

I, CLAUDIA

I, CLAUDIA

Lin Wilder



ALSO BY LIN WILDER

A Search For the Sacred
Finding the Narrow Path
The Fragrance Shed by a Violet
Do You Solemnly Swear?
A Price for Genius
Malthus Revisited

I, Claudia

Lin Wilder

ISBN: 978-1-942545-68-2

Library of Congress Control Number: to come

Copyright ©2019 Lin Wilder

All rights reserved.

Temple of Hephaestus, Athens, Greece ©CAHKT | iStockPhoto
Woman in cloak praying © Nejron | Dreamstime.comt

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations used in book reviews and critical articles.



Wilder Books
An Imprint of Wyatt-MacKenzie

DEDICATION

To those rare searchers for Truth

*Knowledge has three degrees: opinion, science, illumination.
The means of instrument of the first is senses, the second,
dialectic; the third, intuition.*

—PLOTINUS

*The greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of
madness that is heaven-sent.*

—SOCRATES ON THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

*While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him
a message, saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous
Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream
because of Him.”*

—GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, 27:19

*The 21st-century Christian will be either a “mystic,” that is,
a person who has “experienced” something,
or he will not be a Christian.*

—KARL RAHNER

PROLOGUE

They wore the faces of my dreams. Men, women, and children, mouths open in joyous shouts, made soundless by the din of hundreds of marching feet. The people lined the narrow streets, the wealthier watching from their palace rooftops, their children tossing brightly colored scarves upon the phalanxes of soldiers. The lead centurion held the shield of Tiberius steadily aloft: S.P.Q.R. *Senātus Populusque Rōmānus* (Roman Senate and People). The legionnaire moved it only when an errant puff of color landed on the scarlet standard, momentarily obscuring the golden eagle glittering in the bright sunlight.

*He has had his arms raised for how many hours now?
Shouldn't there be a Joshua to help this Moses?*

I suppressed a smile at my wittiness, knowing better than to voice the thought aloud. My ladies would be shocked by my allusion to the great Jewish prophet. I was well aware of my reputation as an empty-headed nitwit among those who served my husband; such low expectations had served me well. Best to maintain the fiction.

Soft pinks, yellows, reds, and blues of all shades drifted lazily down the still, hot currents of desert air. They resembled butterflies until our carriage drew close enough to see that they

were scarves. Some of the soft cloths puddled on the dirt streets as I watched, only to be trampled by the next column of tightly grouped soldiers. The morning sun made the helmets and shields of the marching men radiate so brightly that they could not be looked at without squinting. I closed my eyes tightly against the glare, wishing vainly that the familiar faces of the onlookers were just another dream; terrified that when I opened them, I would see those same faces filled with hatred, their mouths joining in the monstrous roar of malevolence, commanding the death of the righteous one.

“M’Lady, M’Lady, are you all right?” I could hear Antonia’s concern. She knew how I had dreaded this journey, how fervent had been my prayers for some miracle to forestall what I knew was destiny—his, mine, and the world’s. Unlike the others, Antonia had known me almost since birth.

“I’m fine, Antonia, fine. Please do not worry, I am just drained. We have been traveling now for more than thirty days. The heat makes it almost impossible to sleep at night—it never cools off here.”

It was still only midmorning, and yet the temperature had to be over ninety. The fall weather in Athens had always been gloriously cool, crisp; wholly different from this unrelenting, insufferable heat.

Antonia wasn’t fooled by my reply, in spite of my attempt at a smile. I did not blame her. I knew that the upturn of my lips was more rictus than smile...and with good reason. We were heading toward a doom of the kind the world had never seen, and I knew there was nothing I could do or say to stop it. Surveying my surroundings, I felt no relief at the unchanged jubilation, the joyous expressions on the faces of the crowds.

It would come, and soon.

I am nearing the end of my life. Seventy-nine years lived as a shadow, a face behind a curtain, whispering the residues of a dream. Insubstantial, unheard. But my time of silence is done.

It is time to write the truth for those with ears to hear it. I am Procula, wife of Lucius Pontius Pilate. My husband has been dead for several decades now. Like me, Lucius is the subject of vast ignorance, lies, and injustice. The very name *Pontius Pilate* has become synonymous with cowardice and betrayal.

