

A detailed illustration of Father Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit missionary. He is depicted from the waist up, wearing a traditional Chinese official's cap (gatun) with a blue top and brown sides. He has a long, white beard and mustache. He is dressed in a red robe with a yellow sash and a blue collar. He is holding a fan in his right hand. The background is plain white.

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THE  
MENTORIS  
PROJECT

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF  
**FATHER MATTEO RICCI**

# DEFYING DANGER

**Nicole Gregory**

# Chapter One

## THE STRANGE FOREIGNER

It was a hot and humid summer morning in Nanking when the middle-aged peasant woman stepped out of the doorway of her small cottage with a pail full of water for her pigs. Glancing out onto the street, a sight caused her to stumble backward, dropping the bucket of water, which splashed across the cobblestones.

Her children and husband came running from the back of the house. In the street, her neighbors pointed to a shiny, bright red-and-blue sedan chair being carried by four strong men. They had been forced to stop because an ox in the street blocked them, refusing to move. The ox's owner—an old farmer from the country—shouted and pulled at the beast, then pulled out his whip and lashed it savagely, but still the ox would not move on the bumpy, mud-caked street.

The blue lacquered door of the sedan swung open, and down from it stepped a tall, thin man with golden brown eyes, a long thin nose, and high arched eyebrows. His beard was gray and white, yet he did not seem old. He wore a high black cap

and a flowing robe of dark purple silk, around which was slung a pale blue sash. Peeking out from beneath the robe, the white tips of his silk shoes were covered with spots of mud.

“Do not whip the beast!” the tall man said in Mandarin, which caused the crowd to fall silent. It was as if a chicken had just talked! This strange foreigner, who wore the dress of a Confucian scholar, spoke their language perfectly. “Stand beside your animal, speak softly to it,” he said, “and pull it gently alongside of you.” As if he knew better than the farmer how to make the big animal move!

Dumbfounded, the old farmer did as the tall man suggested, and to the amazement of the crowd, the ox took a step, then another, and continued on its way.

The foreigner turned to scan the faces that were all fixed upon him, and smiled gently.

“May peace be upon you,” he said, and climbed back up into the sedan and pulled the curtain next to his seat so that his face was hidden. The four carriers lifted the sedan and proceeded along the street, leaving the crowd staring after them.

“Who is that?” said the peasant woman to her neighbors.

“Li Madou . . . a religious man,” said her husband. “He has another name, too . . . .” He struggled to remember how he’d heard it pronounced. “Matteo Ricci.” He shook his head at the strange sound of the name.

“He’s a foreigner—what is he doing here?”

“I’ve heard he can turn metal into silver.”

“No, no, see his robes? He’s a scholar.”

The crowd continued to speculate with uneasiness about the strange tall man, then turned back to the tasks of the day.

## Chapter Two

### THE SOUL OF A JESUIT

Seven-year-old Matteo Ricci leaned his ear against the door of his parents' bedroom. They were arguing—and he heard them say his name.

“He can only tutor Matteo a few more weeks,” his father, Giovanni, exclaimed. “He’s joining the new religious order—the Jesuits!”

“We can find other tutors for the boy,” said his mother, Giovanna, in a reassuring tone.

“Jesuits! I’m not sure what they stand for, but I don’t like it. They call themselves the Society of Jesus—how arrogant! What about the Dominicans or Franciscans! Do they not follow Jesus too?”

“They do, my dear, but the Jesuits have a new spirit—their fervor for education and missionary work is waking up the church,” said Giovanna. Then her voice dipped down a notch. “Matteo will have a very difficult time losing Bencivegni as a tutor. He likes him so.”

His head tilted against the door, Matteo gulped. All the color drained from his face. His beloved tutor, the priest and teacher Niccolò Bencivegni . . . was leaving? The sting of tears filled his eyes and he turned away from the door.

His grandmother Laria was stirring in the rooms below in the Riccis' house, and Matteo slung his bag of books over his shoulder and went down to find her.

"Matteo, are you up so early?" she called out in a quiet voice.

