the way I supposedly loved Sabina.

Before I realized how time had escaped me, I was overlooking the village of Falcon. From this angle I could see the Castle of Falcon sitting high on a hillside next to the village. I had to think of a reason to be calling on Ella. Perhaps I could just say I want to invite her to my celebration. It would not be that far for her to go or I could even come and get her depending on her parent's restrictions. I am not too sure of her age so I will have to be careful in how I present the invitation.

First, I need to stop in the village and get something to bring to Ella. All I need is a small token of my affection or I should say, my invitation. I go to the shop I had been before. I look around trying to spot something unique fit for a princess. Something shiny caught my eye. It was the most delicate silver rose with a white ribbon holding a note that I could write something to her on. I do not care how high the price is as I was on a mission. Thank goodness that robber did not find my money I had hidden in my stocking.

Before leaving the shop, I asked the shop keeper for a writing pen and I wrote a short note saying, "Princess Ella, please honor me with your presence at Madera." I added the date and slipped it into the white and silver box. I was getting a little excited thinking of

her now. All I needed to do now is go wash my face and hands before climbing the hill.

As I rode up the hill, I could see how massive and beautiful this castle was in comparison to ours at home. What if they will not let me see her? I was getting more and more nervous the closer I got. I dismount and ask the stable boy if Princess Ella is home and he says that she is with a bit of a smirk on his face.

I walk up over the bridge and hear barking of dogs as I get to the doors. A tall man comes to the door asking for my name and business, so I just say, "Roland III to see Princess Ella." He shows me in and seats me to wait. I must pull out my handkerchief to wipe my brow and hands that are sweating.

After some time, I begin to wonder if she is not going to see me but then I hear soft footsteps and she appears in the doorway. With a big smile, she exclaims, "Well, I didn't think I'd see you again so soon." I am trying not to stammer this time, so I speak slowly to tell her I am on my way back home from visiting my mother and wanted to stop to invite her to an event. Her face brightens up as she says, "Oh really, what kind of event?" I explain how my father wants to have a celebration.

Then I remember the gift, so I pull it from my waist as I bow and say to her, "Please accept this gift as my invitation." She seems pleased and comes further into the room to accept it as she sits down. I sit next to her as she opens the box. She gasps with delight and seems overwhelmed.

Then she says, "Oh my, it's beautiful but I really shouldn't accept this without my father's permission." I ask if he is at home and she says no but her mother is and if she gives her permission, she will accept it. Then she gets up and goes to another part of the castle to find her mother.

It seems like a long time before she returns. When she does, she says her mother likes the rose and is pleased to accept it for her, but she wants to talk to me. Her mother is full of questions for me from how old I am to who my ancestors happen to be. Her mother makes

it a point to let me know that Ella has not yet turned 18 but will soon. That means she is about eight years younger than me. That is a reasonable age and just a few years younger than Sabina. I wonder if her mother thinks I am too much older than Ella to be a suiter.

Her mother smiles as if impressed with my answers but at the same time seems a bit worried. I can understand since she has never met me before. She finally tells me that they will need to speak to Ella's father to know for sure if she can attend. She says they will then send word to me if she is able to accept and attend or not.

This seems fair to me and I feel this ends the conversations, so I gently take Ella's hand to kiss its dainty smoothness as I get a closer look into her big beautiful eyes that appear to be a light green. To be proper, I take her mother's hand to kiss it too. I bid them good day as I stumble out the door.

I am feeling like a teenager again! I was happy the way that went so much so that I felt like I wanted to jump for joy and celebrate. I kick Gold a little too hard making her jump and run as I yell, "Yahoo." I cannot believe my luck...I find my mother and a girl that is a princess all in a week's time.

It seems too good to be true but then with all the bad things that have happened to me lately, I guess I should be due some good luck. I could not wait until I got home to tell my father. He will be so pleased that I am interested in a princess instead of a commoner.

Chapter 16: Kidnapped Again



Chapter 16: Kidnapped Again

The ride home seemed to go much faster than the ride there. I was stretched out on my cot for my last night on the road with thoughts of Ella flying through my mind. I could not remember the last time I felt so happy. I was so filled with my happy thoughts that I did not hear the footsteps behind me. Suddenly, I felt something being pulled over my head. In shock I jump up, but something hits me in the jaw, and it is all I remember until I wake up later, not knowing where I am.

When I woke, I could not see where I was as there was a cloth covering my eyes. I am really getting tired of waking up with a headache and not knowing where I am. I start to move around and realize that my hands and feet are tied with a rope. There are not any sounds around me, so I am wondering who did this and why did they just leave me. Is it more robbers? Did they take the little supplies I have left? Or did they take my sword? I try to feel around me to see if it is still by my side where I had put it the night before, but I feel nothing but grass.

It feels like it is around midday as the sun shines warmly on me. I must have slept a long time after getting knocked out. Then I hear what sounds like a horse and wagon. I hear voices but cannot make out what they are saying. I wait until they get closer and then I yell, "Who are you? Why have you tied me up? Where am I?" They do not answer but keep muttering among themselves as I strain to understand a word or two. After a while, I ask again but they go on just ignoring me.

The day drags on and begins to cool down, so daylight must be leaving. I then smell something cooking and wonder if they are going to feed me. Looks like it is a good thing I ate so well at my mothers or I would be starving now. It sounds like they are eating and talking and then it gets quiet for a while. I hear someone approaching me, and I do not know what to expect but then the man grabs my arm and rolls me over to untie the ropes on my hands.

He then puts something in my lap and says, "Eat." I reach for the food and it feels like some type of poultry meat so I take a bite. It tasted rather good but then I am rather hungry. I eat it all and as I am licking my fingers, I hear him come back. He ties my hands back with rope again and grunts the command, "Sleep." I am not too sure I will be able to sleep but I know I should be quiet, so they think I am sleeping.

Unfortunately, I do not understand them because they are speaking a different language. Who could they be? The only person I can think of that is out to get me is Gutierrez, but I thought he was gone overseas fighting a war. Could he be back? If so, how did he find me? My head is full of questions that I cannot answer and not sure I want to know the answers.

Then I had a dreadful thought. What if he went to Madera and made my father tell him where I had gone? I began to worry then and thought I had better say a prayer to ask for God to protect him and hope that it is not too late. Oh no, there is those words again...too late. This may be what was meant in my vision by his saying "You must decide before it is too late." But I still do not know what I must decide.

I finally fall asleep but do not sleep well as I toss and turn with every dream that comes. I have a frightful dream about Gutierrez burning down Madera and dragging my father down the road. I wake up yelling Gutierrez's name. I then realize that during the night the cloth that has been wrapped around my eyes has come off from my tossing and turning.

It is pitch dark, but my eyes start to adjust so I can make out two men sitting by a small fire burning. One of them looks like he has his eyes closed and must be sleeping. It is too bad that my hands and feet are tied. I want to go over and knock them both out.

They probably cannot see me that well, but I lay still as not to draw their attention. I want the cloth to stay off just enough so that I can see when it gets light, so I maybe can see who I am dealing with. I move my head back and forth so that the cloth slides back

on except for a small opening at the bottom so maybe I can see what is going on.

I can see the light creeping in as morning arrives. The two men are still sitting by the fire. I now see behind them what looks like maybe two other men sleeping on the ground. They must take turns two at a time to watch me. Whoever they are, I get the feeling that they are working for someone else and most likely will be taking me somewhere once they are up and ready to go. I keep watch and just as I thought, they have finished breakfast, brought me a bite to eat, and are now coming over to get me.

They roughly pick me up by the shoulders and feet and carry me over to the wagon tossing me in like a bag of potatoes. At least I landed in a bed of straw, so I cannot complain of getting any bruises. The wagon starts to move as I see trees passing me by as I wonder where we are going. After some time of the wagon rolling over bumpy roads, I start to dose off feeling sleepy from lack of having a full night's rest.

I am abruptly awoken when the wagon comes to a stop as I hear shouting and wonder where I am and what are they going to do with me now? Then I feel them grabbing me out of the wagon and carrying me up an incline into some sort of structure. They throw me to the ground and roll me over to untie the ropes. My hands feel numb from being bound and my feet do not want to hold my weight as I try to stand. They then take off the cloth around my eyes and I see I am in a horse barn.

I ask them, "Where am I?" They give me no answer and lead me outside into the bright sunlight. I am blinded for a moment and do not see where we are going but then as my eyes adjust, I see a large structure that has several chambers side by side. I was not sure what it could be but had a feeling I was about to find out. They pulled me in through one of the doors that lead to a small room that had a straw cot in it. The men handling me sat me down on the cot and shouted, "Stay."

It is not a typical jail cell, but it looks like it is supposed to serve the same purpose. They lock the door from the outside and leave

me to sit as I wonder whose property this is and why I am here. There is nothing to do but lay down and stare through the small window. Thoughts of Ella come to mind making me feel better. I am in great anticipation about seeing her again, and just hope I can be out of this situation before our celebration day.

Sometime later I hear someone unlocking the door, so I sit up to see who it is. The door opens to a little but old man who seems nervous. He stares at me for a moment and then in a squeaky voice says, "You have been brought here to speak to Gutierrez; however, he will not be here for a few days, so we will be looking after you until he gets here." I ask him, "What does he want with me?" The man says he does not know but I will find out everything when Gutierrez gets here.

Oh boy, I am beginning to get worried. It was Gutierrez's men that killed my wife and tried to kill me at the Valencia castle, so I had better get my mind ready for what may be coming my way. I search what memories I must see if there is anything that will give me a hint of why he wants me dead. It had to be something I did when I was acting like a tyrant.

I wonder how many others out there might want a piece of my hide. I wish I knew what had happened to me to have turned me into such a mean person that some people say that I am or was. Several days go by as I am denied my freedom and seem to be wasting away without being able to be in the sun or to run or ride.

I am not sure how many days have gone by when I hear the lock open and the little man stands staring at me before he says, "Get up and follow me." It looks like it is time to face what may be my fate. I follow the door keeper down to the other end of the structure as he leads me into a room that has all kinds of hunted animal heads on the wall. He directs me to stand in a certain spot and then says, "Wait." I am normally a brave person, but I feel like I want to run right now.

Chapter 17:
Jousting with Gutierrez



Chapter 17: Jousting with Gutierrez

As I stand there waiting, I am wondering if Gutierrez is going to come at me from behind and try to kill me right here. I stay as focused as possible listening for footsteps. Then I hear the door open and I turn to see who it is and to my surprise it is not Gutierrez, but a man dressed in war gear. He is probably Gutierrez's main man.

He looks at me briefly and then walks to the other side of the room, turns, and says with an accent I do not recognize, "You and Gutierrez to joust in morning." I am surprised and say, "What? I do not have my jousting horse, my sword or anything else to fight with." The man shrugs and says, "We have for you." And then he walks out and directs the little man to take me back to my cell.

I fall back on the cot in the cell as I try not to worry. But then I think why should I worry? Does he not know I have been the best at jousting in all the land for some years now? Wait! What if while I was missing, someone else became better than me? I ponder over this for a while but then dismiss it as it does not seem likely. I think my father would have told me if that were true.

I am hoping Gutierrez does not have a clue that I am the best in the land. I can take him out in no time and be done with this foolish game he has been playing with me. Even without my horse, my sword, lance or my favorite, the long dagger dirk, I can beat him without even trying hard. I was working myself up into a ball of anger, which is just what I need to be ready to fight tomorrow. It was impossible to sleep with this on my mind. It was way past the moon's rising when I must have finally fallen asleep in a troubled slumber.

