

SUKESHINIE
GOONATILLEKE

*Sisters
in Arms*

COURAGEOUS WOMEN
OF THE REFORMATION

“The Reformation comes alive with these stories of faith, adventure and love. The eight women featured in these stories were not only heroes, but flesh-and-blood humans who had fears and excitement and doubts and temptations. They were not perfect, but the reader is touched and inspired by their growing faith and their willingness to suffer for it.

“New author Sukesheinie Goonatilleke has made these leaders of the Reformation jump from the page and into our hearts. The historical details are clear and help with our education, but it is the humanity of each of these women that stands out. Their loves, fears and faith help the reader to both understand the past and have sympathy for it.

“For all who see themselves as children of the Reformation, it is vital to learn about the women who helped lead this movement. *Sisters in Arms* highlights many of the women heroes of the faith—using both deep historical detail and exciting, action-packed stories. As I read these stories, the Protestant leadership emerged as fully human, with emotions and flaws just like me. What an inspiration!”

—Dr Lisa Clark Diller, Professor of History, Southern Adventist University.

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All Bible quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

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Foreword

When we think of the Reformation we often think of the great men who started the movement. Men like Martin Luther, William Tyndale and John Calvin. Unfortunately, the women who were a part of this movement are often overlooked.

This book provides a fascinating insight into the lives of eight female heroes of the Reformation. Their stories are sure to resonate with people from various backgrounds and all walks of life. You will find that the women in this book are from various ranks and segments of society, from the highest to the lowest, yet their faith and commitment to God is a single unifying thread that runs through the book and binds their experience to ours.

Sometimes it is easy to read about the great reformers and wonder how we could ever accomplish anything as grand or heroic as they did. But when you read the story of Marie Durand, who at the age of nineteen took such a decisive stand for God, you cannot help but be inspired. She was not a theologian, pastor or teacher, but her unwavering commitment to God's Word through thirty-eight years of imprisonment speaks to each of us.

Each of these women faced enormous tests and overcame them. As you read this book you will be drawn into the experience of each character. The stories are so vivid and personal that they bring the characters to life, making each of them both relatable and personable.

Some of these women broke with tradition and blazed a new trail for those who would come after them, like Katharina von Bora, who as the wife of Martin Luther, set an example for other wives of faith. Then there are those like Queen Katherine Parr and Louise de Coligny, who lived in royal courts and rubbed shoulders with the elite of society, yet still maintained their faith in God.

These stories are sure to captivate, enrich, motivate and encourage you as

you attempt to navigate the challenges you face, challenges that might seem different on the surface but at their core are very much the same: issues of faithfulness to God, commitment to His Word and deeper education in spiritual things.

In many ways, this book is a fruit of the many hours that Sukeshinie volunteered researching and writing articles for the Lineage Journey website. Lineage is an educational media ministry that creates resources to teach young people about church history. Sukeshinie came on board shortly after the ministry launched in 2017. Since then, she has written more than 150 articles and blogs for the website, which have been a blessing to countless people around the world. Many of those articles formed the basis for the stories that you will find in this book.

I pray that as you read this book and stand on the shoulders of these spiritual giants, you will be able to look to their examples of faith and courage to guide you no matter what you face in the future.

Adam Ramdin

Executive Producer, Lineage Journey

Youth Director, North England Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Preface

The Reformation was the zeitgeist of the 16th century. More than any other social or political event during that period, the Reformation made the most significant impact on every facet of life. The movement was led by giants—juggernauts of spiritual and intellectual accomplishment who were unafraid to stand up and fearlessly proclaim God’s Word.

Together, they introduced people to the truth of justification by faith, the great cornerstone of Christianity, and placed the Bible in the hands of a populace that had, up to that point, been largely ignorant of what it contained. They also came to recognise the importance of religious liberty. The great German reformer Martin Luther summarised it best when he stood before the emperor at the Diet of Worms and boldly declared, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

The idea that an individual’s conscience was free and could be directed as that individual chose was foreign to the people of early modern Europe. As foreign was the idea that a man or woman’s conscience could and should be wholly captive to the Word of God. The Reformation changed that. But a deeper study of the Reformation reveals something else—that history was shaped as much by faithful women as it was by faithful men.