"*Si, Nonna,*" replied the boy. He ran to where she sat in the large sitting room. He gently touched the silver cross that hung around her neck, admiring its intricate design and the way it shined. He loved his grandmother. And she made the most wonderful meat pastries in all of Italy.

Laria reached out to stroke his pale cheek and marveled at his narrow nose, high cheekbones, and thin dark eyebrows arched above his sensitive face. He was a quiet boy, but astute also. What was this sadness in his dark eyes?

"My boy," she said. "What has upset you?"

Matteo averted his eyes and would not answer.

Laria held on to his hand and said, "I know how much you enjoy your lessons, so study well today. And give my regards to Father Bencivegni. Take some sweet biscuits with you . . ."

Matteo kissed his grandmother, scooped up two biscuits from the big table into his bag, then ran to the heavy wooden front door, pulled it open, and stepped into the golden morning sun that spilled over the red-tiled rooftops. He ran down the cool cobblestone street through the bucolic medieval town of Macerata, heading to the home of Bencivegni.

He paid no attention to the far-reaching view of rolling green valleys with olive trees and vineyards that opened up between side streets. He ran past the new clock tower that began

to ring out at 8 a.m. on the hour. It featured small wise men bursting out of a tiny door to adore the baby Jesus—a peculiar mechanical clock that at any other time Matteo loved to watch. Now running along, he nearly bumped into a farmer pushing his cart of lemons, limes, and oranges into the square, and then he leaped over a tabby cat that darted in front of him.

Matteo had lived in this town since his birth on October 6, 1552, and knew the route to his tutor's house well. He flew past two rivers, the Potenza and the Chienti, which flowed by Macerata, but he took their natural beauty quite for granted. Located in the central part of Italy—not far from the Adriatic Sea to the east, in a region called the Marches, part of the Papal States—Macerata enjoyed a climate that was often warm and dry, the air fragrant with blooming citrus trees.

Matteo knocked on the door of his tutor's home, and when it opened, he looked up into the smiling face of the young priest and burst out, "Papa says you are leaving to become a Jesuit. Is this true? And why didn't you tell me?"

Bencivegni's smile vanished as he saw his distraught young pupil. He stepped aside and invited Matteo in.

"Matteo, let's go to our study and I will explain everything."

As usual, the young man showed the utmost respect for his pupil.

Once they were both seated in their chairs—Matteo's feet hardly reached the floor—Bencivegni began. "Yes, Matteo, this is true."

"But why?" the boy asked. "And what is a Jesuit?"

Matteo was not afraid to speak freely with his tutor. He loved this familiar room. He'd examined most of the books that lined one shelf and studied the maps of land and sea on the walls. Here he had learned the rudiments of mathematics, Latin,

and even Greek. He'd learned the constellations of the stars, and about Italian painters, architects, and poets. His parents cared about his future, and his grandmother loved him, but she was uneducated. Only his tutor had captivated and challenged his young mind. A window at the side of the room overlooked a small courtyard where birds now splashed in a water fountain.

"Ah, let me explain," said Bencivegni, running a hand through his curly dark hair, thinking how to describe his decision to a seven-year-old.

The handsome good-natured priest had once been engaged to marry the daughter of a Macerata nobleman. Matteo knew this because he'd heard his parents talking about it. But then Bencivegni changed his mind about marrying because he'd experienced what townspeople said was a "calling" to become a priest. The young woman—and her father—had been really angry.

"The Jesuits are a new religious order, Matteo—that means they are a group of priests with a different way of living. I very much believe in everything they believe in, and so I want to join them."

"And what is so good about what they believe?" Matteo asked forthrightly.

Bencivegni looked at his pupil, who stared back at him with great earnestness and expectation.

"Just before you were born, Matteo, a Christian missionary from Spain named Francis Xavier wanted very much to show the people of China the virtues of becoming Christian. But he became sick and died before he could even try. He had already traveled very far—to Japan, in fact—to convert people there to Christianity. Because he believed that everyone should know the love and forgiveness offered by Jesus Christ."

He stopped, checking whether Matteo was following him,

and saw that indeed the boy was waiting for the next part of the story.