Those who claim to know the substance of my dream believe it emanates from evil. Others insist that those words that will be recited by Christians: “Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, and died,” were the source of terror in my dreams. I was told by the Oracle that these eight words would echo throughout the centuries and be memorialized in something that will be called the Apostles Creed. Most of the people reciting the Creed mindlessly overlooking the word *under* to believe that the Righteous One was crucified *by* my husband.

The slanderous claims, and all others like them, no longer break my heart; they are merely annoying. I often think of the writing of Socrates, a man I consider a good friend though he died before I was born. His wisdom and humility await those rare searchers of truth. “I know I am intelligent because I know I know nothing.”

I was born in Delphi, daughter of the last of the Oracles of Pythia. It was a time of disorder, chaos, terror, and the death of nations. My mother broke her vow of virginity in lying with my father. She feared for both our lives, because what she had done was punishable by death—hers and mine. The time of the Oracles was coming to an end. Men no longer listened to the whispers of the prophets, certainly not to the women—not even when we had the words of the gods on our lips.

I survived, but my mother did not. I was taken to Athens, where I was raised by Adrian and Sabina. Only they knew that I was the last Oracle; my true identity remained a secret to all others—although my husband speculated as much, due to my foreknowledge of so much.

I ask that you permit a conceit. This book will be told in two voices: my own and my husband's. Perhaps that seems presumptuous, or worse: specious? My defense is this: Near the end of his life, almost daily, my husband told me that I knew him better than he knew himself. He talked incessantly about how close he had come to refusing the thunderous command of the Jews. When Quintillus, Lucius's best friend and Centurion gave me Lucius' *Final Report of Lucius Pontius Pilate to Tiberius Caesar on The Crucifixion of the Christ* including the letters he'd exchanged with Seneca, this book designed itself.

Could I have intervened even though the famed Stoic philosopher directed my husband's every thought? Incited a hatred toward the Jews that cost him and the world—no less than everything?

You decide.

CHAPTER ONE

ATHENS, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

They say it is impossible. I was, after all, barely two when we left Greece. But I remember Delphi. The only place I knew as home echoes in my mind and heart still, after almost eight decades of absence. The Delphian air is purer, the sky bluer, and the mountains redolent with wisdom. Scrambling through the tunnels beneath the Treasury of Athena kept me safer than I'd have been in a nanny's arms, and infused me with more knowledge than did my later tutors. It was there, crawling alone around and under those sacred stone structures, that the unreliability of the senses, the language of the Forms, the highest Good, transcendent and absolute, impressed themselves into my very being. That there was just one god, not many. It was a certainty I shared with the Hebrews.

Too young. Absurd. Inconceivable.

I know. I think that too, as I write this so many years later. But the truth is this. By the time I was nine, my Aunt Sabina and Uncle Adrian—my kind adoptive parents—decided I was old enough to study philosophy, mathematics, rhetoric, Latin, and Greek. Sabina hired tutors, the best in Athens. She could not un-

derstand why they lasted just days.

“Claudia Procula! Alejandro has quit,” she admonished me. “He is the third tutor you’ve had in three months. I had to pay him a month’s wages though he was here for only five days!”

I looked up from the scroll of Plato’s *Republic*. Sabina stood looking down at me, her expression a mixture of puzzlement and something else—I wasn’t sure what. Without thinking, I retorted, “You and Uncle Adrian could have saved a substantial sum if you had listened when I asked to spend my days in the Aristotle Library.”

The color in her cheeks rising, Sabina worked visibly to control her anger. She was Mother’s older sister by ten years and must have been past forty, but her beauty remained. She wore a dark-violet stola with a light-lavender shawl tied at her narrow waist with gold braid. A gold armband served as her only jewelry. Sabina had competed in the Heraean Games twice and won laurel crowns each time in the long-distance marathons. Her shape had changed little since those days.

Touching her long, blonde braid, my aunt’s expression and voice softened as she studied me. “Why do these men quit tutoring you, Claudia? What makes them want to leave so suddenly? Alejandro could not remove himself from here fast enough. It was almost as if he thought you—” Abruptly, she covered her mouth momentarily then let her slender hand drop back to her side. She closed her eyes and murmured the prayer I had heard often since childhood.