As morning light was peeking out, I must have been dreaming when I heard a loud trumpet blow. I sat up startled wondering if it was in my dream or not. Then I heard it again immediately outside my cell. It must be an indication that it is time to get up and get ready for the jousting. I hear the door being unlocked and the little man comes in and throws garments at me. These must be what I am

supposed to wear. He then sets down some armor on the floor for me to wear. As I start to pull the breeches of the undergarment on, it looks as if they want to play a joke on me as they are too small. I am not surprised but it stirs my anger even more. I cannot wait to get out there and smash Gutierrez in the dirt.

The little man comes back to get me and walks me over to where the horses are waiting. I see the horsemen dressing the horses in their armor for the battle. Both horses have Gutierrez's crest of a red dragon eating swords on their caparisons that are blowing in the wind like flags. The little man shows me to my horse and says, "Wait." I stand next to the horse trying not to be too nervous.

Then he hands me a small dagger. I hope this is not all I have for weapons but then I see a lance, sword, and long dagger dirk on the horse. I look over them wondering if these will be as deadly as mine. He motions me to mount up and as I do, I see up on the hill another horse in full armor with a rider that must be Gutierrez.

I am led up the hill on the horse with the other man ahead of me. As we get up to the top of the hill, I hear a crowd cheering shouts as Gutierrez raises his arm with his sword in a triumphant wave. I had no idea I was going to be in a tournament joust with him. I thought it would have been just the two of us fighting. This was making me more nervous even though I still feel like I will be able to beat him with all my experience. As I come to the top of the hill, I hear loud yells of discontent from the crowd. They most certainly are Gutierrez's people who sound like they want my blood.

Then I am led behind the crowd to a shed that was for the opponent. Gutierrez was at the other end of the field sitting proudly on his black stallion as it paced back and forth waiting to be given a command to go. I began to sweat under my helmet as the morning sun was hitting me. Or could it be that I am more nervous than I think?

Gutierrez is looking like he may be a tough opponent to take down. But I tell myself not to worry. I have been champion of jousting in the Madera Kingdom for a few years now and it will take a tougher opponent than myself to beat my skills at jousting. I

try to pull down the tight-fitting breeches that are too small for me around my private area. I want to take them off but need them under jousting suit and the armor. It is so tight that I want to holler. It makes me even more angry knowing they gave me the breeches in a size fit for the little man. But this anger is just what I need to carry out my quest.

I hear the trumpets blow to announce the start of our match. I push my face plate down and get ready to gallop out. Watching through the crack of my helmet, it feels as if I have changed into someone else. Perhaps it is my tough and arrogant personality coming out to protect me. I raise my lance as I approach Gutierrez. We clash our lances as we pass each other and the crowd cries for more. I turn at the end of the field ready to go back for another strike.

We clash lances again at a faster pace and I feel myself falling backward. Determined not to let Gutierrez get the better of me, I grab on to the horse's saddle strap before falling completely off and pull myself back up to sitting position as the crowd's cheers get louder. When I am back on the horse, they hiss and moan at me and then they yell for Gutierrez by chanting his name over and over.

Several more attempts to knock Gutierrez off his horse have failed as he has deflected each blow of my lance. It may take more than a few attempts to get him, but I am determined to keep trying. Gutierrez pulls his horse to a stop at the end of the field as he puts his lance down and picks up his long dirk dagger as his choice of weapon for the next round. I am pleased as this weapon has many times worked for me in beating my opponents.

I take out my dirk from the pommel of the saddle as we approach each other, and I thrust it toward him as we pass. The two dirks clash loudly as we spin around but it is not strong enough to do any harm to either of us. The crowd is getting more and more excited as we yell at one another in our passing.

Gutierrez yells at me, "Bartardo, Estúpido!" I do not care if he is calling me a bastard and an asshole. He can call me all the names he

wants to as it does not hurt me a bit. I will be knocking him down soon. We do another pass without any results.

Things are getting more intense and I cannot let him get the upper hand. For the next round, I thought I had better use one of my best tactics to get him to the ground. First, I will need to slow down as I approach him to be able to block the thrust of his dirk. We ride to the middle of the field and I slow the horse down, put my dirk in its holder and when I'm close enough, I dodge his thrust and reach around to grab his left arm and twist it into a hammerlock hold. As I hold on tight with all my strength, I shove my right hand up to knock his head back by slamming my right fist into his chin with a strong blow.

Gutierrez seems surprised by this move and lets out a loud yell of pain when he loses his balance and begins to fall while I still have a grip on his left arm. This is a move my father taught me that can be amazingly effective in gaining power over your opponent as it can be very painful because it can dislocate the elbow, the shoulder, or both. It looks like I may have dislocated both on Gutierrez as he continues to roll around groaning in pain.

The crowd is not pleased with my move as they yell obscenities at me. I pay no attention to them as I continue my intent of taking Gutierrez out, so he will not be a problem to me anymore. I grab back my dirk, jump off my horse and see him trying to recover from still being in bad pain. He is just where I want me—defenseless and without his weapon. I jump on top of him as he struggles to be free. I knock off his helmet and then punch him across the jaw while I am pushing down on his injured shoulder with my other hand. He yells out in pain and begs me, "No, no more, stop!" I want to laugh at his pathetic cries.

I grab my dagger from my side holder and raise it above his head but then something stops me. Am I getting soft like I was accused of or is it something else? It hits me then that I do not want to kill him until I know why he has been trying to kill me. I also do not know if he has done something to my father. I yell at him, "Why do you want me dead?" He grumbles something that is hard to understand but sounds like he says, "Damned thief." He is

calling me a thief for some reason but what is it? I ask him, "Why do you call me a thief when you are the killer of my wife." He tries to talk again but coughs up blood.

I wait a minute for Gutierrez to stop coughing and then ask, "Did you do anything to my father?" He gets a questioning look on his face and shakes his head. Just then the man who brought me here interrupts us telling me I have won and there is no need to do anything else to Gutierrez. I am upset that I cannot continue my questions. It looks like it will have to wait until another time.

I tell Gutierrez, "This is not over. We will meet again." Gutierrez just grunts and spits blood as he curses at me again. The man directs us to get up off the ground. When I stand, he pulls my arm up to show the crowd that I won the match. The crowd is not happy and keeps calling Gutierrez's name.

The man motions me to go back to my side of the field. When I get there, the little man is there, and he directs me to follow him back to the horse barn. When we get there, I dismount, and the stable boy takes the horse's bridle and leads him over to be cleaned up. I pat the horse on the hindquarter to thank him for helping me win. The horse lets out a neigh as if to tell me he was happy to help.

Then the little man says, "You go now." I am not sure I understand him right, so I ask him to say that again. Again, he tells me I am free to go. He points over to where a horse is tied eating some green grass. I then realize that the horse is Gold and I have never been happier to see my horse.

Even though I do not know where I am or how I am going to find my way home, that is of no big concern since I am sure I will figure it out. From how Gutierrez reacted to my question about my father, I do not think he hurt him, but I am not sure I can believe him either, so it is urgent that I get home as soon as possible.

Chapter 18: Plans for Madera



Chapter 18: Plans for Madera

After leaving the edge of the forest, I ride in the direction I feel would be heading toward Madera Castle. I ride along what appears to be a well-traveled route even though I do not recall going this far to the outskirts of Madera before. As I ride, I cannot help but be worried about my father and my children. I just wish I could remember the time period that I was gone because I feel there must be a clue to why Gutierrez is after me buried in the facts of what went on during that time.

Was I really a criminal like Ber claimed I was when he said, "You have not chosen to be a better man. You just forgot how to be a criminal." I must seek a way to know why I was hated by so many and then find a way to make them see I am not that man anymore. The harder I try to remember, the harder I push Gold to gallop.

I come to an incline that I need to carefully take my time getting down and then see that it is leading into a forest region. This must be the forest that runs from Madera to the cliffs. I see a small stream flowing over the rocks and pull up to water Gold and take a rest. It is almost sundown, so I might as well find a spot under the trees to make camp here for the night. I decided not to light a fire. It may entice someone to come and rob me.

I was glad to see that someone had packed fresh supplies to my food bag. I was starving for anything to eat and a good rest for whatever may be coming tomorrow. I make camp, have a few bites to eat, and get comfortable as possible on the long grass I have gathered for a bed. I may not have my sword anymore to protect me, but I do have the small dagger that was handed to me and not reclaimed when I left. I stuffed it under the grass where I laid my head down and was asleep in a short minute.

I awake in the morning at first light raring to get going. I am eager to get home to see that all is fine there. I water Gold and hope he is ready for a long hard run. As we gallop along the edge of the trees that I still feel are part of the forest I am familiar with, I come

up over a ridge and then begin to recognize the scenery that is close to home. It has been a long time since I have been on this side of the forest, which would explain why I did not know where I was before.

As I approach Madera castle, everything seems in order and I am hoping that it will be inside the gates also. The gatekeeper sees me coming, waves, and opens the gate since I did not go straight to the stable as I usually do. I unmount quickly at the door and run inside calling for my father. He looks down from the balcony above with a look of concern as he says, "What is all the noise about?" I let out a sigh of relief and say, "Oh nothing. I am only glad to be back. I have a lot to tell you."

I run back outside and ask the gatekeeper to take Gold to the stables and I return excitedly asking, "How are my babies?" My father says, "Just fine. You were gone longer than I had hoped. Did it go all right?" I want to tell him everything but need to change and wash off the dirt and sweat so I excuse myself and tell him I will explain all at dinnertime.

At the dinner table, I make a pig of myself since I had not had a decent meal since at my mother's house. As I tell my father everything about my mother, he does not look up or smile but just stirs his food around. I know speaking of her upsets him, so I did not tell him I invited her and her family but focused more on my other adventures. He was happy to hear I met a princess and that I called on her with a gift as an invitation to the celebration.

My father was rather upset when I told him about the jousting with Gutierrez but seemed proud when I told him how I won the fight. He asks, "I hope you put him in the ground." With a pause I put my head down as I say, "No, his men wouldn't let me kill him. it will have to happen another time." My father just hung his head shaking it from side to side. He then stands up and slams his hand on the table and yells, "He killed your wife! What has happened to you? You are not the same tough son that I raised."

I was surprised at his outburst not realizing he felt this way since he had not expressed it before when I first came back home. I could

see that dinner was over, so I stand up and say, "I am sorry but there really was nothing I could do." He asks, "You couldn't have gone back and finished him off when he wasn't expecting it?" I then say, "I was concerned about you because there was some talk that he may have come here for me and hurt you." He did not seem happy with that answer and just said, "So what?" I turned and left the room.

I went to my room and paced back and forth wondering what I should do. I then heard my babies crying so I went to their chamber and held them for some time. I want to be a good father and teach them not to hate others and for my son not to take part in violence. I thought that is what my father had taught me but then I had to think hard about it because it was more my mother's teaching than his that was in that line of thinking.

My father had always been rough and tough, but I did not remember him ever bragging about killing anyone. Maybe he just never told me about his violent side. I told the babies good night and went back to my room to go to bed. I was exhausted but did not sleep well as thoughts and memories were spinning around in my head. As I fell asleep, a dream about Gutierrez coming after me and my babies woke me as I sat up yelling, "No, no, stop. You can't have them." It was a horrible dream that I could not get out of my mind for some time as I tossed and turned.

The next morning, I heard my father laughing all the way up the stairs, so I followed his laughter to the kitchen and he was sitting at a small table drinking coffee and talking to the servant girl, Maria. I entered and when he saw me, he said with a wide smile, "Well, look what the cat drug in." Maria laughs and so I join in and say, "Yeah, I'm the rat." He stands up and directs me to go into the dining area and sits down. I join him since breakfast will be served soon.