As much as men like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli revolutionised their world and ours, there were also remarkable women who worked in a similar fashion and accomplished significant feats in their own right.

These women came from every walk of life. Like many of us, they were wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. But they were also heads of state, writers, activists, poets and scholars. They were women who helped shape not only their homes and families but also their communities and nations. This book is dedicated to telling their stories.

The idea for this book first came to me when I was doing a series of blog posts on women of the Reformation for Women’s History Month in March,

2018. The more I dug into the lives of the women of the Reformation, the more I began to see common threads that bound them, as well as an amazing array of differences that made them stand apart as individuals.

Of all the women I read about, the eight women included in this book made the greatest impact on me. In many ways, these women were flawed and moulded by the social norms of their times, yet they demonstrated a dauntless commitment to God's Word that led them to defy social biases and traditions. They were deeply human and at the same time deeply spiritual as well. They are women of the German, French and English Reformations, and their stories are grouped together in this book by geographical region and then by chronology. I have tried to follow the historical narrative as closely as possible, though I have exercised some artistic licence in places. My goal overall was to be as true to these women and their stories as possible, because there is something powerful about telling true stories. I believe they can capture the imagination as thoroughly as fiction.

These women were not afraid to follow their consciences and make hard choices, even at great cost to themselves. Their lives are described in Revelation 12:11: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." It was this that drew me to them.

Men who fought together on the front lines of history's great wars are often referred to as "brothers in arms." Commitment to a common goal and willingness to make enormous sacrifices in the pursuit of it bound these men together inextricably in a brotherhood that was often stronger than any blood tie.

Similarly, these women, though in some cases separated by time and space, chose to pursue a common goal at great personal cost. Though they did not take up physical arms, they took up the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and the shield of faith and went to war against formidable forces of spiritual darkness. This bound them together. This made them sisters in arms. And those of us who pursue a similar commitment to God's Word regardless of the ensuing costs are part of that

community as well. We too are brothers and sisters in arms, to each other and also to them.

As you read this book, I hope you are as deeply moved and inspired by the lives of these amazing women as I have been. I pray that they not only inspire you but that they also challenge you to examine your own commitment to God's Word, so that you too can experience the unique joy of fellowship with Jesus that they each treasured.

Sukeshinie Goonatileke

September, 2020

1

Katharina von Bora

RUNAWAY

Nimbschen, The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation

April 4, 1523

The stillness of the night is pierced by loud rattling and the pounding of hooves. We all tense at the sound, wondering if it is the man we have been waiting for. We are nervous and skittish, huddled around the thick garden door leading out into the lane beyond.

Beside me, Veronika leans towards Margaret. “Do you think it is him?” she whispers.

Margaret presses her face against the rough wooden door and peers out into darkness. “It could be,” she replies.

“Well, if it is him then why must he make such a racket? We will be caught before we even leave the convent, Margaret!” Elsa complains. Margaret turns and silences her with a glare.

“Could he not be more discreet?” Ava agrees, shooting Margaret a glare of her own. This is all Margaret’s doing. She is the one who has written to Brother Martin for help.

“He has come to help us and frankly we should be grateful that anyone has come at all,” Margaret tells us imperiously.

The moon is high tonight and the countryside is awash with pale silvery light. It is not the best night for our escape, but beggars can't be choosers

and tonight we are beggars. The rattling gets louder and I nudge Margaret out of the way to peek around the corner of the garden door at the approaching wagon.

“I pray Sister von Haubitz is soundly asleep,” Elsa says right beside my ear. “She will hang us out to dry like sheets in the wind if she catches us.”

“Shhh,” Veronika whispers. “Be quiet all of you! Your whispering alone is going to wake the Abbess.”

The rattling comes to an abrupt halt and I hear the soft nickering of horses not far from where we stand. We wait, listening for the signal that will confirm that this is indeed the man we have been waiting for. Then we hear it, a soft piercing whistle, once, twice, three times.