“I did not know Francis Xavier, but I’ve heard great stories about him,” said Bencivegni. “He had once been a careless, frivolous young man. He was very intelligent and liked to have fun—he spent money without thinking. He was not always honorable with his friends, and he caused much trouble for his family. But he had made one friend named Ignatius from Loyola, Spain, who tried to get him to live as a Christian. Ignatius wanted Francis to lead a better life—to still have fun, of course, but to think more about his purpose, his Christian purpose, which is to help others.”

Matteo listened, rapt.

“Soon Francis began thinking Ignatius was right—maybe his life could have more meaning if he thought about Jesus Christ and tried to be more like our Savior,” Bencivegni continued. “Francis and Ignatius became friends, and then they made more friends and they all formed a small group who decided they wanted to be the kind of Christians who travel the world and help very poor people and sick people. They begged for money to buy clothes and food for poor people, and they talked to people who did not even know about Christianity.

“And they all were very smart and they agreed that school had helped them learn about the world and to be brave and open-minded—and they wanted all children to have the chance to go to school.”

“I think that is good,” said Matteo. He understood that he had some connection to this story.

“So, a little less than twenty years ago, Ignatius, Francis Xavier, and their friends decided to call themselves the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, and they believed in helping other people

and in educating children. The pope gave them his blessing. And today many young men who agree with these ideas are joining the Society of Jesus, becoming what we call Jesuits. I want to be one of them, and so I will be leaving Macerata to go to Rome.”

Silence followed, and Bencivegni watched Matteo take in this story. Though the boy was only seven, he grasped the meaning of his tutor’s words and could even understand Bencivegni’s decision.

“Well, when are you leaving?” Matteo asked, looking up again at the books on the shelf.

“Tomorrow. This will be our last lesson together. Now, shall we look at the Latin text?”

As Matteo reached to pull out his lesson book, he remembered the biscuits he’d brought. “Here, these are for you, from my grandmother.”

“Thank you, Matteo, and tell your grandmother thank you.”

The tutor and pupil opened their books and began to review the lesson. But Matteo was barely able to concentrate as he thought about losing his beloved teacher.

That night Matteo wept in his bed. He couldn’t stay at home with his younger siblings—they were too little and bored him. He poured out his misery to his grandmother Laria when she came to say goodnight. She went to Giovanni and insisted that he hire new tutors to continue Matteo’s studies. He did so, but it was soon obvious that none was as engaging as Father Bencivegni had been.

Matteo was the first of many children born to Giovanna Angiolelli and Giovanni Batista Ricci. A prominent citizen of

Macerata, Giovanni naturally assumed his first son, Matteo, would follow in his career path. Giovanni was not only descended from a noble family, but also had worked hard and was a prosperous businessman. His sights were set high for his son and he hoped he would go far beyond their little hilltop town.

Then in 1561, Giovanni learned from a business associate that some Jesuits were arriving in Macerata to open a school where boys could attend free of charge for a complete education in the humanities taught in a highly disciplined manner. He immediately knew that Matteo would want to attend, but he did have doubts.

Giovanni disliked religion intensely, yet he was keenly aware that these new Jesuits were becoming known for providing the highest quality education possible. That night he talked about it with his wife.

“I just don’t want Matteo to start wishing to be a Jesuit himself,” he said.

“Giovanni, they offer the best education, and it’s free. We know Matteo has a mind for academics, so we must encourage that strength.”

“The risk is that he will lose his interest in business,” said Giovanni, shaking his head. “He’s already more attracted to the little stories from the Bible that your mother tells him than he is in what I have to say about running a pharmacy! But all the best families in Macerata are sending their sons to this new school. Sending Matteo would assure his status. He might find a place in the papal administration.”

His wife nodded in agreement.

The next day, on his way to his shop, Giovanni enrolled his son in the new Jesuit school.



Matteo didn't know which made him happier—the challenging lessons he now received every day from the Jesuit teachers or being around the other bright boys like himself who, in good cheer, competed with each other academically. Every day in his new school felt like a fantastic adventure, and soon Matteo's shyness gave way to easy friendships with the other students.