My father clears his throat and softly says, "I must apologize for my behavior last night. Your story about Gutierrez just took me by surprise." I tell him, "It is not a problem. You have a right to your opinion." He then takes a deep breath in and says, "But that's just it. I think it was just a reaction because of the way you used to be. I

should be glad that you are not a wild man like you were. But after thinking on it some, I know that a wild man does not make a good father. I want you to be a good father to those two sweet babies. I had no right expecting otherwise from you."

I am somewhat taken back at what he is saying but am glad for it, so I ask, "Are you sure that's what you want?" He shakes his head over and over, saying, "Oh yes." Maria walks in with our breakfast then and we have a hardy meal of eggs, grits, and hoghead with the best gravy I have ever had. I then asked him what plans he had made for this celebration that he wanted to have for my benefit. He laughed and says, "I have no plans. You have to make them." Oh great, so now I need to come up with some ideas. I am going to need Maria's help on this.

As I climbed the stairs and went into the study chamber, I had ideas floating through my head. One thing for sure we had to do for the celebration was to have a horse race, so my father could show off his pride and joy. Raven. We could have the celebration last for three days and invite everyone he knows for miles around. I just wish there were some way I could convince him that it would be nice to invite the forest people to watch the race. That would certainly make for a large crowd.

The days fly by as Maria and I do our planning and as we have only a week to go until the day it starts, I begin to wonder why I have not heard from Ella. I really want her to come as much as I want my mother and her family to come. Perhaps even more. I have decided not to tell my father about my mother being invited because chances are she will not make it and if she does, he will not get upset and make a scene in front of several guests.

The I thought maybe I should not tell my father about asking the forest people to come to the race. Since Pissarro is no more, he really has no quarrel with the common people. I chuckle to myself as the plan comes together. I will need to ride out to the forest and tell them today, so I tell my father I am going for ride. When I get to the forest and ride to the spot that I had been kept prisoner, I wonder who has taken over as their leader. Whoever it is, they could not ever be as terrifying as Pissarro.

Just as I come among the huts, I see a familiar pretty girl standing to the side talking with another woman. She looks up and sees that it is me and smiles. I lift my hand to greet her and she runs up to me, so I stop Gold and greet her with, "Hello, how are you?" She says in a shy manner, "Good day, my Lord. Have you come back to claim me as yours?" I smiled and thought "Oh boy, what do I do now?" I dismounted and asked her to follow me, so we could talk privately. She was excited and I hated to disappoint her, but she never gave me a chance to tell her I was married or anything.

I take her hand and look into her big blue eyes and start by saying, "You would make such a wonderful wife to someone, but I am already married, so I would not be the one." Her smile faded, and I thought she was going to cry but instead she shook her head in understanding and turned to walk away.

I hated to see her so disappointed, so I said, "Wait. I would like to invite you and your family and all the forest people to come to a celebration at the castle. We are having a horse race that we want everyone to come to." She smiled again and said, "That would be nice. Thank you. Should I tell everyone else?" I tell her that I think that would be wonderful. She would be the perfect person to spread the word and it would save me some time. Then it hits me that I never got her name, so I ask her for her name.

Her face lights up again with a big smile as she says, "My name is Ursula." I introduce myself as Roland and then give her the date, time, where the racetrack is located, and that we will be serving food. She says, "That sounds like fun." With that done, I mount Gold and turn him around to head home and wave to bid her good day. She returns the wave with a smile.

I really do not think Ursula expected me to just take her with me. She is pretty and intriguing, but with my interests in Ella now, I cannot think about another woman. Maybe I can introduce her to my new younger half-brother, Ethan. With them both being commoners, they may just like each other. I am only glad she is the one that will be telling the forest people about the invitation as they may not feel like I am sincere in wanting them to come if I were to tell them.

Chapter 19: Madera Celebration



Chapter 19: Aladera Celebration

Thanks to Maria, things are coming together for our 3-day celebration that starts tomorrow. Some guests have already arrived, and I am finishing up hanging some decorations in the dining area.

My father is getting excited about the race going around telling everyone how Raven is going to win. Maria has been in the kitchen for days cooking with the help of some other women that have come to her aid. I see out the window a rider coming who looks like a messenger. I am hoping Ella has finally responded so I run out to meet him.

He has a few letters and a package for us. I quickly go through the letters and see one addressed to me in a fancy handwriting. I open it as fast as I can and read that it is from Ella and it says, "Greetings Roland, I am sorry but my parents have agreed that I will only be able to come to your celebration for one day and they will bring me. I look forward to seeing you at the races!" I am so pleased that she is coming even if it is just for the day. Now that I have heard from her, I can concentrate on things better.

I walk around the grounds to inspect all the areas where games are to take place to make sure everything was ready. I still had some items to get out of the storehouse for some of the activities planned. Plus, I had to help the hired men to finish setting up seating for the race.

It was rather exciting even though it was a tremendous amount of work. My father keeps saying to let the servants take care of all the work, but I just cannot sit around and watch when I could be doing something. By the end of the day, I was exhausted but was hoping it would help me sleep in case all the excitement keeps me awake.

The next morning came quickly after I finally got to sleep the night before. I had a big breakfast with my father and the few guests that had arrived yesterday. Most people were not expected to arrive until later today since the invitation said it starts at 2:00 in

the afternoon. I still had a few things to do so I took care of them and then went to play with my babies for a while. It was around noon when I took a bath and dressed in my royal attire as my father expected.

Soon guests began to arrive, and I was busy greeting and talking about all the latest events in the area. Many were glad to see I had made it back home in one piece. Most of them said how sorry they were to have heard about Sabina but were so delighted to meet my newborn son and daughter. I had not realized that my father had not seen many of these friends since before I was kidnapped. We all had a lot to talk about.

It was a beautiful spring day to have Picnic Day with lots of flower blossoms on the trees, which was a perfect setting for an outside gathering. Maria had done a wonderful job setting up the outside tables for the guests to have a nice welcoming picnic meal. I was busy showing guests to the tables, when I turned to go back through the kitchen door, and I saw my mother with her family walking up to the gate. I was pleasantly surprised that they had come. I now had better go and greet them before my father sees them.

After greeting them with hugs and handshakes, I walked them to the front door and asked them to wait for a minute while I go get my father. I could see my mother was nervous and was not looking forward to seeing him, so I reassured her that it would be fine. However, I thought to myself that I better say a little prayer before telling him.

I then called my father and told him, "I have a surprise for you." He smiles and asks, "Oh really, what is it?" I calmly said, "Please don't be upset with me but I invited my mother and her family to come and they are here now." My father's face dropped, and it looked like he was going to have to sit down so I took his arm and calmly said, "I know you don't really want to see her, but I felt like it was only fair that she gets to meet her grandchildren." He looks around for a moment trying to keep his anger under control and then shakes his head and asks, "You are not going to ask me to talk

to her like we are good friends, are you?" I said that I would not and directed him toward the door.

I was proud of my father as he kept his composure as he welcomed my mother and her family. My mother told him, "We are not sure that we can stay for more than a today." He responded, "You are welcome to stay all three days if you wish." He then turns his attention to Rangler and seems to warm up a little as he tells about his pride and joy, Raven. It looks like Rangler, Ethan, and Beverly also love horse racing.

I am glad to see that they at least had something in common to talk about. I did not want my father to feel too awkward, so I gathered the four of them and directed them toward the outside tables. My mother whispered to me, "Thank you for helping with that." I softly said, "I'm just glad he didn't get angry with you." Then she said loudly, "So where are my grandchildren? Can you bring them outside?" I said I would go get them.

My mother was so thrilled to meet Larissa and Lawrence. She held them as she ate her picnic meal and did not want them to go back inside when I went to get them from her. For a short time, my father even sat next to my mother to join her in playing with the babies. It was a pleasant sight to see. The rest of the day went by quickly as everyone was enjoying the food and outdoor games. Many children as well as the young adults participated in the hammer throwing and the ball and paddle games.

As evening light dimmed everyone went inside and had other games to play such as chess and card games. Everyone had a light dinner of several cheeses, freshly baked breads, and potage with several flavors of cakes before retiring to their respective chambers. I was glad to see them to their chambers as I was so exhausted from the day's activities that I just wanted to flop into my bed.

The next day was to be Archery and Hunting Day. I had set up several targets for the archery games. I hoped we had enough horses and hunting equipment to accommodate everyone that is going on the hunt for pheasants with my father. Rangler and his son joined the other hunters. My father seems to be having a really

good time now that he can be outside most of the day hunting. Before leaving, he announced that the goal is to bring back enough pheasants to feed everyone for dinner.

When they got back from hunting, they had more than enough birds to feed everyone tonight and tomorrow. The archery games were a big success with the others. The winners got to pick from the prizes that I had gotten ready beforehand. Most prizes were something related to lions with the family crest of the blue lion on them.

The grand prize for the race is a large statute of a golden lion that I had a local artist make with the blue lion crest with two swords and shield that says Madera around his neck. I know my father would love to have it when Raven wins. The guests that did not take part in the hunting or archery, were happy to watch the archery games or the other games that the children were playing.

Everyone was having a good time, which was exactly what I had hoped would happen. I could not recall any other time that we had such a successful turnout even though we had done this type of thing before. I told my mother how I thought this was successful celebration and she said she thought it was because of my hospitality.

I didn't tell her, but I had a feeling it was because people had heard that I was not the same mean and harsh man that I was before, so they had to come and see for themselves. Apparently, they were pleased with what they saw in me as they had many questions about my adventures when my memory was gone.

By evening everyone was ready for a light dinner and an early bedtime, so they could be up early the next morning for the race. The race was only big activity planned for the day. Some people like my mother and family would want to leave right after it, so they could have some daylight hours left to travel home when they needed to be home by the following day.

Others would probably stay the whole day and leave the next day like his brother-in-law, Drake and his mother, Lucia. Drake was

having such a good time; he may not want to leave. He also kept looking at me like something must be wrong with me or something. I think he just could not believe that I had changed to be the opposite of what I used to be. I know he could not believe my father and I had made up and he was not banishing me like he had heard rumors of.

Sabina's mother, Lucia, was having a good time too. She told me it was the first time she had really laughed and enjoyed herself since her daughter had died. I was glad to hear that. She also told me she wanted to speak to me privately after everyone departed. I was curious what she wanted to talk to me about, but I was too busy taking care of all the guests to think about it. I collapsed into my bed again with an overwhelming tiredness.

I must have slept like a baby through the night because I woke up at the break of dawn eager to get the day started. My father was up already having breakfast as I came down to greet him. He was excited about the race and started joking with me about the grand prize. He said he will take it now since he knows he is going to win. I laughed and said, "No Father, you cannot get it out of me what the prize is so just stop your joking."

He laughed and then got a serious look on his face and says, "I want to thank you for what you did inviting your mother. I never thought I would ever want to see her again, but it makes me feel better to know she is happy and safe because even though I didn't treat her like I should have, I did love her." I told him I understood and asked him what he thought of her husband. He said, "He must be a good man since he loves horses."

My father excused himself then and said he had to go check on Raven and make sure they are getting him ready. I finished eating and went to the kitchen to check with Maria on how things were going. She looked terribly busy and was cussing when I walked in. She saw me and put her hand to her mouth as she apologized.

I laughed and told her there was no need to apologize as she must have a lot to cuss about with so much to do. She thanked me for my concern and then asked me to do some things for her, which

I was glad to do. She was so happy that she jumped up and kissed me on the cheek.

I scolded her saying, "Hey, watch it. I'm a single man and may take you seriously." She smiled and said, "Oh no, I just am so happy you are helping. I understand why I never recognized you when you came back. It was because you are a different person now. The old Rojo never paid me any attention or helped me with anything. Besides that, I hear you are sweet on a girl down south." I wasn't sure how she found out about Ella, but it was not a problem if she thought that even though I couldn't say it for sure since I had not spent more than a few minutes with Ella so far."