“It’s him,” Margaret says, and a ripple of excitement goes through the small knot of young women gathered around the garden door.

“Go see if it’s really him, Katie,” Veronika prompts, nudging me forward. I look over at Margaret, who nods her agreement.

“Why me?” I ask bewildered. “Shouldn’t you be going?”

Margaret shrugs. “You’re the only one of us who isn’t afraid of anything,” she says mildly. “Now go on, we don’t have all night!”

Sighing, I slide through the gate and out into the open country lane. I spot him in the shadow of the wall to my left and make my way over, keeping out of the moonlight.

“Herr Koppe?” I whisper, when I am close enough.

“Yes,” he whispers back, and I hear the creak of wood as he steps down from the driver’s seat and comes to meet me by the horses’ heads. Leonhard Koppe is known to us, but unfortunately not for his intellect.

“I am Katie . . . Katharina,” I say, suddenly shy that I, a nun, am having a secret rendezvous with a strange man outside the walls of my abbey in the middle of the night.

“Fraulein Katharina,” he greets me formally. “Are the other sisters ready?”

“Yes,” I reply, my eyes shifting to the rickety cart. “You will transport us in this . . . wagon?”

“Uh, yes.” He scratches the back of his neck. “Dr Luther suggested that a wagon might be the most effective . . . uh . . . means of escape. How many

of you are there?”

“There are twelve of us,” I say, as I eye the vehicle. He nods and I see that his face is serene, as if smuggling nuns out of a convent in the dead of night were an everyday occurrence. “This could very well be a fool’s errand,” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

“Yes,” he concedes, “but we will not know unless we try.”

It is not like you have many other options, Katie, I think. Then I nod. “I will get the others,” I tell him and hurry back to the garden door.

Quietly, I gather my sisters and we slip out into the lane in a huddle, melting into the shadows like thieves in the night. We gather around the wagon and when I glance up to measure Herr Koppe’s reaction, I see that his usually calm face is showing signs of concern.

“Well?” Margaret snaps impatiently, taking in his dazed expression. It is too late for regrets now. “Where do you want us?”

“What do you want us to do?” Elsa repeats.

Herr Koppe stares at us for a long moment, then mutters, “I have brought fish barrels.”

“Fish barrels?” Veronika asks. “Whatever for?”

“I thought . . . ” he shifts and rubs the back of his neck, “I thought you might travel in them.”

“Travel in fish barrels?” Ava repeats, looking at him like he has lost his mind. “How big are they?”

He motions for us to come around to the back of the wagon and look, and we follow him, a soft ripple of indignation passing between us.

“Fish barrels?”

“Has he gone mad?”

“Perhaps they are larger than we expect?”

“Humph . . . I doubt it.”

“*Shhh,*” Margaret hisses.

I jump in then, hoping to placate everyone, “The man has been good enough to risk his neck and find a way to conceal us. The least we can do is show some gratitude.”

“Let’s see how grateful you are when you have to sit inside a stinking fish

barrel, Katie von Bora,” Veronika murmurs. I sigh, knowing that she’s right.

The barrels are squat wooden receptacles with bands of iron wrapped around their bulging middles. “Here they are,” Herr Koppe says, looking sheepish.

Gathering up my skirt in one hand, I hitch my foot into the spokes of the wheels and awkwardly squeeze between two barrels and onto the wagon bed. Cautiously, I peer into a barrel. In the moonlight, I see a sludge of fish entrails lining the bottom and the stench of rotting fish hits me. I rear back wrinkling my nose.

“What is it?” Margaret whispers, and I turn to see her climbing up into the wagon behind me. She peers into a barrel and I see her face blanch. We exchange a look and then glance at Herr Koppe, whose face has resumed its placid expression. I turn back to the fish barrel and hitch my leg over the rim, struggling a little to get inside.

Before long, all twelve of us are crammed into the wretched fish barrels, our knees jammed against our chests and the stench of rotting fish seeping into our skins. The sludge of old fish entrails is damp and cold beneath me. An involuntary shudder passes through my body at the thought.