The rigorous academics intimidated him at first—the teachers demanded he pay attention and absorb lots of information. But Matteo was intrigued by how his teachers made their subjects fascinating and fun. Six days of the week, the boys were immersed in Latin and Greek studies. Matteo memorized Roman poetry and studied Greek prose. He wrote compositions, completed lengthy translations, and took classes in rhetoric. The Jesuit teachers created competitions and gave prizes to those of outstanding achievement. In addition, mornings began with Mass and prayers, and students were encouraged to go to confession at least once a month.

It didn't take long for teachers to notice Matteo's unusual focus, his ability to retain complex ideas and facts and remember long passages of text. As Matteo grew into his teen years, these abilities gave him confidence, and he was more and more drawn to the Jesuit way of life that combined virtue, spirituality, and knowledge. Most interesting to Matteo was that his Jesuit teachers seemed invigorated by a purpose, a higher calling than the ability to earn money or reach an impressive position in society.

His father's worst fear was coming true.

## Chapter Three

### ROAD TO ROME

To the relief of his parents, Matteo agreed to enroll in law school in 1568 at the age of sixteen. Secretly, the boy was certain that legal matters would never interest him, but it was important to secure his future—at least that is what his father said.

After many tearful goodbyes to his siblings, his beloved grandmother Laria, and his parents, Matteo left home and traveled by carriage to Rome and to La Sapienza University. As Giovanni Battista watched his oldest son disappear into the landscape, he sighed sadly. But he was sure this was good for Matteo—the university was known for educating sons of the ruling class and Matteo's choice of studying jurisprudence would certainly lead to an even finer profession than that of a pharmacist. That night he told his wife of his deep wish that Matteo would earn himself a noble title. The boy had demonstrated such a quick intelligence that this was a real possibility.

A noble title could not have been further from Matteo's

mind. Rome! It was the capital of the Papal States and of Italy. It was the beating heart of the Catholic world. Matteo's own heart now beat with excitement as he approached the densely populated city. At the gate, a guard inspected all his belongings, making sure that no heretical Protestant writings would cross into Rome.

Inside the walls, the city was a labyrinth of streets and plazas filled with men and women from Spain, France, and Germany, as well as Florentines, Milanese, Corsicans, and other Italians. Matteo stared in awe as he passed palaces and gardens, yet even within the city walls he noticed rough open spaces, like the countryside he'd just left.

Once he settled in the university, he couldn't wait to get out and explore the streets. He found the Pantheon, the Theater of Marcellus, the Capitoline, and numerous monuments still under construction.

He found the Vatican. What a thrill to know that Pope Pius V dwelled within its walls, a pope who worked with great determination to stem the Protestantism that was sweeping through Europe. Matteo had heard this pope's spirituality was fierce. Did he really wear a hair shirt underneath his habit and walk about with no shoes, as rumor had it? He imposed severe punishment for adultery and blasphemy, Matteo had heard, and had forbidden horse racing. This pope was so frugal that he dismissed the papal court jester and eschewed all luxuries.

Matteo mulled all this over as he went for walks, exploring Rome's streets and neighborhoods. The smell of delicious food he never knew existed wafted out to the street from restaurants and cafés on every corner. He marveled at the golden sunlight playing across the elegant architecture at different angles morning, afternoon, and evening—and he flushed with embarrassment

when young women, obviously prostitutes, called to him from their doorways when he passed.

He was lonely. After he closed his books at the end of the day, he wished he could tell his grandmother about what he'd learned and all that he'd seen. She would always listen to him with great attention and share her own memories and lessons she'd learned from life. Ah, to be in the warmth of the kitchen, with the fragrance of his grandmother's pheasant stew filling the air.

"Matteo!"

The next day on his way to class he heard his name shouted out from the crowd of students, and scanned the scene to see who was calling him. It was a schoolmate from Macerata, Girolamo Costa!

"You're here too!" exclaimed Girolamo, who pushed his way over to Matteo. The boy was shorter than Matteo, with dark curly hair and a broad smile. "I was just wondering how I might get in touch with you, my friend. What class are you in?"

"Girolamo—yes! I'm here at university, in the law school," said Matteo as other students hurriedly brushed past him. "The classes are not interesting so far, but perhaps they'll get better. It's good to see you, friend! I've been missing my friends."