“Clear-eyed Athena, unrivaled in wisdom, daughter of Zeus and Metis whose craft and wit excelled among the mighty Titans: Athena, I pray to you. Wise in all things you are, goddess; your cunning and guile are well known. In time of war you have no equal in tactics or in strategy; many armies have you guided to victory. In time of peace your blessings fall on those whose work is of the mind—friend of the philosopher, the scientist, the student. Advisor of kings, patron of clever heroes and bold-

hearted adventurers, defender of the thinker, mistress of reason and understanding, goddess to whom a strong arm and a sharp sword are nothing without the sense to wield them well and the insight to know when words are worth more than weapons. Athena, grant me a sound mind and steady temper, bless me with good judgment, show me the long view.”

The moment the words came out of my mouth, I wanted to reach into the still, warm, summer air, grab them and eat them. “These words are beautiful, even wise, Aunt Sabina, but Athena is just an illusion. Her mouth produces no words, her mind no thoughts, and her heart does not beat. Your goddess is merely an instrument on which to hang human weakness.”

My aunt swayed, ever so slightly, from side to side, her turquoise eyes hardening into flint. “You have no right. With all of her gifts—the gifts you share—your mother *never...ever...* spoke so cruelly. Know this, Claudia Procula: Should you utter one more viperous word, you will be out of this house.”

Impossibly, her eyes grew even colder. “Someone as wise as you surely knows what would become of an abandoned female ten-year-old, does she not?”

I learned on that sultry afternoon just how massive a burden it was to possess the supernatural knowledge I had done nothing to merit. I also learned that once loathsome, pitiless words are uttered, no power in this world or another can cauterize the wounds they make. They bleed into eternity.

CHAPTER TWO

GERMANIA

Lucius Pontius Pilate

I was born to be a warrior. Until I donned the tunic, body armor, and shoulder plates of the legionnaire, I felt like a child. I knew upon grabbing the dagger, sword, javelin, and shield that this was my destiny. As a boy, I had been ungainly, all angles, awkward and fumbling. But as I placed the helmet on my head and joined my legion, I knew that time had passed. I would lead men. And soon.

The march from Rome to the outskirts of Germanicus was dreadful. Our commander underestimated the effect of the northern winter and overestimated the strength and endurance of his legion. More than one hundred Roman soldiers died from exposure and exhaustion before we met a single Germanian. Stupidity. Incompetence. Inexcusable in a leader. My pent-up anger when we finally met our enemy whipped my speed, tactics, and deadliness into something manic, crazed, unstoppable. At the end of that first day, exhausted and improperly clothed, we sent the Germans fleeing, outnumbered by three to one, exhausted and improperly clothed, the Germanians had fled. And the Roman soldiers who had survived were cheering my name.

“LUCIUS!”

“PONTIUS!”

“PILATE!”

Our Tribune was dead. Overnight, at the age of twenty-eight, I became Tribune.

Was it destiny that caused Tiberius to ride onto the blood-soaked German soil just as the men were hauling me atop their shoulders and shouting my name? Was it fate that caused the next emperor of Rome to smile as he replaced my helmet with a laurel wreath? As he wordlessly crowned me Tribune after my very first day of battle, the men continued shouting my three names until the trees shook.

Had I known Claudia then, and had she told me of my future, would I have turned away from my calling, cutting short my rapid ascent to the pinnacle of the best army the world had ever witnessed? Could I have become a farmer like my brother... a physician like my uncle...or perhaps a consul like Seneca?

Seneca, a friend of my heart, he to whom I gave my trust blindly. He whose words I revered and whose viewpoints became mine.

CHAPTER THREE

ATHENS, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

At fifteen, I was of marriageable age. Old, even, when compared to the three daughters of Aunt Sabina's best friend, Phoebe, all of whom were married by their twelfth birthdays. Girls were expensive, and dowries were expected; the wealthier the household, the more extravagant the dowry.

Had Uncle Adrian not been so fond of me, I'd have been gone that dreadful summer afternoon when I stupidly and cruelly insulted Sabina's faith, her goddess Athena. There is no excuse for the lack of respect I showed a woman who had taken me in and done her very best to prepare me for the world.

And yet, when I look back through these ancient eyes, I have sympathy for that impossibly young girl who had just mastered Plato's *Republic*. She'd been feeling the supreme joy of deciphering a map to wisdom, discovering that philosophy can be a practical guide to life.