“Even if I wash for a thousand years, this stink will never come out of my skin,” I hear Elsa whisper hoarsely from the next barrel.

When we are settled, Herr Koppe takes the reins and we begin our journey. The road is rough and uneven and the wagon bounces hard. Soon my entire body is rattling and I clamp my jaw tight until it aches. *Two days of this*, I think. *Two whole days of rattling and jolting in this stinking brew of fish.* I close my eyes, reminding myself of why we are doing this, how it all started and why it is worth it.

Summer, 1519

My favourite place in the whole convent is the library. I love the musty smell of books and ink and the scarred tables lining the stone room. I am reading a book on canonical law, my brow furrowed as I take in the concept of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—there is no salvation outside the church—when a sound behind me makes me look up. It is Veronika, eyes wide, a

small sheaf of bound papers clutched in her hand.

“What is it?” I ask, shutting the heavy book. “What’s happened?”

She sinks into the chair beside me and casts a glance around the room. There are a few other sisters in the library quietly reading.

“Veronika,” I say, as I follow her gaze. “What’s . . . ”

“Shhh,” she presses a finger against her lips. “I have just received a pamphlet,” she says, her voice so low I have to lean almost against her mouth to hear her.

“From where?” I ask, my brow furrowing again. Ever since this monk Martin Luther commenced his rampage, we have been instructed to be very careful about the kind of literature we accept.

“From my uncle,” she says, looking at the papers in her hand.

“The prior at the monastery in Grimma?” I lean back, my shoulders sagging in relief. If she has a book from her uncle the monk, then we have nothing to worry about. “So, what is the problem?” I ask, forgetting to whisper.

“Katie!” she hisses. “*Keep your voice down!*”

“What on earth for?” I ask, though I oblige. “If your Uncle Wolfgang sent you a book, it can hardly be contraband.”

“That’s just it,” she whispers, placing the papers on top of my book. “He has sent me a pamphlet written by Martin Luther.”

“What?” I glance down at the pamphlet, slowly taking in the title: “Lessons on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.” It appears to be a collection of sermons. I quickly take the pamphlet and slide it under my book, my eyes darting around the room. The other sisters seem oblivious to us.

“He sent me a letter,” Veronika continues. “He says that Brother Martin was at the priory in Grimma a few weeks ago and preached to the brothers there. He says he believes every word Brother Martin preaches, Katie. He has sent us this collection of sermons so that we can study what he teaches for ourselves.”

I am too shocked to speak. I stare at her, my mouth opening and closing like a fish.

“Well?” she demands. “Say something!”

“It is heresy,” I finally choke out. “Surely your uncle knows how dangerous this is?”

“He does not think it is heresy,” she says, and I shake my head.

“Then he is a heretic himself.”

“Katie! How can you say something is heretical until you have taken the time to study it?”

“Because the Abbess has told me that anything that comes out of the mouth of Martin Luther is heresy,” I retort.

“And that is enough for you?” she challenges.

“Is it not enough for you?” I reply hotly.

“You would throw out everything he says just because the Abbess says so? I never would have thought you would be so . . . ” she pauses, searching for the right word.

“So what?” I ask dryly, then I cut her off with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Don’t try to manipulate me, Veronika. I do not like to invite trouble.”

“What if it is trouble worth inviting?” she replies, raising her eyebrows.

I sigh in exasperation. “So what will you do with this?” I ask, motioning towards the pamphlet still in my lap.

“We will study it,” she says.

“Who is we?” I ask.

“Margaret von Staupitz and Ava von Schonfeld, Elsa and myself. We plan to meet in my room tonight after the lights are out. Please Katie, say you will come.”

“Veronika, this is madness. Who knows what will happen to us if we are caught? I heard that Martin Luther disputed with Dr Eck at Leipzig just last month. The entire church is in an uproar about this.” I lean closer and whisper in her ear. “They might even burn him as a heretic. And then where will we be? What will they do to us if we are caught reading his work?”

She is silent for a moment. “He is using Erasmus’ new translation of the New Testament, you know,” she finally replies, as though she hasn’t heard a single word I have said.