"Listen, I am late for my class, but I've just joined the Sodality of the Annunciation at the Roman College of the Jesuits," said Girolamo. "Another Macerata boy is there—Giulio Ala-leoni, remember him? Why don't you join me this evening? You'll like it there—the conversations are fascinating."

Matteo readily agreed and the two friends made arrangements to meet that evening. As he rushed to his class, Matteo's heart soared. He was no longer alone!

He slid into his chair moments before his professor began the lecture on the history of civil codes. As Matteo focused on

the professor's words, he recalled the readings he'd done the night before. He'd taught himself a strategy for memorizing the driest material as a way to keep interested—to see each code as a room, with each part related to an object in the room. His lips moved as he silently recited the codes, and then smiled when he realized he'd gotten them all right.

That night he was Girolamo's guest at the Jesuit Roman College as the sodality, or fraternity, gathered. These young men met informally to discuss the teachings of Ignatius, but sometimes they simply talked about their beliefs and hopes for their futures within the Jesuit society.

Matteo said little, but watched and listened intently to the lively conversations around him. Every person seemed to burst with ideas and opinions—they talked about Horace, Ovid, and Virgil; about Aristotle, Epictetus, and Seneca. They talked about traveling to Japan and even China as missionaries, and starting schools for children who would otherwise have no education at all.

One handsome, dark-haired young man from one of the wealthiest families in the region stood up and declared he'd turned his back on a large fortune to become a Jesuit, for which he had no regrets.

“But I don't intend to spend my days in a life of cloistered silence,” he said with a laugh, “but to fight infidels and heretics, and spread the Catholic faith far and wide!”

“Do you wish to be a martyr, then?” called out one of the others.

“Perhaps, if it comes to that,” the handsome young man replied with bravado.

Matteo, listening intently, doubted that his faith would lead him to martyrdom. Or would it?

“To quote Francis Xavier,” said a strong-muscled young man from across the room, “‘To the greater glory of God!’”

The group erupted in cheers and began to disperse for the evening.

Matteo returned to these Jesuit meetings with Girolamo as often as he could. Each night he left with much to reflect upon. No one was surprised when Matteo announced that he wanted join the Jesuits and take up the missionary challenge to change the world.

“I am willing to serve Christ wherever I am sent!” Matteo blurted out to Alessandro Valignano, the master of novices at the Society of Jesus.

Alessandro smiled at this young man, apparently a law student who’d had a change of heart, who had knocked so vigorously on the Roman College door just moments before.

Alessandro was respected—sometimes even feared—by the students. Rumor had it he’d lived a wild life years back. Like Matteo, he also started out studying law at the insistence of his father, a wealthy, influential man. But the story that was whispered among students was that when Alessandro was a teenager, he’d gotten into trouble and was accused of slashing a woman’s face with a knife. For this crime, he spent more than a year in a cold, damp Venetian prison. In that long year, in the midst of suffering from lack of food and little human contact, he realized all he had lost because of his impulsive behavior.

Once out of prison, Alessandro was determined to show his family that he’d changed, and enrolled in Padua University to

study law. There in 1566, he had a strange experience—one that he told only a few friends.

He had been preparing to go to bed in his tiny room at the university after an ordinary day of classes and studying. Kneeling down before a small wooden icon of Jesus that he brought from his home in Chieti, he closed his eyes and began to pray. Suddenly, he felt a gentle warmth wash over his body. At the same time, he heard the words *You are here to help others experience the love and forgiveness of God*. Clear as the text in one of his schoolbooks, the words seemed etched in his mind. Looking around the room, he noticed the light of the flickering candle on his desk and wondered what had happened.

The next day, he requested admission to the Society of Jesus and was immediately accepted.

Because of his skill at organization, Alessandro was appointed supervisor of the novices. And though he was physically tall and imposing, personally he exuded a kindness and charm that put students at ease.

He now listened intently to Matteo Ricci and observed a fervor and intelligence, which were precisely the characteristics Jesuits looked for. Alessandro had invited the young man to come into his office and now sat opposite him. He had a good instinct about him and proceeded to pose many questions—about Matteo’s family, schooling, and, most important, the origins of his desire to become a Jesuit missionary.