At the end of that first reading of the *Republic*, I finally had the words to express portions of the inchoate knowledge with which I'd been infused at Delphi: *virtue, justice, immortality, eternity, nobility*. I knew, even then, that there were just two

paths: that of the foolish and that of the wise. But the maps delineating those paths were often obscured, even deceptive. I understood that the knowledge of how to live emanates from wisdom—but also that it takes considerable work and study to embody true good. The pursuit of wisdom would assure that I would not live the life of the fool.

Upon reading Socrates' explication of Plato for the first time, I didn't just learn but *recognized* the writer's words:

That the true lover of knowledge is always striving after being—that is his nature; he will not rest in the multiplicity of individuals which is an appearance only, but will go on—the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his desire abate until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being, having begotten mind and truth, he will have knowledge and will live and grow truly, and then, and not till then, will he cease from his travail.

This was the work of a lifetime—I knew it even then. An endeavor that requires no less than *everything*; a practice that can be shared with no one but the creator.

Uncle Adrian walked in the house just as I was finishing the ninth chapter. “What are you doing, *Claudiaki mou*?” he asked.

Adrian was an aristocrat—one of the *arostoi*—and he looked the part as he stood in the courtyard smiling down at me, the tanned olive skin of his arms and muscular, robust legs contrasting sharply with the gold linen chiton he wore. His distinctive white-wool toga indicated that he had been at the agora that morning.

Due to the force of my concentration, I had not noticed the

onset of dusk until I heard his voice. He looked pleased, even relaxed. The morning meeting must have gone well. I knew he had been concerned about the fate of a new tax plan he'd devised with two other citizens. A wealthy property owner, my uncle was an influential citizen in Athens. His was one of the largest farms in Athens, with acres of olive trees and vineyards and more than forty slaves to work it.

"I'm finishing Plato's *Republic*, Uncle," I answered him, proudly pointing at the thick pile of pages I'd read, next to the thin sheaf still to be completed.

Eyebrows raised, his smile grew wide. "This calls for a celebration! Where is Sabina?"

"At Phoebe's. They are working to complete a wedding dress for her youngest daughter."

Reaching down to pull me up off the couch, my uncle said, "Come! Let's find Antonia and some wine. Then you can tell me all that you have learned."

And so I did, for over two hours, as Uncle Adrian listened carefully and asked a question now and then to get me to clarify a point. He was particularly interested in my excitement about the ideal state, the philosopher king, and what I called the "ir-refutable logic" of there being just *one* god, not many. Just one cause of everything.

Eyes shining, Uncle Adrian said, "I'm very proud of you, Claudia. When I gave you my copy of those scrolls for your birthday last year, I had no idea that you would devour their contents as if it were mere air!"

I think it was the fact that my erudite uncle had seemed to agree with my ideas—even about religion—that inspired the hubris in me and impelled me to correct Sabina. After my foolish outburst, my aunt distanced herself from me entirely and permanently. I faced each successive birthday with increasing apprehension, knowing that the day would soon come when I would be told whom I would marry.

It was a relief then, on the April evening of my fifteenth year when she appeared in my doorway and said, “Claudia, Adrian and I have decided it is time for you to meet your future husband, Lucius. We’ll be leaving early Friday morning. Pack all of your things.” She spoke softly from the open door of my room and looked at me warily as if expecting an outburst.

I smiled and stood. “Will you come in and sit for just a moment, Aunt Sabina?” I held my breath. For the past five years, I had tried and failed to have a conversation I hoped desperately now to have.

We stared at one another at eye level. I was now as tall as she, five-foot-seven. I noted a shimmer of surprise in her eyes as, almost unwillingly, my aunt noted the similarity of our bodies. She was lovely, ageless, her skin like porcelain. I could easily see why my uncle had fallen in love with her. Her use of kohl around her eyes was artful, just bold enough to emphasize the unusual shade of her eyes. The red ochre on her lips looked natural. *Was this how my mother looked?* I wondered. Then, with a jolt, *Am I this beautiful?*

I reined in my silly thoughts. *Claudia, you will never have this chance again. Act. Now.*

“Please,” I said, holding out my hand. I exhaled softly as she stepped over the threshold of my room and took it.

Sitting on the *kline* I had slept on since a baby, I patted the space next to me.

She sat down, looking as surprised as I was that we were sitting side by side.