“What?”

“Erasmus of Rotterdam.” She gives me an exasperated look. “You know who he is, Katie.”

“Yes,” I reply. “I know who Erasmus is, but what of it? Erasmus dedicated his new translation to the pope himself. I fail to see how it could propagate heresy.”

“It’s a different sort of translation, Katie. Everyone is saying it’s . . . it’s so refreshing.”

“But surely the Holy Father would have come across any inconsistencies?” I say.

“Perhaps the Holy Father hasn’t read it?” Veronika offers, biting her lip.

“*Veronika!*” I gasp.

“Well, I have heard say,” she replies, her chin tilting up stubbornly, “that the Holy Father called the gospel a profitable fable.” She leans back and studies me.

“That’s nonsense,” I say dismissively.

“Is it? We owe it to ourselves to see if there is any truth in what Brother Martin is saying. Come on, Katie! There is a copy of Erasmus’ Bible here in the library. We can use it to check every reference Brother Martin makes in his pamphlet. There is nothing to lose, is there? If it is heresy like everyone says, then we can see for ourselves and be done with it, but if it is true, like my Uncle Wolfgang says it is, then how can we walk away from it?”

I sigh and shake my head. Veronika is right. “Alright,” I say grudgingly. “I will come.”

Her face breaks into a wide grin. “You will not regret it, Katie. I promise you won’t!”



That night we meet in Veronika’s room, huddled around her hard bed, a single tallow taper flickering on the small wooden stool nearby. There is an air of excitement in the room, coupled with tension. We read Brother Martin’s pamphlet, flipping open Erasmus’ heavy translation of the New Testament and comparing it with Brother Martin’s conclusions. We stay like that until we hear the low tolling of the bells summoning us for Lauds, the

hour of mass just before dawn.

I glance up from the Bible, my eyes stinging with the strain of reading in dim candlelight. “We must go down for Lauds or they will wonder where we are.” The others nod.

“I’ll return the Bible to the library later,” Veronika says.

None of us have slept a wink, but I doubt that we could have even if we had wanted to.

Adrenaline is pumping through my veins and I am wide awake as we enter the chapel and go through the motions of Lauds. I barely blink when I bow to the host or when I repeat the words. My mind goes back to the book I was reading when Veronika came to me, and the dogma that there is no salvation outside the church. My eyes narrow on the monstrance—an ornate case holding the consecrated host—on the altar before us, the great rood on the wall, and a thought hits me like a great boulder, shattering a hundred ideas I have cherished for so long. If Brother Martin is right, then salvation can be found outside the church but not outside of Christ.

The more we study, the more we are convinced that Brother Martin is right. We tear through the book of Romans, hanging on St Paul’s every word. Salvation outside the church but not outside of Christ. Salvation *only* in Christ. When we come to the first verse of Romans Chapter 5, I hear the scaffolding of an entire system of belief begin to pull apart in my mind.

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” Veronika reads quietly. She lifts her eyes from the page and looks around at us all. Justified by faith. Not by the sacraments or indulgences but by *faith*. It is an idea that is impossible to conceive. Too wide and high and deep to comprehend. Salvation by faith.

“If this is heresy, then I shall gladly be called a heretic,” Ava says.

It is a reformation of ideas, of beliefs, of thoughts. A reformation of our very hearts. And once the fire has been kindled, it seems that nothing can stop the blaze. We study each night until we are exhausted and the Abbess, my aunt, remarks on it. Then we are more careful, studying in private during our free time in the library, only meeting once a week to discuss what we have learned together. I am like a woman possessed. The Word of

God consumes my every waking thought and I want nothing else.

January, 1521

“They have excommunicated him.”

I turn to stare at Margaret von Staupitz. “Who?” I ask. I am in the great hall, stacking logs into the crackling fire.

“*Who else?*” she hisses, grabbing my arm and propelling me into a small alcove in the gallery beyond.

“Dr Luther?” I ask, and she nods.

“My brother has written to me,” she continues. “He says that Brother Martin took the papal bull of excommunication and burned it for all the world to see at the Elster Gate in Wittenberg.”