“I feel as if . . . I was born to be part of the Society of Jesus,” Matteo blurted out. “My first tutor, Niccolò Bencivegni, gave me my first lessons in mathematics and astronomy, as well as the beginning of Latin and Greek. He showed me the world through knowledge, the world that God has made. And this knowledge

has given me, well, a joy that surpasses all other joys. I want to bring this . . . this awakening . . . to as many other people as I can.”

“And are you now prepared to renounce the world and relinquish all of your possessions?” asked Alessandro, studying Matteo’s response carefully. Young men naturally were filled with ambitions and desires of all kinds.

“I renounce the world and all its temporal goods,” Matteo said, his eyes bright with intensity. “I promise to do whatever my superiors believe is most useful, and to go wherever they wish me to go, for the glory of God.”

“I see your sincerity in commitment and willingness,” said Alessandro, nodding with approval. “Please arrive at the house of Sant’Andrea at the Quirinale tomorrow morning, where all novitiates give up their earthly items. You will, of course, also need to sit for entrance examinations.”

The next morning, Matteo arrived as he had been instructed, carrying a small pack of his clothes and books. These were all gently taken from him by one of the fathers, and in return Matteo was given a clerical habit, a coat, four shirts, a book of Latin grammar, a book by the African-born Roman poet Florus, and *Mirabilia*, the ancient guide to Rome.

As soon as he was settled into his room, Matteo sat at the desk and wrote to his father, telling him the news.

Giovanni was deeply upset. He crumpled the letter from Matteo in his hand and stalked out of the house and into the small grove of orange trees behind it.

No, he would not send a return letter, he decided. *I will*

*go to Rome myself to tell him in person that this is not acceptable.* Giovanni turned to go back into the house when he saw that his aging mother had followed him. She had been in the kitchen and was still wearing her apron.

“I found the letter you tossed to the ground,” said Laria softly. “And I beg you to think of Matteo as the young man he really is, not the boy you wish he would be. Allow him to have his own life. Don’t be angry with him.”

“Nonsense, of course I think of him as he is—he has a great mind and can accomplish much in this world, as long as he doesn’t veer off into a life of irrational thoughts and unrealistic dreams,” Giovanni huffed.

“My grandson Matteo knows himself and has chosen a spiritual path,” Laria countered. “No one can make him change his mind, of that I am certain.”

Giovanni raised his hand to say he did not wish to discuss the matter further with his mother, and brushed past her to find his servants and ask them to prepare a carriage to go to Rome the next day.

The following morning, finally en route after a fitful night of sleep, Giovanni was set with determination. The air was clear and warm, the sun already creating shadows behind the olive trees they passed.

Giovanni reviewed his indignation as he looked out at the scene. First his mother and then his wife had tried to dissuade him from going, but he knew he could make Matteo change his mind. The road was full of holes and stones, which made the carriage jerk uncomfortably. As the sun rose in the sky, the air became hot and dry, and Giovanni began to feel ill. After several hours, his face was flushed, and as he glanced at the passing fields, he started to lose focus and feel confused.

When the carriage driver stopped at the town of Tolentino, Giovanni nearly fell to the ground when he stepped out. The other passengers carried him into a nearby store and to a cot the storekeeper kept in the rear supply room.

They fanned him and put a cool cloth to his head, but Giovanni was overtaken by a fever, and he remained on the cot for several days. In spite of the good care the storekeeper and his wife provided, Giovanni tossed and turned, until finally the fever broke on the third day.

From the cot, he looked around at the small wooden room, at the shelves with empty jars and the bundles of straw stacked on the floor. What had happened to him? Giovanni's mind slowly focused on his predicament. Perhaps this trip was not to be. And maybe this was for good reason. After all, his son Matteo was nineteen—a man! He could choose his own destiny. *Who am I to try to determine my son's future? He will find his own way.*

As soon as he could, Giovanni Battista rose and thanked the kind storekeeper, gave him some money for his troubles, and sought a carriage that could take him back to Macerata.