“Thank you,” I said, turning my body so I could look into those lovely violet eyes. I knew that in just two days, I would never see her again. “There is no excuse for what I said to you that day, the pain I inflicted with my rash words. Please know how profoundly I regret them. There has not been one day since that I have not felt sorrow and remorse.”

Sabina’s cheeks flushed, the unbidden shame, the humili-

ation and most likely anger of that day inflaming them. Her lips parted, and she placed her hands on either side of her thighs—about to bolt, I feared.

Grabbing the hand closest to me, I whispered again, “Please, aunt, hear me out. Give me a mere five minutes.”

I hated the sound of my own begging, but the need to speak the words that had been searing my heart for five years was like a living thing with shape, weight, and dimension. Feeling Sabina’s hand relax, I rashly fell to my knees in front of her. “You must know that I will never use my gifts to harm another. Please, dearest sister of my dear mother, you, who opened your home and heart to this orphan, please know how much my heart aches over those impulsively uttered words. Please accept my gratitude for taking me in and allowing me to attain the education I so desired.”

Staring at her, I could feel the weight of my own unshed tears, then feel their tracks as they overflowed and slowly descended my face. “Please forgive me.”

She rose. The kiss she planted on the crown of my head was a blessing. Her strong arms pulled me up beside her until, once again, we were gazing at each other.

“I do forgive you, Claudia. I do.” Her eyes searched mine as if looking for something lost. Then as she clasped me to her bosom, “Your problem, my child, is the oldest in the world. The wisdom you seek so desperately will only disappoint you. It will never be enough. The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.”

It would be years before I would realize that my Aunt Sabina had been quoting Socrates. That the woman in whose home I had lived for twelve years was a total stranger.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROME, PALACE OF TIBERIUS

Lucius Pontius Pilate

I waited for hours that steaming August day. Clad in my full Tribune regalia, I must have lost ten pounds in sweat as I awaited Tiberius's summons into his private chambers. My heart pounded, not just from the heat but from a powerful foreboding that my days as a legionnaire were over. The note on the wax tablet had said nothing other than, "Come see me immediately." Tiberius had not even bothered to add his seal.

The journey back to Rome had been exhausting—filled with sporadic fighting with Germanian soldiers who had refused to accept defeat. The passage had taken thirteen days instead of the usual week; I dared not calculate the number of days we'd gone without sleep.

Caesar Augustus, the god-like leader of the Roman Empire, was dying—but he had been close to death for several years. No one was sure just who would be the next Caesar. His succession was thrown into turmoil with the deaths of his grandsons, Lucius and Gaius, after the banishment of their younger brother, Agrippa Postumus, ten years earlier. But this was Roman politics. Nothing was assured until Augustus was dead.

Tiberius was a warrior, like me. We had “recognized” each other during that first blood-soaked battle six years before. As I waited, I deliberated about this man I had come to admire as a leader. Tiberius was a born soldier. Neither subtlety, deception, nor fawning blemished his character—although all three qualities and more were essential if one was to thrive in the boiling cauldron of Roman politics. Although I knew that his ascendancy to Princeps would have a dramatic effect on me and my own career, for the life of me, I could not imagine Tiberius as Caesar. Mainly because he had told me that his was not an authentic claim to the legacy. The great leader of the fading Roman Republic had adopted Tiberius upon the deaths of his own beloved sons, Gaius and Lucius Caesar. Tiberius was a son not by blood but by default. True, he had been quite drunk the night he shared this secret with me, but I believed the truth of it...

That strange confession had emerged after the Germanian victory in the Teutoburg Forest. The cleverly planned ambush by the German tribal leader Arminius had caught Varus, Tiberius’s replacement in Germania, by complete surprise and resulted in a rout; four brutal, storm-filled days described more accurately as a massacre than a battle. Tiberius and I, the newly minted legionnaire Lucius Pontius Pilate, had arrived in time to view the carnage: More than 15,000 dead Roman legionnaires, along with many of the women and children who had accompanied them on their journey through the “peaceful Roman territory.”

It was when we happened upon Varus’s body on the blood-soaked ground, his hands still clutching the spear that impaled his chest, that Tiberius won my lifelong fidelity. We had been carefully picking our way through the corpses, Tiberius astride his pure white Arabian, oblivious to the stench, flies, and hellishness surrounding us. I had no idea of why we searched. The only sounds were those of the horses’ hooves as they laboriously

sought safe ground free of limbs and bodies. Unconsciously, I sought to imitate my superior, maintain my composure and keep the contents of my stomach where it belonged.