The guests started coming down for breakfast, so I got out of the kitchen and did the few things Maria needed. I was getting excited just thinking about Ella coming today. I could not wait to see her beautiful face again. Just as I was thinking of her, I heard the doorman announce that the Princess Ella from Castle Falcon had arrived.

Oh no, I had not gotten dressed in my royal attire yet. I ran upstairs to change and then came back down to find her waiting with her parents. I greet them and ask if they would like something to eat. She shakes her head and says, "No." Her parents say they are hungry after the long trip. I direct them to the dining room and introduce them to the others having breakfast.

Chapter 20: Raben Races



Chapter 20: Raven Races

This left Ella and I together alone and I am too nervous to know what to say. She probably could see my nervousness and asked how the celebration was going. I told her about all the activities and who all the guests were. She seemed impressed and we continued to talk for some time getting to know each other.

My nervousness calmed down some and she began to relax too. We were sitting across the room from each other and I thought it would be nice to sit closer, so I stand up and slowly walk over to the chair next to hers and sit as I continue to tell her how excited my father is about Raven winning the race. She then asks, "Oh, can we go see Raven?"

I agree to take her to where his stall is but said my father may not want any strangers to upset him. She assures me that she will not startle him. I direct her through the dining room and tell her parents we are going to the stables to see the horses and they acknowledge us with saying, "Have fun."

I ask her as we walk outside if she rides horses much and she laughs and says, "Almost every day. I love horses. I have a beautiful white mare who is about to give birth. She was sired by a racehorse named Blue Falcon, so we hope to have a new racehorse soon." I am impressed to see she is a girl who loves something I love.

When we get to Raven's stall, Ella walks slowly up to him talking softly as she stands for a while talking to him. She then reaches for his forehead and pets him like they have been friends forever. I am just amazed. Raven does not normally take to people that quickly, but he probably could sense that she was a horse lover. I join her as we both stroke him and hopefully make him relax.

Raven knows he is about to race because he knows the routine beforehand. He is usually nervous before hand and I could see him relaxing under our touch. Even though he has relaxed, his heart is

racing fast as the excitement builds for him to race. He was bred to be a racer and I can tell how much he loves to run. Just then my father walks in and wants to know who is petting his horse. I introduce them, and my father is smiling a big smile, which must mean he approves.

Since my father is in such a good mood, I thought this was a good time to spring the other news on him about the forest people coming to the race. He begins to laugh when I tell him, and I am wondering what is so funny. Then he says, "That is great! The more people to be for my Raven, the better." I am a bit surprised that he does not object but then he is right. Having a large crowd will make it even more fun. Then he asks, "Son, are there any more surprises for me today?" I laugh and say, "None from me."

My father then leaves the stables going back to his guests. I look down at Ella and smile as I am thinking how much I would love to kiss her now. She seems to feel my emotion as she gazes into my eyes for a few touching minutes. Then Raven is moving his head up and down as if to say, "Go ahead."

We both laugh, and she turns around toward Raven again to pet him when she catches her foot on something and starts to fall. Thinking quickly, I reach down to catch her before she hits the floor and as I grab her waist I slip, and we both go down landing on a pile of straw.

She lets out a little yell but then puts her arms around me in a brief touch. I am not sure if it is to balance herself or if it is meant as a sign of affection. I feel like if I do not make a move to show her it is fine for her to show me affection, she may not do it again. I bend over and slowly get closer to her.

She seems to be waiting for me to make my move, so I then kiss her ever so gently on the cheek. She turns toward me and puts her lips right on mine. She tastes as sweet as an apple pie with the warmest and softest lips. My passion is aroused as I keep kissing her. She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me closer and I feel her warm bosom next to my chest. Oh boy, I do not want to stop.

Raven then starts to whiny like he is saying, "Hold on, slow down." I am out of breath as I pull away and smile as I say, "I think Raven is telling us something." She laughs and says, "He is a smart horse." She starts to get up, so I jump up to help her and I think we both are not sure what to say now. All I know is that this girl is just what I need to feel like a complete man again. I am going to have to act fast to make sure no one else snatches her up before I can.

As we walk out of the stable, we begin to hear the noise of people coming from outside. When we get outside, we see several people coming up the path to the gate and I realize that they are the forest people. It looks like several of them, so I tell Ella I need to greet all these people who live in our kingdom. She comes along eagerly, and introduces herself to many of the women, including the water girl. I am so impressed with the way she carries herself and is so warm to these people she does not know.

The forest people all go to fill up the seats at the raceway. I tell them they are welcome to join us for a meal after the race and they as happy to accept. My father has brought Raven out to take her place on the racetrack. She looks like she is ready to win the race. As soon as the trumpet blows, she is off at a good pace. My father is jumping up and down like a child excited about a present.

The other horses look good but not as good as Raven. As the race continues, I hear the crowd yelling for Raven to win. I do not want to watch as it would be very nerve wracking. I hear the thunder of horses' hooves as they circle the track and I hold my breath as the Announcer is saying Raven is ahead as she passes up every other horse except one that is beside her. She really may just win.

I start jumping up and down and move closer to where my father is to see if I can see Raven coming around the bend. He is head to head with another horse and I yell, "Go Raven Go!" I go back to jumping up and down. My father and I hug as Raven crosses the finish line and it is for certain that he has won. Wow, what a race!

My father is still yelling with so much excitement that I am afraid he may hurt himself. Then I remember I am supposed to give

him the prize. I run to where I had it hidden and carry it back to give to my father. His eyes get wide as he sees the big item that I have wrapped up in some cloth. As I hand it to him, he isn't expecting it to be so heavy and he looks like he is going to drop it, so I brace it and help him put it on the ground.

The crowd is still yelling as he opens it and when the cover comes off, they go to roaring with glee. My father steps back and with wide eyes, looks like he is going to cry but he stays strong and yells, "Hurray for Raven! Hurray for Madera!" The crowd copies him as they chant the same thing for a few times before they start to quiet down and begin to leave their seats. They take turns coming over to congratulate my father and Raven. I have never seen him so happy and my heart fills with love for him.

Ella is also excited to see him so happy with winning. She says, "Your father is so happy. He is just like my father with his racehorse." Her parents then come over to congratulate him with a hug and they give Ella and I a hug too. I feel like I am in a dream of some sort. I cannot wait until my children are old enough to hear this story as it will become part of family history. I think I will start telling them before they get older. I still have not introduced Ella to the babies and that is my next thing to do once things quiet down around here.

I tell the forest people they are welcome to go to the outside tables and take part in the food that is there. Maria has made a huge spread of all kinds of food that I am sure they will very much appreciate. I then ask Ella if she is hungry and she says loudly, "Yes, I am starving now." We go over to the tables and join in with our friends. I am so happy that I decided to invite all of them. They are part of our kingdom, so they should be part of our celebration. They do not seem to have a leader anymore, so I ask Ursula, "Who is your leader now?" She smiles and says, "We have voted that you should be our leader."

I am taken back for a moment by her expression. Why me? I do not live with them. I ask, "Ursula, why do you want me as leader?" She laughs and says, "Because you saved us from the cruel hands of Pissarro and there is no other man who wants to be leader of our

people. You know what is best for us, so you will make a good leader." I understand, and say, "I will do my best to be a competent leader." They then chant, "Yah, Roland! Yah, Rojo!"

I am very honored to have them as my people and I then pull Ella into me and let them see how I am feeling toward her. Ursula smiles and claps her hands in approval. I am so glad she is not upset with me. She is very respected among her people and I feel like I should do something special for her. I know just what to do.

I announce to everyone, "I pronounce Ursula of the Village of Mariposa to be the Ambassador of Madera. She will be in contact with me and then carry out my orders to you for whatever may be needed to help you all have full lives." Ursula sighs and looks like she is about to cry as she says, "Thank you so much. What an honor you have given me, my Lord."

It looks like our celebration has been a great success. The guests are mingling together like one big family. My new motto for us should be Madera Means Family. I lead Ella through the crowd and then we sit next to Ursula as we have some of Maria's wonderful beef stew and hard bread rolls as well as some delicious apple crumb cake. I feel like I have eaten too much and want to walk it off so ask Ella to join me on a walk around the castle.

She is willing and then goes to whisper something in her mother's ear. Her mother smiles and motions her daughter to go ahead. She then takes my arm as we begin to walk to the other side of the property.

I am hoping we can find a spot where we can have some time alone. We talk about the weather and other unimportant things as we walk. I then see the spot I was hoping no one would be around. It is a little garden that I was told my mother started years ago that has a bench in the middle of beautiful flowers and greenery.

I direct her to sit on the bench and then go to pick some flowers for her. She accepts them with a big smile and motions me to sit down next to her. I then tell her about Sabina and how she died and how hard it has been on me. She is very sympathetic as she kisses

my hand and puts her head on my shoulder. I cannot believe how close I feel to this woman already. What is happening to me? I cannot be falling in love, can I?

As the day moves into the afternoon, I realize that Ella and I have been sitting in the garden for a few hours. We have been talking but mostly I have been talking telling her about my adventures. She does not have much to say but loves listening to me. I am surprised someone has not come looking for one of us. I guess everyone is too busy enjoying themselves.

Within a few minutes, her mother comes walking down the path and sees us sitting holding hands and smiles. Ella sees her mother and rises from the bench to go greet her. She then brings her mother over to me and says, "My mother has something to tell you." I say curiously, "May I be of assistance, your Highness?" She says, "Ella tells me you would like to court her. Is this true?" I nod and say, "Yes Queen Isabel."

I am happily surprised that Ella has told her mother and glad I do not have to ask. Isabel then says, "Ella's father may not approve due to her age, but I would rather have her promised to court you than some of the other men that have shown interest. You seem to be an honest and upright man who would treat my daughter the way she deserves. I am giving you permission to come to Falcon to court her for the next year and when she comes of age, we can cross that bridge when we get to it and discuss this further." I take her hand and kiss it as I say, "I will be honored to court Ella at Falcon. Thank you." I am at a loss of any other words.

I then invite Queen Isabel and King Hernando to stay the night before they leave to go home. They accept my invitation and I then tell Ella that I have a surprise to show her. Her eyes get wide and she looks excited. I bring her into the house and take her up to the children's chamber. She sees Larissa first and exclaims, "Oh what a cute baby! Who is she?" I pick up Larissa and ask Ella, "Who does she look like?" Ella thinks for a moment but does not catch my hint. I ask her, "Who else in my family has red hair?"

She thinks for a moment and says that she thinks my mother does. Then her eyes light up and she puts it together and says, "Oh my, this baby is yours?" I say that it is and then point over to the other baby bed where Lawrence is sleeping. She lets out a small sigh of joy as she says, "What? Another one? Yours too?" I say that he is, and she starts making baby coo sounds at them.

We spend some time with the babies, and I am so overjoyed by the way Ella takes to loving them. It almost seems unreal. Am I in a dream? This girl is just too perfect. Something must be wrong with her. So far, I have not found anything negative about her except for her naïve ways but that is just because of her youth. My mother then comes in and says she wants to see the babies before they leave. I tell her to please come in and be with them for a while. Even though Ella does not seem to want to leave the babies, she takes my cue and puts little Lawrence back in his bed.

I then led Ella to the room she and her parents can stay in overnight. She walks around and says it is a beautiful castle. I cannot help myself, but I just want to touch her silky skin again, so I walk up behind her and put my hand on her cheek. She turns and smiles as she comes closer. Yes, another warm kiss is what I want so badly. We linger in each other's arms for a few long wonderful minutes before she says she had better go back to mingle with the guests. I do not want to take my hands off her curved waist that rounds up to such soft and perfectly shaped breasts.