I gape at her in shock. “Surely he would not defy the Holy Father in such a manner?” I whisper, scandalised.

Margaret’s eyes are shining with a mixture of excitement and fear. “He did. His books have all been proscribed. They are to be burned and anyone found reading them condemned as a heretic.”

At this, I feel a shiver race along my spine. We have been receiving his pamphlets regularly through Veronika’s uncle. “Should we burn what we have?” I ask Margaret. “Have you talked with the others?”

“No, I have not talked to the others, but I think it might be wise to burn what we have. If we are caught handling them, there is no telling what might happen.” She pauses and studies me. “You know that Brother Martin holds my brother Johann in high esteem,” she says, and I nod. Margaret’s brother is Dr Johann von Staupitz, and she has told us that he has had a great deal of influence over Brother Martin. “Johann fears that Brother Martin will be summoned to appear before the emperor soon.”

“Will they burn him?” I ask, and Margaret nods.

“They will if they can find reason enough.”

“We must be careful then,” I tell Margaret. “Perhaps we should stop studying and . . . and just go back.”

“Go back?” she interrupts me, incredulously. “Go back to what? Believing in indulgences and relics? Would you really do that, Katie?”

“He is causing a stir and . . . I am not certain that I want to be caught up in all of this.”

“I had never pegged you for a coward, Katie von Bora,” Margaret says.

I glare at her and raise my chin a notch, my eyes flashing fire. “I am no coward, Margaret von Staupitz,” I bite back. “But neither am I a fool. If he has been excommunicated and proscribed by the Holy Father himself as a heretic, then we would do well to be wary of his teachings. Are you really ready to turn your back on the Holy Father and the church? Are you really ready to throw in your lot with a man as wild and as unstable as Brother Martin Luther? You yourself told me that he is often beset with bouts of melancholia. How do we know that he is even in his right mind?”

Margaret snorts in a most unladylike manner and waves her hand dismissively. “I do not pretend to know Brother Martin’s state of mind, Katie, but I do know this: he speaks the truth. I have seen it with my own eyes and not just from his writings but from the Bible. He is right when he talks of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* and *sola Christus*. Do you deny it?”

My shoulders sag under the weight of her words and I avert my eyes, studying the flagstones at my feet. I cannot deny it. Each particle of truth I have gleaned has been as sweet as honey in my mouth. “It is a high price to pay, Margaret,” I say instead. “This is all I have ever known. I was gifted to the convent by my father at the age of five. I have grown up in the shelter of a cloister my whole life. Where would I go if I embraced this new doctrine openly? What would become of me? I would not know how to live out there. Would I marry? For no woman can remain unmarried in society. A woman who is not protected by the church needs the protection of a man.” I shake my head. “I cannot even begin to comprehend what life would be like outside these walls.”

Margaret’s eyes soften and she lays a gentle hand on my arm. “God will lead you, Katie. One step at a time. But it is up to you to decide which path you will choose.”

Summer, 1521

We hear about what has happened at the Diet of Worms from Margaret’s

brother Dr von Staupitz and from others. It seems that every peddler that stops at the convent has a different version of the same tale. They say that Dr Luther was greeted by adoring crowds at every city and village he travelled through, they say that Dr Luther has bested the emperor and the pope and all of the scholars in Christendom. They say that Dr Luther will set them free from papal indulgences and papal taxes and that now the peasants might raise their heads just a fraction.

We are dumb with shock. We cannot believe that he has had the gall to stand before the emperor and declare that he will not listen to popes or councils, because they have often contradicted themselves. We cannot believe that he has told them that his conscience is captive to the Word of God alone. We half expect the emperor to flay him alive while he is still at Worms, but instead the emperor honours Dr Luther's safe conduct and allows him to return to Wittenberg. But no sooner has he left than the emperor issues the Edict of Worms, damning Martin Luther as a heretic and calling for his immediate arrest.