Abruptly, Tiberius reined in his horse. The gelding snorted in surprise but stopped, and Tiberius instantly dismounted. Without thinking, I followed suit and stood beside him where he knelt...belatedly realizing that the body before us was the Tribune Varus himself.

Where a lesser man may well have given no thought to the proper battlefield burial for such an inglorious death of a leader, Tiberius gently, almost reverently, picked up the body of Varus and assigned four soldiers the task of burying him. Then he had turned to me and growled, “I hope you can hold your liquor, young man. Because we’re going to get exceedingly drunk.”

After several hours of drinking Germanian beer, we were both so inebriated that all self-control was lost. Several times, Tiberius swore he would go into exile rather than accept the laurel crown of the Roman Empire.

I had never been that drunk before or since, even during the early days of legionnaire training, when we’d run close to thirty-six kilometers a day, loaded down by thirty-five-and-a-half kilograms of armor. Oh, the impossible feats they demanded of us! All we did was run... and drink.

Tiberius as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire? Not *that* quintessence of the perfect Roman soldier...why, it would be precisely like *me* becoming a politician, wouldn’t it?”

I smiled at the memories, even of that swill Posca—the only wine that we could afford. And reveled in my recollection of the grandeur and glory of becoming a Roman legionnaire—the acme of all fighting forces in the world. But my smile faded with the memory of reading the message from Tiberius, and the sense of foreboding that accompanied it.

Suddenly the enormous wooden doors of the inner chambers exploded outward. A phalanx of soldiers stepped out in a tight formation, revealing Sejanus. He was no longer clothed in the uniform of the legionnaire but in a toga and unarmed.

Sejanus is prefect of the Praetorian Guard, I thought. By Jove, Augustus must be dead and Tiberius now the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire!

Some 753 years ago, after killing his brother Remus, Romulus had personally yoked a bull and a heifer to a plow and marked off the sacred boundaries of his city of Rome. There was no temple to Mars, the god of war, and even generals changed to civilian clothes when they entered the holy precinct. All Roman soldiers knew—even most citizens—that the Palatine Hill was a place of peace, the *pomerium*.

Despite the heat, Lucius felt a chill. As if a cold breeze had materialized. Saying nothing, he merely stared at Sejanus and waited.

CHAPTER FIVE

ATHENS, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

“I forbid it. It would be far too dangerous—for my men and me, never mind for you and Claudia! That territory is still riddled with bandits.”

I had never heard Uncle Adrian raise his voice, let alone shout. Aunt Sabina’s reply was too quiet for me to hear from the doorway of my room on the second floor, where I strained to hear them talking down in the *andron*. It was by far the largest room in the house and was on the far side from my room—but not so far that my uncle’s deep voice did not carry clearly through the still morning air. I knew they were in the space Adrian kept for seeing business associates and hosting important social occasions. I had seen Sabina in there only a few times when her hospitality to the leaders of Athens was warranted.

Clearly, they did not want me to hear their conversation. I could only conclude that they were talking about me. But what could they be having words about? Soon, I would be gone from their lives and no longer their concern. Whatever the matter, it had surely been raised by Sabina, and was obviously the cause of great consternation for Adrian. His last phrase echoed in my

mind: *That territory is still riddled with bandits. Too dangerous even for my men and me...*

I continued to stand silent and alert but could make out nothing further. My things were all packed: Three large woven bags held my clothes and another two, along with a beautifully carved wooden chest, my dowry.

The dowry. Sabina had offered more than a few times to explain how and why my soon-to-be husband's proposal had been accepted. With each of her attempts to discuss the matter, I had feigned indifference, but I could tell she recognized my fear. Did she also sense my exhilaration? The two did battle in my head almost constantly.

My dreams were not so specific back then. They offered no portent, nor did they show me the man who would be my husband—only his land, which seemed both familiar and strange. The place was very much like Greece: arid, mountainous, and located near the sea. But the contours, dimensions, and feeling of the mountains were different—these were more like hills. I would soon live in this exotic land, surrounded by people who spoke a language unknown to me.

As I'd been unable to sleep, I had been packed for many hours. I'd closed my eyes for a few moments, only to startle awake, heart racing, perspiring heavily. Finally, I gave up, arose, and gathered my things together.