She must have read my mind as she takes my hand and places it right under her breast. I gasp with pleasure as I feel my groins aching for more. Does she know what she is doing to me? I have been married so I know how a slight kiss can turn into something so much sweeter. I cannot let that happen with this young girl who is yet a virgin. But Oh, how I want it to happen now. I can imagine what her upright exquisite nipples must feel like to suckle and what it must be like to enter her soft spot.

I must pull myself away before I get too eager and go further. She sighs a gentle, "No, don't go." I let her pull me back hard against her warm body that is growing hotter by the minute. I whisper in her ear, "We must stop, or I will not be able to contain

myself. Do you understand?" She takes a deep breath and lets out a sigh as she pulls away. She then says, "I am so sorry. I do not know what is happening to me. I have never had this happen with any man. You must be someone special." I say, "No you don't have to be sorry. I feel like you are someone special." We then walk back down to the guests and try to act natural. I feel like we are both walking around in a daze as we hope the time goes by quickly until we can be together again.

After everyone was settled in for the night, Lucia finds me with the children and she says, "Oh great you are here with them. I need to tell you a family secret that Sabina did not know about. In fact, I did not know about it for years. One night a few years ago when the king had a few too many drinks, he admitted a secret to his wife, Queen Anna.

He swore her to secrecy that she could never tell Sabina or anyone else, but she broke down and told me after the fire. She said that he had relations once with a common woman who got pregnant and he made her give up the baby so she would have no hold on him. She gave birth to the girl that we adopted and named ...Sabina."

I was not sure I understood what she was saying. Lucia was a friend of Queen Anna, who had been married to King Fernandez of Valencia Castle – the castle that I had found Sabina in before she died. Gutierrez had killed Fernandez and burned down the castle, but I did not know if the Queen had survived or what. I then ask Lucia, "You mean to say Sabina's real father was King Fernandez?"

Lucia shook her head to mean yes and then went on to say, "The Queen was not at the castle when it got burned down and she has been hiding out ever since. I did not know this when we adopted Sabina. We were told she was taken from a young mother who had no husband. When she told me, I told her I did not believe her, but she swore on the Bible that it was true."

What? A bunch of questions were floating through my head but then it hit me... my babies were of royal blood. If Sabina was the child of a king than her children were also royalty. This was good

news even though it did not matter to me if they were royalty or not, it meant that they would have a better chance in life. Only thing is that there is no proof. I asked, "There is no proof of this anywhere?" She said that there was not but that if she could get Anna to make up a sworn document as to what she was told, that may help them someday. I told her to try and get that for me and she agreed. I agreed not to tell my father or anyone else until it was official.

That night when I go to bed I toss and turn thinking about Sabina and our babies. They must have been just days old when Gutierrez kidnapped her. She did not mention them to me when she was dying most likely because she was not even sure I loved her anymore when I came to her without my memory. After the celebration, I will be sure to bring her body back here to bury her where she belongs.

Then my thoughts wandered to the time Ella and I spent together today. I felt guilty for thinking of her when my wife had only been dead for a short time. But I could not help that my heart was racing with thoughts of how I want to be with her. How can this be happening when I just met this girl?

I just hope this is not my passion erupting because I have not had relations with a woman for some time. It seems more than that. We seem to read each other's minds and even with our age differences, we have lots in common. Only time will tell. I have a year to really get to know her while we are courting under the supervision of her parents. I wonder how that will go.

I drifted off to sleep at last dreaming of Ella, my babies, and I together in a beautiful castle that was bigger and nicer than anything I had ever seen. My dream was also disturbing as Gutierrez showed his ugly face and he was holding a red serpent in each hand as he took over our castle and was about to kill the babies, when I woke up screaming at him to stop. I got out of bed and made sure no one was hiding anywhere and that the children were alright. The dream was just too real.

Chapter 21: Ambassador Ursula



Chapter 21: Ambassador Ursula

After everyone leaves Madera Castle and goes home, it seems so empty. Even Raven does not seem happy as he grunts and stamps his feet in his stable. My father has not talked to me for two days since everyone left. I do not know if he is upset with me about something or just hiding out in his chambers due to being exhausted. I asked Maria why he has not been to meals and she said that he was not feeling well and wanted to rest. I guess I will try to do the same.

I was certainly tired out from all the activities, but I also could not stop thinking about Ella. How long should I wait before going to see her. We did not talk about when I would come. They just said to come any time. I spent some time going through my attire. I didn't have that many royal suits that I could look good each time I go to see her, so I am going through what I have and make a note of what to ask the tailor to make for me.

I then come across the scroll from Gutierrez that I found. I kept staring at the crest of the lion's head that Ber pointed out to me as being from my father. It did not look exactly like the lion of our crest. Could it be a forgery? I could not comprehend my father giving an order to kill me, so it must be a forgery. Just as I was about to put it away, my father walks in and asks what I am looking at.

I told him I found it on the man who was out to leave me for dead. He wanted to see it, so I gave it to him. He let out sort of a laugh as if he couldn't believe this and says, "This crest is a fake. The swords behind the lion are not right and shield is not gold. And I do not sign my name like this. It is a poor fake. Do you know where this Gutierrez is from?"

I tell him all I know is that Gutierrez is the leader of the Redlaw warriors, a renegade group of soldiers from the Land of the Red Serpent. I explained, "He is evil and has killed so many people. He killed a friend that I made from the forest and his four men. It must have been one of his men that killed Sabina. He and his men kill

King Fernandez and burn down his castle. Thank goodness the Queen was not there. He also must have put a serpent with a dragon head in the moat that almost killed me.”

I went on to explain that Gutierrez must be who kidnapped me and then Sabrina, even though I do not remember that. I wish I knew why he kidnapped us. Probably just for money like any greedy kidnapper. But then why did he take Sabina too?

The more questions I have, the more I want to go hunt him down and get revenge. The problem is that I do not think I could carry out any act of revenge. Does that make me a big chicken in comparison to other princes that go fight battles for revenge everywhere?

I was working myself up into a ball of anger. I need my father to say what I should do. He listened carefully to all I said and then with a serious look, he said, “I cannot tell you what to do. But I do not want you just taking off without a plan of action as to what you think you should do about him. Whatever you decide, I will back you up.”

If my father is not going to tell me what I should do, I will need to make up my mind what I think is the best thing to do for Madera. I must take some time to think about it. My anger wants to go find him and kill him, but my mind and heart’s logic is saying otherwise except that I am not sure what that means. I do know that I first need to know where I can find Gutierrez.

I will need all the help I can get. I am going to go speak to my people’s ambassador, Ursula. After getting dressed in my royal attire, I tell my father where I am going. He gives me a quick hug and tells me to be careful. I go to the kitchen to ask Maria to pack a food bag for me. She gets some food ready and then tells me, “Please be careful and come back as quickly as possible.” I say that I will do my best and thank her as I rush out the door. I have the stableman get Gold ready and then mount up. We take off toward the forest and within a few hours arrive at the entrance.

All seems quiet in Mariposa as I ride by the huts looking for Ursula. I see no one. Usually there are a few people outside taking care of various chores, but I see not one person. I keep riding and see ahead two men standing as if guarding me from going any farther. I pull Gold to a stop and ask them where I can find Ambassador Ursula. One of them says, "We can let her know you are here, my Lord." I nod and say, "Yes, please do. It is important."

He walks out of site and I wait. While waiting I ask the other man, "Do you know about a man called Gutierrez, the leader of the Redlaws?" The man's eyes get wide and then he puts his head down as he seems afraid to say anything. I ask again, and he hesitates but then says, "Yes, he is bad man." I agree and ask, "You don't know where he lives?" He shakes his head to answer that he does not know.

The other man returns with Ursula. She is happy to see me as I am of her. I dismount and motion for her to follow me back away from the two men. I ask her why there are guards and she explains that Gutierrez has been coming through the camp raising chaos and tries to take their young women. So far, she has been able to keep him from taking anyone, but she does not trust him.

I am amazed at this criminal who thinks he can take anything or anyone. I ask how often he comes, and she says every few days. I then ask, "Is it alright if I stay here without anyone knowing so that the next time he comes I can deal with him?" She says that is a wonderful idea and leads me to a hut where I can stay.

I hide Gold back in the forest where he cannot be seen. When I walk back to the hut, Ursula is waiting for me with some refreshments. I thank her and ask when the last time Gutierrez was here. She says it was a couple of days ago, so he is due to come within a day or two.

We sit and talk for a few more minutes and I begin to feel very sleepy. She must be able to tell from my half-closed eyes and says, "Why don't you rest for a while and I will let you know when dinner is ready." I told her thanks and stumbled to the straw bed. It

felt so good to just spread out and not think about anything for a while.

Before I realized it, I had fallen asleep. I hear Ursula calling me and then she is touching my shoulder to wake me. I am not sure if it was a natural reaction to her touch or what, but I reach up to pull her down to me without her resisting one little bit.

Before I know what is happening, we are kissing as I feel her full rounded breasts against my chest and something in my groin stirs as if to say it wanted more. With one swoop of my hand, I turn her over to be partially under me so that our full bodies are touching.

How can I let this happen when I have feelings for another woman? It feels so natural as Ursula seems so willing to have me keep going. I know that doing more without a betrothal would be wrong and I hesitate. I stop kissing her for a moment and look into her piercing blue eyes.

She is as excited as I am, so I ask, "Are you giving me permission to keep going?" She smiles and says, "Yes, please my Lord. I've been wanting this for a long time with you." Still unsure in my mind that I should proceed, my body's craving is taking over with my manly urges. I barely remember Sabina, but I must have had intercourse with her, so I try to remember what I did to please her.

Ursula then pulls her dress up over her head to reveal the most awesome curves. Seeing her nakedness makes me want to kiss her soft silky skin all over. She pulls my head down to her breast and nature takes over as I suckle like a baby gone mad and then go to the other one just as eager. As I suckle, I pull down my bottom attire and then she takes off my shirt.

Feeling her skin next to mine makes me yearn even more for entering her softest place below as the anticipation is making me pant like a dog in heat. I reach down to touch her softness amazed at how warm it is as she squirms and makes soft groans of anticipation pulling me down to kiss her passionately.

Without any more hesitation, I pull myself up on my knees and with a groan of delight, push myself slowly into her. She cries out

with delight. We are one now as we move up and down in the motions of lovemaking. I am amazed at her eager thrusts that seem to match mine perfectly as we keep up the rhythm for what seems like too short of a time but yet is very satisfying as we both groan in a climaxing song of ecstasy with several long sighs of pleasure.

We are both winded and sweating as we lay back to catch our breath. She starts to giggle like a schoolgirl. I laugh a bit and ask, "You are a real troublemaker. I was just taking a nap and you just had to interrupt it."

She laughs again and says, "Well my Lord, if you wouldn't look at me the way you do, I wouldn't have been enticed into your loins." I laugh again and give her a big hug. I am wondering now if this was a mistake. What if she expects that I will court her or somehow commit to her?

I feel like the only way to solve this is to be honest. I then softly caress her breasts as I say, "I hope you don't get any ideas about us." She smiles and says, "None besides wanting to bed you whenever you come for a visit." I laugh and say, "We will see about that!" She laughs and without being upset, she assures me she understands that I need to marry a princess but that she would be happy just to see me as often as possible.

Ursula gets dressed and says she must go now to get my dinner. I am exhausted by our escapade and fall back asleep until she comes back with a hardy dinner for us both. As we eat, she talks all about her family and how her grandparents were the ones who started the village of Mariposa naming it after the many butterflies that would be in the forest.