It forces us all to count the cost. For now Brother Martin is no longer a raving monk of questionable mental capability. He is a man hunted for his life, a man preaching against the Holy Father and the church, and any man, or woman, who is foolish enough to follow him will be as hunted and reviled as he is. I am reticent to attend our regular Bible study sessions. Fear keeps me away. Night after night I go into the little chapel at the convent and kneel on the flagstones, pleading with God for guidance, for help. I do not think I have prayed this way before, but now I find that I have nowhere else to turn. The Word of God has become precious to me, and yet it is also like a great sword, slashing at the cables that hold me to the only anchor I have known all my life: the Holy Roman Church. Were I to be cut loose, what would become of me? I would be set adrift upon a vast and boundless ocean and who would anchor me?

I am working in the garden one day, digging out weeds, my mind roiling about the situation I am in, when I pause from my work and look down at my clothes. Prickly burrs from the weeds cling to my skirts. I pick at them, quietly mulling over a passage of Scripture I have read the previous day.

It is a single verse, from the fifteenth chapter of St John, where our Lord speaks of the vine and its branches. In verse five He says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” I consider this verse, quietly breaking it apart in my mind, just as I have been breaking up the rich clods of earth at my feet.

I think of the burrs that are even now clinging to my skirts, and I think of a branch and how it clings to the vine, drawing nourishment and strength from it. A branch is nothing without the vine, for the vine is its source of life. And then, quietly, like dawn gently stealing over the sleeping earth, the truth settles over me. I see the choice before me as it really is. I had thought that I was struggling to accept Brother Martin’s words and the inherent dangers of such a choice, but the truth is that I am struggling to accept the words of Christ.

Yes, the path that Brother Martin is carving before us is fraught with danger and sacrifice. It will cost me something to embrace these new teachings. I will have to leave the safety of the convent and face a world that is hostile and alien, not only to my beliefs but also to my gender. I will have to learn to live in the outside world. I realise that to accept these new teachings will be to relinquish safety and security. The surety of a roof over my head, food in my belly, a respectable station in life. For if I were to leave this convent, I would be nothing more than a homeless, helpless woman, unprotected and vulnerable in a world that has very little use for me apart from being a wife and mother—and I have no experience in such things. I do not know what it means to be a wife or mother, for I have lived among nuns my entire life.

Sighing, I rise to my feet and dust off my skirts, grasping a single burr in my hand. I realise that, like this little burr, I have to choose what I will stick to. Will it be Christ? Or will it be the safety of the convent? For I know that I cannot have both.

Summer, 1522

It is Margaret who finally makes a decision. Or at least takes some action.

There are twelve of us and we have all decided that we cannot turn our backs on the truths we have learned. I have read the book of Romans again and again, and I find that I cannot deny the pure beauty of righteousness by faith. I cannot. That book above all others has taught me that I must stick to Christ as that little burr stuck to me. There is no safer place for me to be, not even within the walls of this convent that has been my home for so long. My only safety is in Christ and I must stick to Him always.

But that leaves us with very few options. We all write to our families, tentatively asking if they will have us back, if we can come home. My father does not even reply and his silence speaks volumes. Most of the other sisters find that their families will not have them either. It is a scandal to harbour a runaway nun, not to mention a danger, especially in the times in which we live. No-one wants to be called a heretic and burned.

It is then that Margaret takes it upon herself to write to Martin Luther.

“But what will you say to him?” Veronika asks, eyes wide in disbelief.

“I shall ask him if he can offer us a solution to our present predicament,” Margaret says breezily, though I wonder if she is as self-assured as she appears.

“What kind of solution could he possibly offer us?” Ava shakes her head.

Margaret smiles, “Well, we shall soon find out.”

And we do, for Brother Martin writes back to Margaret and they begin to devise a plan.

Wittenberg, The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation

April 5, 1523

Crammed into a fish barrel in the back of a jostling wagon, I remind myself that this is what I wanted: to leave, to be free. But with the stench of rotten fish filling my nose, I can't help but wonder if there might have been a better way to get us out of the convent. Looking up at the sky above me, I see that it is streaked with the pale pink of dawn. *At least I am warm*, I think.

I am dozing when the wagon stops. I snap awake and sit still listening. I

End of product sample

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