I stepped out onto the balcony barefoot and soundlessly made my way down the stairs. At first, I could just make out the whispering of my guardians, but as I stole closer, I began to make out their words.

“Sabina, dearest, why would you endanger yourself like this?”

My aunt is crying. No, she is sobbing! What is this? I've never known Sabina to shed a tear, even on the day I so deeply wounded her with my words.

Barely, I heard the name, *Amara*.

My mother. She is talking about my mother!

I felt something give way deep in my chest at the sound of
that beloved name.

Amara. Mother.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER SIX

PALACE OF TIBERIUS, ROME

Lucius Pontius Pilate

Sejanus finally spoke. I had not realized it was a contest, but from the look in the Praetorian's eye, Sejanus thought so. His gaze emanated enmity.

“Lucius.”

“Salve, Sejanus.” He looks the same, I thought. How many years has it been...at least fifteen since those days when we were impossibly young; boys playing at the games of men. But none of it was ever a game for you, Sejanus, and look how far you have come. Head of the Praetorian Guard. Head bodyguard of the emperor. But it's not enough, is it? Not even this role is sufficient to satisfy your appetite for power, fame, and adulation. Your eyes are wholly devoid of light. Clearly, you hate me still. Or, more likely, you hate everyone who is of no use to you.

As I stood there contemplating his character, I realized how unsurprised I was at the rapid ascension of Sejanus through the ranks. His ambition had been evident even when our cheeks were still smooth. Although his given name was Lucius, like my own, he had discarded it as childish and refused to answer to anything but *Sejanus*. Somehow, he'd persuaded even the coarse instruc-

tors to call him by his preferred name, as if *Lucius* had died in childhood. The implication was obvious: Sejanus believed that I, Lucius Pontius Pilate, had preferred to remain a child, answering to the name given me by my mother, while he was a true legionary.

Sejanus's sudden renaming had come just at the time of his losses in the chariot races, and I had wondered at the coincidence. Roman legionary training was arduous to be sure, but even those in charge of it had been young boys once. They understood the psychology of boys eager for manhood—the urgency of the desire to prove themselves worthy of belonging to the finest army the world has ever seen.

Although Sejanus excelled at most of the training exercises—marathons, gymnastics, marksmanship, and the like—he lost the chariot races handily. And each time to me. The aftermath of our last match was horrific. The instructors tried to stop the mayhem, but did not act in time. Sejanus had gotten so angry at his horses' inability to carry him to victory over me and my splendid team that he had thrown his javelin into the chest of his lead Arabian, goring him and causing the other three to fall and break their legs. The animals' injuries were so severe that they had to be put out of their misery. Four fine horses dead because of a lost race.

Finally tiring of his wordless demonstration of mastery, Sejanus's smile was insolent. More of a grimace than a smile, "Emperor Tiberius will see you now, Lucius."

Bowing slightly to my new superior, I revealed nothing. Years of practice had taught me perfect self-control. I merely removed my helmet, held it close to my right side, and followed the praetorians stepping smartly into the inner temple of the new Princeps: the "first person" of Rome.

As we marched into the private quarters of Tiberius, Sejanus hissed in my ear, "Prostrate yourself when you get to his

throne. This is the God of the world—show him due honor!”

I knew Tiberius would hate the kowtowing—at least the Tiberius I had known in Germania would. But I did as I was bidden.

“Get up, Lucius! For the sake of Jupiter, don’t behave like just one more sycophant, please.”

Shaking my head, my smile rueful, I apologized to my old comrade. “What would you have me do then, sir?” From my prone position on the stone floor in front of the throne, I could see nothing. I was grateful for the sudden, jarring cold of the stone on my superheated body, and for the few seconds I’d bought to collect myself. Tiberius’s inner chambers contained a glut of brilliant gold-and-bejeweled statues of Roman gods in myriad shapes and sizes. They seemed to cover every centimeter of the spacious room, and so bright was the blinding light of their reflection in the afternoon sun that it threatened to hurt the eyes.

Tiberius, is this you? The one called “the Exile” after you fled to Rhodes to escape your corrupt mother, Livia, and the ruthless Julia she forced you to marry? May the gods save me from such avaricious women! Have all your noble ideals vanished with the laurel crown on your head?

“GET UP, LUCIUS.”