She explains how she has carried on her grandmother's tradition of loving butterflies. She loves to make butterfly related items for gifts and decorations as she points out the wooden butterflies hanging from the hut's ceiling. I am beginning to really enjoy her company. I will not have anything else to do while waiting for Gutierrez, so I might as well enjoy her company. After she leaves for the night I fall back to sleep and do not wake up until the next morning.

Ursula joins me for breakfast and asks if I would like to join the men for a trip into the deeper forest to go hunting deer. I accept the invitation feeling like it would be a different kind of hunt than I am used to but should be interesting. She leads me to where they are gathering and introduces me to the five men that are going on the hunt.

The leader of the group is Pedro and he wants me to double up with him. We ride some ways into the forest. I had no idea it was filled with such tall beautiful trees. We seem to be several miles into the forest when Pedro puts his arm up to motion everyone to stop. We dismount as he motions us to be quiet.

He then points to go through the trees until we get to a clearing. We stop and hide behind a fallen tree. After a few minutes, he points out to the clearing and there stands a female deer with two young ones behind her. Pedro motions that we stay and do not shoot. He whispers to me that they do not shoot female deer with young ones.

We later see a male deer grazing. The men all get their weapons ready and shoot. The buck goes down and we put the deer on the extra packhorse we brought and head back. The deer will be enough meat for everyone. Ursula meets me and is excited that we had success. She says, "Now I get to cook it for you." I say, "I don't think I have ever eaten deer meat before and look forward to tasting it."

I sit with the hunting team as others gather around to hear about our success. Pedro introduces me to everyone and makes me feel right at home. Then Ursula and the other women bring out the food. I am pleasantly surprised at how good this meat is and will have to tell my father to come down and join the hunters.

After dinner Ursula asks me to come to the hut to see about fixing something so I follow her. As soon as I walk in, she pulls me toward the bed. She teases me saying, "Are you ready for dessert. We eagerly caress each other as we get more and more familiar with each other. I feel like the most fortunate man on earth right now.

Chapter 22: Revenge or Not?



Chapter 22: Revenge or Not?

Being with Ursula made my questions disappear as I could not think about anything except being entwined in passion with her. My question about whether I could carry out an act of revenge seemed like a distant problem that just did not matter anymore. I felt like I had been drugged with love potion. What am I going to do when Gutierrez comes? Will I be able to fight him?

Little did I know that the next day would answer my questions. I awoke to the sound of chirping birds that were so loud I thought they were in my hut. When I went outside, I could see them all above the hut singing as loud as they could. At the castle I could only hear them in a distance since my room was above the trees and the castle walls were so thick not much sound made it through unless I was next to an opening to the outside.

After having some breakfast from Ursula, I noticed that many men were running toward the back of the area. I saw Pedro and called him aside to ask him what was going on. He just said one word, "Gutierrez!" I asked, "Where is he?" He answered, "About a mile out on his way."

Pedro was on his way to hide where the men could jump out and deter Gutierrez from taking their women. I asked him where Ursula was, and he said hiding with the other women. I hoped she would be safe there while I got ready to carry out my plan that I had worked out with the men yesterday.

The forest men had agreed to help me with my plan and build a perch in the trees that I could hide from him until I felt it was time to confront him. I went to get my sword and dagger and climb up to where I would wait for the right time.

The men were not far from where I will wait with their weapons that I helped them make. They did not believe in carrying daggers or swords but were willing to build a net to catch him up in and carry hammers they could defend themselves with if needed.

It got incredibly quiet as we waited and then I saw Gutierrez trotting his horse in as if he owned the place as he was yelling obscenities about how he wanted to have all the women. He said he will mistreat them taking turns doing disgusting things to them. Then he yells that he will kill any man that gets in his way. I had no idea this man was so degraded. If I see him touch Ursula, I will want to kill him.

I can see the men from my high seat, and they are ready. Gutierrez keeps coming closer and closer looking around as he yells, "Where are my ladies? I am waiting on you." Does he really think they are going to just come running to him? What an arrogant son of a bitch! A few more feet and Gutierrez will be in the right spot for the plan to work. He is getting more and more angry wondering where everyone has gone.

He stops right near the spot but not quite far enough to pull the rope. One of the men see this and step out from behind a tree. He yells to Gutierrez, "We do not want to give you our women anymore. You have used them all up." Gutierrez laughs and then starts to move closer to the man as if to attack him.

I could see the other men were happy to see him move closer and they had their hands ready to pull the rope that would open the net. With a whishing sound the net jumps up from the ground and surrounds Gutierrez.

Before Gutierrez knows what is happening, he is surrounded with netting that wraps him and his horse tightly. His horse gets scared and tries to jump away as his legs and feet are sticking through the bottom of the net, but his body and Gutierrez are surrounding with strong rope. Gutierrez begins to swear at the people saying they had better get him out or they would be sorry.

I told the men beforehand that when Gutierrez threatens them, it would be my time to appear. It looks like that time has come. I yell down at him, "How are they going to be sorry when you are outnumbered?" Gutierrez looks around trying to find where my voice came from.

He finally spots me in the trees and lets out a holler and then, "What are you doing here? These are not your people." I yell back, "They are not yours. They have chosen me as their leader. You are not allowed here anymore or allowed to touch the women of the forest."

He yells back at me, "You have no right to them. Why don't you come down from up there where you are hiding like a woman? Let us decide this between us like men. Let the best man win." He was making me even more angry and I was tempted to take him up on his offer. "I do not need to prove anything to you or them. This is my father the King's land and as Prince to his throne, I have the right to it and anyone living on it." He then says, "You have never cared about these people so why are you starting now."

I'm not sure what to say to that but have to say something so I say, "I have changed and now care more about all people. You are the one that does not care. You kill people for nothing. You killed my wife and I have all the right to kill you for that if I so desired to." My anger is rising again. I begin to climb down the tree to face him. When I get down, I walk up to him and take my sword from its sleeve and point it at his throat.

He pulls back and for the first time I see fear in his eyes. "I could slit your throat right now, but I am a fair man, so I am going to challenge you to a sword duel. Tomorrow morning at full sunrise." He says in a much lower voice than before, "I will be ready." I am not sure this is the right thing to do but I need to show these people that I mean to protect them as their leader. The forest men come and take him out of the net and then tie him up to a tree for the night. They water his horse and then tie him up to the same tree, so they can wait out the night together.

I go back to my hut to rest up. Ursula comes to see how I am doing and offers me some dinner. I eat some but my appetite is not good. She tries to kiss me. I give her a small kiss and she can see that I am distracted. "I will help you relax. Let me relax you." I am not too sure about this, but perhaps it is just what I need now. I feel like I will probably just go to sleep anyway, so I lay back on the bed and close my eyes."

She takes off my boots and begins by rubbing my feet. Then she pulls down my bottom attire and runs her hands up and down my legs rubbing the muscles. It feels soothingly good as I start to relax. I am almost drifting off to sleep when I feel something I was not expecting. It is the warmness of her mouth on my thighs as her hot tongue flicked to touch me. Her lips stimulate me to want more. What is this power she has over me?

I begin to wonder if she could have worked at a brothel since I thought it was only the harlots that could drive a man crazy with their tongue. But then how would I know since I do not remember ever going to one?

She was licking me all over and when she slips her dress off, I want to mount her, but she pushes me back down on the bed and climbs up on me. She then sits on my thighs kissing my chest as she rubs me all over. I feel her warm hand gently pull me into her warm softness. I let out a long groan. It feels so good.

She begins rocking as she leans forward so I can kiss her soft neck. I am so excited that I suck it hard as she lets out a sound I had not heard before, between a squeak and a hiss. She is really oh so good at knowing exactly how to please me and herself. I start to sweat and pant as she moves faster and faster, riding me like a crazed animal of some sort.

She groans and pants along with me. As we continue moving in a love rhythm that we both find gloriously tantalizing, she starts to cry out and I thought it was hurting her for a second, but she was letting out a cry of passion. She calls out my name with squeals of delight as we join in a big explosion of loving expressions. We melt into each other's arms and fall asleep for a few hours until she quietly gets up and leaves me snoring.

It was just before sunrise when someone was knocking on the door. It was Pedro saying it was time to get ready. I was still groggy and what Ursula did to me last night has me feeling like I have been beat up. Just then she walks in with a steaming hot breakfast. I laugh and tell her, "You ruined me for today. How am I going to fight?" She says, "I am not sorry for doing it."

I asked her where she learned how to do all that and she says, "I just did what I felt like doing. No one taught me." It is just in my nature to do my best to get what I want. After all, my name Ursula means female bear." I laugh and say, "Well, no wonder you make such a good ambassador...no one argues with you! You certainly live up to your name, but I do not want to see you as an angry female bear." She lets out a long silly laugh and tells me not to worry.

I tell Ursula it was time to face Gutierrez and start getting ready. She hugs me and makes me promise to be careful and come back unharmed. After I sleeve my weapons, I kiss her and start walking to where the duel is supposed to take place when Pedro comes running up to me and is yelling, "He is gone! Gutierrez is gone!"

What? I cannot believe it. I ask him, "What happened?" He said the ropes were cut and his horse was gone too, so someone cut him loose and let him go. I did not know what to think. Who would do that? Perhaps he had some men waiting on him who came in the middle of the night and cut him loose. I was not sure what to do.

The only worry was that he may have gone to the Madera castle to wait on me or something. I had to go home and let my father know but I wanted to ask Pedro and a few other men to follow me in case I had trouble. He was more than willing to help me out. I said my goodbyes to the rest of the people.

Ursula was in my hut and looked sad that I was leaving but she understood. We embraced, and I assured her I would be back as soon as I could. I was going to miss her. I asked Pedro to wait until I was ahead a mile before following.

Chapter 23: The Plan of Attack



Chapter 23: The Plan of Attack

All the way home I could not get my mind off Ursula and how she was turning out to be much more than I had ever imagined. Was she trying to turn me away from Ella by seducing me? Not that she really seduced me, but she sure had a way of overpowering me with love. Ever since I met her, I have been attracted but I thought I could get my mind to overpower my body by thinking of how my father wanted me to marry a princess.

There was something that Ursula had told me that sticks in my mind. She said I had to make up my own mind and follow my own life's dreams, not my father's. She was so right. In the past, I was living a life I thought my father wanted but look what it got me. I am still trying to fix a mess I must have caused in my past life. There had to be a reason Gutierrez was after me in the first place. What could it be? If only I could remember.

When I get home, I quickly ran in and call my father. He comes out of the dining room after finishing dinner. I ask him if anyone has come looking for me and he says no one has come by except for a messenger from Queen Isabel and King Hernando. I thought maybe they were wondering when I was coming to court their daughter Ella. I read the message and they wrote, "We have decided that Ella should not court you at this time due to the distressing issues we have discovered about you. Please do not contact her."

It was a bit upsetting to read that they had heard about my past, but I would just have to prove myself to them as I am trying to do with others. Which then reminds me about Gutierrez, so I tell my father about him. I explain what he has been doing to the forest people and how I challenged him to a duel. My father tells me to get all our weapons together and tell the men servants to come in here. I do as he says and tell him I have brought some men with me too. He was grateful for my forethought and asked me where this Gutierrez lived.

I told him I did not know but the forest people may know. I went out to see if they had arrived yet and they were just coming up the hill to the castle. I waved and walked out to greet them and direct them to take the horses to the stable. I then asked Pedro if he knows where Gutierrez lives.

Pedro had an idea but did not know exactly so he asked the other men and one of them said he knew because he had followed him once. I asked if he lived in a castle. He said that it was not a castle but that Gutierrez and his Redlaw warriors all lived in a place on the other side of the forest near the cliffs with a high fence and guards.

Pedro said that he knew about where that was and asked me if I thought we should go there. I thought about what the best way would be to surprise him and then asked Pedro, "Do you know of a way to get to the bottom of the cliffs and a way to climb up them?" Pedro said, "Yes sir, but it is dangerous. Why do you want to know?"

