



The Fifteenth Letter **Excerpt**

Book 3 of the Falcon's Bend Series
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"His sights were always fixed on unmade discoveries, unfinished initiatives, imperfect gains, and frustrated crusades."

~from *Columbus* by Filipe Fernández-Armesto

"A professional thief is a man who wakes up every morning thinking about committing a crime the same way any other man gets up and goes to his job."

~Willie Sutton in *Where the Money Was: The Memoirs of a Bank Robber* written by Willie Sutton with Edward Linn

Prologue

November 23, 1989

Serena Salim barely noticed when a third nail tore under her anxious gnawing.

"How much longer?" young Roman whispered.

Though her mothering instincts kicked in infrequently, she recognized the fear in her boy's voice. She could say or do nothing beyond reach for his hand. Without hesitation, he pulled away and put his face against the passenger window.

Nels and Zeke had been inside for so long now. Had something gone wrong? Or had Nels gotten greedy again? He was a man who would go back for just one more penny--the proverbial cherry atop a mountain of decadent cake.

This one couldn't go wrong, not with all Zeke's planning. On and on, Nels had raved about how brilliant Zeke Carfi was; he'd thought of everything. Nothing could possibly go awry.

But they should have been back a long time ago.

Serena swore under her breath in Korean. This would have solved all their problems. No more hand-to-mouth. No more of Nelson's crazy schemes to "make ends meet", most involving his shop of rare books, Antique Books, Ltd., that was never profitable on its own. When Nels met Zeke a year ago, Zeke'd taught him how to make money the easy way. This one final heist would set them all up for life.

Where are they?

She leaned forward near her son and looked down the block to the front of the bank across the street set far back from the road. Eisner Bank & Trust looked calm and peaceful this day, though people no longer milled in and out.

She shook her head. Something had happened.

"We should get out of here," she murmured.

Roman turned to her, his dark gaze confused. "But Dad's not out yet. We can't leave him."

"They should have been out--" she started when the sound of sirens broke through the menacingly still autumn air.

Roman dove out the door of the van just as fast. Serena swore again, plunging out after him down the street. She caught him only inches from the sidewalk in front of the bank. With every bit of her strength, she dragged him kicking and screaming to the van. At fifteen, the boy was no longer as small and weak as he'd been, but her desperation allowed her to do what she had to.

"We can't leave him!" he cried as they reached the sliding van door.

"We won't." She knew she had to give him the promise to make him calm. "But we must watch from here."

He allowed her to hold him. Behind him, Serena forgot how to breathe while police cars and an ambulance surrounded the bank. She and Roman waited. Minutes ticked by, minutes that felt like hours. Like vultures, reporters descended on the place in helicopters and trucks.

She and Roman were too close, but she knew Roman would fight her and call attention to them if she insisted they get back in the van or leave. Until he'd seen his father, he wouldn't budge.

Her mind raced as she tried to imagine what had taken place, what had gone wrong. She barely noticed how ragged her son's breathing had become.

Nels screwed up. He always does. Roman may worship his father and believe he can do no wrong, but I know better. I know exactly what he is: a thief from start to finish. But I didn't care; I would have done anything to escape my father. Anything. And I won't go back. What a fool I was to trust Nels.

Finally, the police swarmed out amid the reporters. For a moment, Serena noticed nothing in the throng. Then wheels appeared. Atop the gurney was a long and narrow black bag.

"Dad..." Roman began, lurching suddenly out of her shocked embrace.

A crowd of interested citizens had gathered. Serena knew they were safe within it, but she caught her son once more, holding him back. "Where's Dad? Where's my dad?" he murmured, his tone frantic.

Serena felt Roman go rigid. She glanced at him, then followed the direction of his gaze. Zeke emerged, hands bound, surrounded with police officers on all sides. His eyes lifted for only a moment as if he sensed her presence. Regret and sadness overwhelmed his expression. Serena knew. In that moment, she knew. Nels was dead. Zeke had betrayed her husband. The heist had gone bad because Zeke turned on Nelson. What else could explain a death they'd never figured into their careful plans?

"We have to find my dad!"

Serena shook her head. "We must go. Now. Don't fight me. We must be at the shop when the police come."

The urgency in her voice must have convinced him. He allowed her to rush him back across the street and into the van.

By the time they arrived at their apartment over the small bookstore, Serena's heart had turned to stone within her. She sat while Roman turned on the television, looking for news. Mutely, she watched the reporter talk about the robbery at Eisner.

Nelson had been about to shoot the bank manager for refusing to cooperate, and Zeke had stopped him. Zeke had killed his own partner to prevent the death of an innocent. She watched Zeke defend himself, meek as a mouse, his handsome face lined with regret. "I tried to talk to Nelson, tried to get him to reconsider. I only meant to stop him by putting a bullet in his shooting arm...but he shifted." The shot had caught Nelson right in the heart. He'd died before they wheeled him out of the bank.

Serena's eyes narrowed as the reporter went on to interview the bank manager who praised Zeke for "coming to his senses" and standing up against a murderous, greedy thug.

I have nothing. The b@#d left me with nothing. How will I take care of myself?

The sound of her father's hated voice filled her memory, as did the feeling of his fist slamming into the small of her back. Serena choked on a sob, not daring to close her eyes to dark memories she'd spent so many years hiding from.

Can't go back there...rather die. No one can make me.

"He killed my dad," Roman spat, interrupting her thoughts, "and the public decides he's a hero for it. A damn hero."

Serena glanced at her boy, recognizing the rage building in him. She couldn't move as he picked up a baseball bat and sank it into the TV screen with all his strength. He screamed in fury at the injustice of losing the father he'd idolized.

Cringing, Serena covered her head when he flew around the room, destroying everything in his path. Tears leaked from her eyes in terror. Once more, she was the little girl huddling in fear, willing herself to become invisible to the tirade around her.

"Stop. Stop, Roman, please," she whimpered.

For a long time he seemed not to hear her pleas. Then silence came, and she still didn't move, especially when she felt him standing before her. Sobs overwhelmed her. Protective gentle arms came around her, and she lifted her head. Her gaze met her son's unexpectedly tender one.

"We have nothing. He's left us with nothing," she told him bitterly. "I can't take care of you, Roman. I can't go back home."

"I'll take care of you, Mom. I promise. We have the maps. Dad told me about the maps he and Zeke stole--the ones Dad kept in the safe, away from Zeke. They're worth a fortune. You won't have to go back home, Mom. We'll make this right."

Zeke had betrayed them all. He would pay. How could anything ever be right again?

It wouldn't, not until she had her revenge.