I explained to him that if we could climb up the cliffs instead of going there on land, he would never suspect we were coming. Pedro thought that I should not take the risk of climbing the cliffs. He thought we should just wait until Gutierrez comes back to try and take the forest women again.

I thought about that but told Pedro that he may not come for some time now that he knows I am on to him. "Why don't we see if we can work out my plan first?" He agreed so I then wanted my father's opinion about what we were planning. The King was impressed with his son's idea but asked, "But once you get there, how do you plan on getting just Gutierrez to come out without his men?" I told him I was working on that and would let him know soon.

There was one thing I knew Gutierrez would let his guard down for and that was a pretty woman. He hated to involve Ursula but if he planned it right, she would not be in any danger. I asked Pedro if he thought Ursula would be willing to help. Pedro says, "Oh yes, my Lord, she will do anything for you." I had to laugh a little as he

was teasing me about her now. I guess all the forest people knew we had become romantic just by how we looked at each other.

I offer Pedro and the men some dinner and then we go to the study to do our planning. Pedro told me how we would have to go to an area where we could get down to the shoreline that was connected to the cliffs. It was a few miles out of the way but well worth the extra travel to make the plan work.

I will need to take a ride down to ask Ursula and if she is as willing as Pedro thinks, I will explain what she should do. We finished with our plans and I invited the men to stay for the night, so they could get some rest before heading home. They were surprised at my invitation but happily accepted.

The next morning, we all eat one of Maria's belly-filling breakfasts and I got ready to go with the men to the forest to speak to Ursula. When we get there, Ursula is pleasantly surprised to see me. We go to the hut I had stayed in before as she said it was mine now.

Before I could start to tell her about my plan, she was all over me with kisses. I must tell her, "Wait my sweet. I need to ask you about helping me with something." She says, "Of course, whatever you desire, my Lord." I told her that she may not want to do what I am asking, and to be honest with me if she really does not feel comfortable doing it.

After I went through the plan with her, she sat and looked like she was going to get upset with me for a moment but then opened her arms in a teasing way as she said, "And what do I get for helping you with this plan?" I would give her anything, but I had a feeling she was looking for something special from me, so I thought for a moment and then said, "I will take you on a trip to France and buy you a beautiful Paris gown." She jumped into my arms like a little girl all excited as she exclaimed, "Yes, yes, wonderful."

It was all arranged now so I told Pedro that we should carry it out as soon as possible. First, we had to send an invitation to Gutierrez from Ursula, inviting him to meet her somewhere close to

where he lives. I told her that she will be asking him to come on a picnic along the cliffs. I started to tell her what to say in the invitation that would entice him to come. She laughed and said, "I need no help with what to say. I know he has had his eye on me for some time now and if I appear interested in him, he will come running." She wrote it and told him when and where she would be waiting in a few days from now.

I had one of Pedro's men take the message and I told him to make sure that it gets directly to Gutierrez and to wait for his reply. That way we would know he was not planning out leaving the area. Our messenger left immediately on his way so all we had to do is to wait for his return. Ursula and I were then left alone as Pedro went to gather some tools we would need later.

She brought some food and drink for us to have a little refreshment. She came over and sat closer to me. I tried not to let her distract me as I was concentrating on how the plan was going to work. She had other ideas as she stroked my legs moving her hand closer and closer to my groin area. I told her in firm voice to wait until later when she would have my full attention. I thought she may get upset but she understood, kissed me on the head and went to see about getting ready for the plan. Again, she impresses me with how she can read me so well.

Chapter 24: Final Assault



Chapter 24: Final Assault

It was almost nightfall when our messenger came back with good news. He said Gutierrez fell for it and sent back his acceptance to the invitation. I laughed and told Ursula, "You have power!" She smiled and teased me back with, "No, he could see that I have lots of love to give." I agreed saying, "That's what I said. You have more power than you will ever know. Look what you do to me." She asks, "Does that mean I can turn on my womanly charm toward you now?" How could I deny her? I was ready.

The next day we got ready at daylight to head toward the cliffs. We only had until tomorrow to get there and be ready to put the plan into action. Ursula would not take the trip to get to the spot close to his place until tomorrow, so she would not be leaving until the next morning. I assured her that we would be there, but just in case something may happen to delay us, I gave her my extra dagger I had brought for her.

We went over what she was to do to keep him from looking toward the cliffs and other details. I then told her that there would also be a few of the men that will follow her at a distance and hide nearby in case she needed them. She said she was not worried and would be fine.

After we said our good-bye, the men and I rode off. Ursula was sad to see me go as she waved her handkerchief at me and dried her tears with it. I could not help but have apprehensions about her doing this for me. I should have asked one of the other women, but they do not know me, so they may not have been willing like Ursula.

It was too late now. We had to go forward. We rode as fast as we could to the destination at the sea. Pedro was leading as he knew the way better than I did. We only stopped to water the horses with a brief time to eat at mid-day. The sun had disappeared behind the cliffs when we got to where we were going to camp.

We made camp far under the cliffs in a cove that looked almost like a cave. It was safe to have a fire there. Pedro said that Gutierrez's place was down about a mile but up above the cliffs and he knew the place on the cliffs where people were known to climb up as there were trees scattered throughout that you could tie ropes.

We had some food and were all exhausted from the ride. Pedro said he would stay up to watch out until one of his men got some sleep and could take over. I tried to get comfortable but was nervous about the plan and did not fall asleep right away.

The sound of the tide coming in crashing up on the rocks must have triggered me to dream about my childhood adventures of playing in the water with another boy. I had not been to the sea since I was a child. There was something overly exciting about it. I was dreaming of wading in the water when a red serpent wrapped itself around my leg and I could not get away. It was biting at my legs as I ran yelling for my father.

I started to yell in my sleep and woke with Pedro shaking me. He asked, "What were you dreaming about?" I sat up with a fright before I realized I was dreaming. I then groaned as I remembered the serpent that had attacked me at the burned castle. Then I asked Pedro if he knew if Gutierrez had any red serpents at his place. He said he had heard some stories about him having a dragon and a serpent that had babies, but he thought it was just a story. I told him it must be true because I was attacked by one. Pedro could not believe it.

The challenge of climbing the cliffs was very tiring. We could not move too fast as it was hard to keep our footing. The dirt was soft and slippery, so we kept falling and sliding. We ended up getting full of mud and looking like a mess. I told Pedro, "This is good. He won't even recognize us." We finally made it to almost the top where we stopped to rest. We only had about an hour before the time that Ursula would be at the picnic spot.

After an hour, Pedro sent one of his men ahead to see if they were where they should be. He came back to report that they were

there, so it was my time to go confront Gutierrez. I spread some more mud on my face just so that he would not recognize me at first. I made sure I had my sword and dagger as I climbed up to the top. I could see the wagon that Ursula had taken there but I did not see them. Where were they?

Then Ursula comes running around the back of the wagon with Gutierrez running behind her. What was going on? I then could see that he was trying to catch her. He probably had waited long enough and wanted to have her right there on the picnic blanket. My anger was rising and felt like this is the opportune time to catch him unaware of my presence.

She runs around the wagon again and as she comes around, I think she sees me as she slows down and lets him catch her so that his back is to me. She tried to keep his hands to himself as he says, "Oh so you want to play hard to get, huh?" She laughs in a pretend kind of way as she looks towards me. I need to get there quickly.

I walk up behind him and say in a loud voice, "What are you doing to that woman?" He turns and not realizing who I am, says, "What business is it of yours? She is my woman." That is not what I want to hear, and I pull my sword out of the sleeve with a fast and furious voice, "No she is not yours." Gutierrez is walking backward now toward his horse as I am sure he has a sword there. I yell at him, "Stop where you stand, or I will throw this dagger into your heart." He asks, "Who are you? I know you."

I wave Ursula away from him as I say, "Yes, you know me. And I know your name is Gutierrez, but I really don't know who you are." I walk closer and put my sword in front of him and say, "You are not moving another inch until you tell me why you kidnapped me and have been trying to kill me." He puts his hands on his hips as if he is trying to look tough and says, "You son-of-a-bitch, don't act like you don't know."

Of course, he thinks I remember why so I must convince him that I do not know why. "I know it was you who left me for dead out near the Valencia Castle and I think it was you or your men who killed Sabina and King Fernandez but I do not lie when I say I

do not know why because when you hit me over the head something happened to my memory of what happened right before that. You may not believe me, so I am asking you to tell me what happened during the eight months before that."

He thought for a moment, spit on the ground, and then said with anger, "No I don't believe you but will be happy to tell you the horrible things you did to my family. First, you stole my best black stallion racehorse." I was shocked. Is that why I could not remember Raven? He goes on with, "Then you broke into my home in upper Catalonia twice, stealing my gold, then my silver and other valuables." No, I could not believe what I was hearing. I was a thief like Ber said, but he was not done accusing me.

He went on, "Worst of all, you had your way with my daughter and ruined her for life. She now lives at a brothel." Now that seemed rather far-fetched as I do not think I would force myself on a woman, but then I do not remember what terrible things I may have done before.

But I do remember what one of his men did to Sabina, so I accuse him. "That is not as bad as what one of your men did to my wife Sabina. He killed her and the King at Valencia and then blew up the castle." He says, "I had nothing to do with that. They were not supposed to kill anyone but just to scare you into giving me my property back. The King must have gotten in the way."

I did not like that excuse and I acted like I was going to attack him. Suddenly, he charges at me. What is he doing? He has no weapon. But then I see him pull a dagger from behind his back. Instinctively, I jump out of his way and he falls but gets back up and charges at me again. I yell at him, "I brought some armor for you if you want it." He yells, "I don't need it."

We go back and forth as I keep dodging his attempts at trying to stab me. I really do not want to kill him. I just want him to stop coming after me. I am not sure what I am going to do but I will defend myself if needed. We keep it up as he keeps pushing me back toward the cliffs. We are a short distance from where the men are waiting but I do not think I need their help. I had made plans

that if I needed them, I would wave my blue handkerchief, but how could I do that now?

He is still coming at me, but I can see he is getting tired. After all, he is probably 10 or 15 years older than I am. I yell at him to stop and listen to me for a minute, but he keeps it up. I see a large boulder and decide to jump up on it and yell at him again the same thing. This time he stops and is out of breath as he drops to his knees.

Chapter 25: The Winner



Chapter 25: The Winner

I let Gutierrez catch his breath before I attack again and while waiting, I get that dizzy feeling again like I am going to have another vision. I see my father and my mother together both begging me to not let the babies get killed. As I come out of it I am dazed and am wondering if Gutierrez would do anything to harm my children later if I don't either kill him or do something else that will get him out of my life. I really do not want to kill anyone.

It comes to me to ask him something, "Was your black stallion the fastest horse around?" He looks at me puzzled and says, "Damn right he was." Then I tell him, "I know where he is being kept, and I can give him back to you." His eyes become slits as he accusingly says, "Why would you do that?" I tell him that I want to prove to him that I am not the man I used to be before I lost my memory, and that I want him to stop coming after me. He is still doubtful but says, "What about the other stuff you have done?"

I then put my right hand up and say, "I swear that I will return the stolen items or repay you. As for your daughter, I will try my best to have her returned to you. I would never have done such a thing as I am today. I do not know why I was like that before but want to make amends for all the wrong I did." He starts walking in circles as he is thinking what to do.

Then he faces me with a hard look on his face. He says, "Will you sign a document swearing that you will do as you say?" I answer that I will. He then motions to me to come down off the rock. I ask, "Do you swear not to come after me anymore?" He laughs and says, "Fine, fine, I will stop."

I jump down as he holds out his hand for me to shake. I breath a long sigh of relief. We walk over to where Ursula is waiting. She looks at me with a question on her face and I laugh. She asks, "What happened to you two?" I explain to her how I told him I would make my wrongs right. Then Gutierrez asks, "You two set me up, didn't you?" I laugh and said, "It was the only way I could think of to get you alone." He says, "True, you know me too well."

I then motion the men to come into sight and tell them what has happened. Pedro is surprised and not too sure it is a good idea. He does not trust Gutierrez, which I do not blame him after all the chaos he has caused among the forest people. I then have an idea to fix that too. I ask Gutierrez, "I shall sign your document under one condition." He groans and asks, "Oh no, what is it?"

I say, "If you sign a document saying you will not harass the forest people's women anymore. Don't you know that you can have a woman without taking her by force?" He laughs and says, "I know but I am getting old and they don't like me much." I pulled him to the side and in a low tone tell him that maybe if he took a bath every week and dressed nicer, they would not mind being around him. He laughs and says, "Fine I will sign your document."

We all gather around and finish off Ursula's picnic food. I tell the men I will go back with Ursula in the wagon and ask them to bring my horse when they go back down to get their horses. I ask Gutierrez if it is alright if I come to his place to make up the documents. He says it will be fine after he tells his men what he is doing.

But then I remember about the red serpents and ask him if he still has them. He said he did but that they would not hurt me. I then ask, "How about if we go with you to your gate? Then you go get the scrolls and pens to bring out for us to make up." He laughs and asks me if I fear serpents. I yell, "Damn right, I hate those things!"

We go to Gutierrez's place and make up the scrolls. I tell him I will bring his belongings back within three days. He says he knows where my castle is and will certainly be coming there if I do not bring them. I take Ursula home and tell her I will return when I bring the horse and other things to Gutierrez. I hate to bid her good-bye but need this done and over with in order to relax again. As I ride back home, I am deep in thought as to what a day it turned out to be. What a turn of events!

When I get home, I am not looking forward to telling my father that his prize racehorse is not his and must be returned. I will have

to replace Raven with a new Raven. And what about the treasures that he said I stole? Where would they be? I must get some rest before I do all of this. I go to see my babies for a while and as I rock them, I wonder about Ella. Do I still want to court her? She is so young, and immature compared to Ursula. Plus, I will need to convince her parents that I have changed my ways.

Ursula just has something about her that reminds me of someone. It then hits me that she looks a lot like my mother with the beautiful red hair and ocean blue eyes. But it is more than the physical. She makes me laugh and I feel so comfortable around her. I need to stop thinking about this now or I will never get any desperately needed sleep.

When I meet my father at breakfast, I tell him I have some news. He says he hopes it is good news. I tell him that it means I will not be pursued by the madman Gutierrez anymore. He asks, "Why, did you kill him?" I say, "No Father, we made an agreement. He and I made scrolls to document that he would stop trying to kill me if I returned his property that I apparently stole from him before I lost my memory."

I explained that Gutierrez is a no-good man who kidnapped me, locked me up for months, and then left me for dead but that I had to be the better man and forget what he did because of what I did to him. My father earnestly is listening until I get to the part that he could not accept. He jumps up from the table, slamming his fist and yelling, "What? Raven cannot be his! You gave him to me as a present." I told him I would get him another racehorse and tried to calm him down but knew he would have to have a while to do that so left him alone.

After some time, my father came to me and said he understood. Then I had to ask him if I had ever given him some gold, silver, and other valuables. He said that I had given him a lot of valuables and asked if they were stolen. I said they were, and I needed to give them back. He just shook his head. I needed to ask him one last thing. I had to ask if he had ever said to me, "You must decide before it is too late." He looked at me with a pitchkettled look on his face. He said he may have but he was not sure when or why.

The next day, I was awakened by a loud voice yelling, "Get your arse up! You good for nothing piece of shit." It could only be Drake. I was glad to see him even though he still did not seem to believe my story. My father set him straight as we had breakfast and he apologized and asked how he could help.

I told him how a lot of valuables we had were stolen, but I did not know who else they belonged to besides Gutierrez. He helped me gather the things from our safe storage that I thought were Gutierrez's and told my father I was about to leave with the wagon. He shook his head sadly and then went out to the stable to get Raven. Drake went with him.

I hated to see my father look like he was about to cry. When he brought Raven out for me to tie to the back of the wagon, he didn't seem so upset as before and tells me that Drake can have Raven mated with a filly he knows is of good stock if Gutierrez allows it and they may be able to have another race horse. I told my father I would ask Gutierrez about it and return in a day or two.

He then tells me that he remembered when he told me to decide before it is too late. It was once when we were arguing, and he told me that I would be sorry someday for all the hurt I caused if I didn't make up my mind who I really was because he thought that I was just being young and foolish due to my anger with him for making my mother leave. He apologized for not letting me see her over the years.

I then ask my father how I could decide between two women, one a princess and one a common. He laughs and says, "Oh no, not again. I only wanted you to marry into a blood line for the sake of your future children. But after losing the love of my life to a common man, how can I say what is best? Only you can decide that my son. I swear I will never try to tell you how to live your life again."

I thanked him and he gave me a hug and said he wished me a safe trip as I left. Drake assured me he would look after my father while I was gone and when I got back, he would help give back the

rest of the valuables. I was happy to see my brother-in-law come to help me out.

I had a lot to think about as I made the trip. During the previous night I had dreams about Ursula and Ella. I think it helped me make up my mind on which woman I wanted to spend my life with. I will need to send a message to Ella and then speak to Ursula when I get back from making this delivery.

I also had to find Gutierrez's daughter and see what I could do about bringing her back to her father. When I got to Gutierrez's place, he was happy to see me, but probably even happier to see his horse. I ask him to give me some time to find his daughter and he agrees to give me a month.

On the way back, I couldn't pass by the entrance to Mariposa without stopping to see Ursula even though I had thought I really should go home to send a message to Ella first to tell her my decision. Ursula is excited to see me and brings me into our hut to show me a small blue and gold purse she has made with little butterflies on it. I tell her it is beautiful, and she says, "I made it to go with my new Paris gown of blue and gold." I had almost forgot what I promised her. I laugh and say, "Of course, we will find a gown to go with it. I have not forgotten my promise."

I then get an idea to surprise her and say, "The only problem is that a single woman should not go traveling with a man of royalty unless they are married." She hangs her head for a moment saying, "You are right, my Lord. What if I go as your servant girl?" I shake my head and say, "No, you can only go as a married woman. Which means we will have to do something before we go."

She looks puzzled for a moment as she was not sure of what I was saying. But then her eyes get wide and her mouth drops open. She lets out a high-pitched scream that almost breaks my eardrums. She hesitates for a moment and asks, "You are not fooling me, are you? What? Married? You and me?"

I then get down on my knee and take her left hand. I do not have a ring for her yet, but I will give her the one my mother gave me

that my father had given her. I am nervously wondering if she will say yes, but still I cannot wait to ask her. She is looking at me with wide eyes of wonder as I ask, "Will you marry me?" She jumps up and down yelling, "Yes, yes! I am so happy; I think I'm going to faint." I join in with her glee and pick her up and twirl her around and around. Yes, she is just what I need. Her enthusiasm makes my heart jump for joy and makes my soul feel like I do not need to pretend to be anyone but myself. We were meant for each other.

Pedro is knocking at the door asking, "What's all the noise?" I tell him, and he congratulates us with a big surprised expression. Then she must go around the village telling all her friends and they all bring us gifts of food, wine, and other modest gifts that are handmade from their hearts and so very welcomed. I feel like I have found another family.

I ask Ursula if she thinks Pedro would be a good ambassador after we are married, and she thinks it is a wonderful idea. We ask Pedro if he is willing to take the position and he gladly accepts it with gratitude. I then tell Ursula and Pedro my secret plan of introducing my half-brother Ethan to the Princess Ella and hope they get along so maybe a royal princess could marry a commoner. We all toast our cups of wine and laugh at that.

After the gathering breaks up, Ursula and I spend the night together talking almost all night in between the lovemaking. She tells me all about the few years of her life with a husband that died a few years ago. She never told me that before and it made me feel even more close to have that in common and it gives me a better understanding as to why she is so experienced in the bed.

I tell her more of my adventures and as I am speaking, some memories start coming back to me. I did not want to remember the bad things I did in those months before I lost my memory, but I guess I must face them someday so why not now? I have done what I must do to make amends for the wrongdoing. It is a free feeling to be able to know the real me.

Ursula was very understanding and said she would listen to me as the memories returned. I told her how horrible it was to be

kidnapped and kept in a cage for months and then to later find out that Sabina had two babies without me by her side. It was one of the very few times I shed some tears as I remembered what a good and kind woman Sabina was and how she was able to help me escape from where I was being held captive. And then how we were able to spend a few precious days at the Valencia castle before Gutierrez's men came. I remembered her favorite color was red and I know that every time I see it, I will think of her.

Some painful memories of how I used to use my power to mistreat people and rob others came back. I did not like remembering how I used to be but knew that I was not acting as myself. I was putting on a show like I thought my father wanted. I asked Ursula if she thought God would forgive me for all the terrible things I did. She said that she knew God was merciful and he would forgive me because I have repented and turned my life around.

Then Ursula asks if I had learned any lessons from my past. I had to ponder about that for a while to put it into the right words. I turn to look into those deep blue eyes as I told her, "Yes, I learned that power is necessary in this world of violence." Her eyes tell me that this is not all I should have learned, and I agree as I go on, "But also, that love is more important than having power because you can lose power quickly whereas love can last a lifetime and it should be considered as the means to overcoming violence."

Ursula smiles and nods her approval saying, "I agree but I also believe you can have a good kind of power; a power that is ruled by love. In a way, they are both winners just like both you and Gutierrez are winners in what you were fighting for. Of course, we know that wouldn't have happened if you didn't take the first loving step for which I am so proud of you for."

I love it when she compliments me. Then like a bolt of lightning, it came to me clear as day. I tell Ursula that to sum it up, my lesson is what my late wife had tried to make me see for years. I explain, "Sabina had a saying she would tell me when I misused my power by taking advantage of people. I didn't really understand what she meant by it at the time, but she would say it so often that I had it

inscribed in a locket for her." I pull the locket out from inside my pouch and put it around Ursula's neck as I say, "I now understand...Love Over Power!"

And they lived happily ever after!



The End

About the Author

Jessica Dumas has been a freelance writer for over two years working for online freelance services. She also has her own business called the Butterfly Connection offering virtual assistant and writing services.



Before opening her business in 2002, she spent many years working as a document specialist and administrative assistant for healthcare, telecommunications, and environmental consultants, as well as manufacturers, attorneys, and CPA firms.

She was raised on the outskirts of Stillwater, Minnesota, and has been writing stories and poems most of her life but just recently had her dream of becoming a professional writer come true. She writes poems, books, eBooks, web articles, product reviews, product guides, and blogs. She has written a total of ten books/eBooks counting the books she has written as a ghostwriter. Writing poems is her greatest passion. Another passion is butterflies as you can tell by much of her work.

Other books she has written are listed below and are available on Amazon.com:

- One Last Flight Lesson – A memoir of Life with Captain Dumas
- Monarch Butterfly 101 – Learn About Monarch Butterflies in One Sitting
- Monarch Butterfly 2.0 – 101 Reasons to Cheer Our Favorite Orange and Black Butterfly from A to Z
- Be Like a Butterfly – 10 Steps to Help You Make Changes in Your Life
- My Book of Poetry – 46 Poems About Love, Life, and Butterflies
- The Dolphin and the Butterfly – A Lesson in Kindness (Children's)