The reverberations from his shout shook several pedestal tables severely enough that the precious objects atop them fell to the floor and smashed into tiny pieces, sure to embed themselves into the bare feet of the slaves who appeared from nowhere to clean up the mess.

“You can leave us now,” Tiberius said sharply to the servants. “You too, Sejanus.”

“Imperator, I—” Sejanus bowed as he objected, but a snort from Tiberius cut him short. Prudently, he and his seven praetorians backed out of the chambers.

“*Salve, Lucius. It has been a very long time.*”

Tiberius looked to me world-weary, even old. His long,

thin face was lined, and his eyes, which had always been vital and alive, reflected heartbreak. His broad shoulders slumped, giving him a shrunken look—as if all of the decisions he’d had to make had diminished him. With good reason, I supposed. After all, he’d left a beloved wife when she was pregnant with their son in order to marry a woman he hated. And then there were the countless men he had led to their deaths. Perhaps he sensed them all blaming him. Mocking him. *For this, you destroyed us? You threw love and family away for some colored glass and gold? Do your treasures comfort you in the middle of the night?*

As if reading my mind, he said, “Lucius, governing Rome is like holding a she-wolf by the ears. Sejanus has been here under three months, and already he is plotting with the Senate against me.” At that, he grabbed the laurel crown on his head and smiled as he twirled it around his right forefinger. “Power...it’s what we all want. The gods, men, women...I tell you, it is the most potent of all the intoxicating spirits known to men. Once experienced, we seek more and more of it...”

A sudden clap of thunder seemed to sanctify the words of the sovereign ruler of the world. His smile became laughter as he tossed the crown to me. “Lucius, you’ll be getting one of these soon. In Judea, where you will be Prelate!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

ROAD TO DELPHI, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

I was transfixed by the story Aunt Sabina was telling. For the first time in twelve years, she talked to me easily, with familiarity, with...love. *What was the cause of this sudden concern for my welfare—a concern so seemingly deep that she had implored her husband to make a journey he considered dangerous and maybe foolhardy? And, even more fundamentally, why was Sabina talking about mother—after years of total silence about her?*

My psyche was a cauldron of unanswered questions mixed with profound gratitude. Upon my collapse outside the *andron*, Uncle Adrian had dropped all resistance to Sabina's pleas. They would accompany me back to Delphi before my voyage to meet my husband-to-be. The trip would take several weeks—possibly longer.

Adrian must have arranged the transfer of his daily responsibility in the agora and at his farm with great haste that morning. A contubernium of Roman legionnaires on horseback appeared about an hour before their convoy left Athens; clearly, they represented the solution to my uncle's misgivings about our travel-

ing alone along the mountainous road to Delphi. Four soldiers would lead the small group of carriages, while the remaining four would ride in back.

I was intrigued, not frightened by the appearance of the soldiers. The practical effects of Greece's loss of independence to the Roman Empire were far less traumatic than were the turbulent and violent wars among the Greek city-states. In fact, Roman respect and admiration for the philosophy, laws, and culture of Greece was so profound that the Greek language was adopted by the wealthy and educated Roman leadership. The relationship between the two countries hardly seemed like that of conqueror and vanquished. As an Athenian, I was well aware of the benefits we enjoyed as citizens of a senatorial province of Rome, rather than an imperial province. I knew that many of the more recently conquered territories in the Orient and Asia required direct Roman leadership and maybe a military intervention due to the frequent rebellion of the citizenry.

But, precisely how did Uncle Adrian manage to secure an escort of Roman legionaries—and with such haste? I had to wonder...but I knew enough to keep this and my many other questions to myself as I sat back against the pile of cushions arranged behind me on the hard seat. I reveled in my relief and rapture at the sound of Sabina's voice, and her evident forgiveness for my verbal mishap of four years earlier.

"What do you want to know?" she asked me, in response to my question about my own mysterious past.

"Everything," I replied. "Every detail. Even just partial memories. All of it—please?"

Sabina offered me a warm and genuine smile, one I had not seen in a very long time. I couldn't help but wonder if she was thinking about my parents at that very moment. The weight of her gaze began to weigh and then oppress. I looked around the small space, pretending to have heard a puzzling sound but it was merely to escape her scrutiny.

When I looked back at my aunt, she was still staring at me. Frowning, I asked, “Is there something wrong? Have I a horrid blemish on my face, Aunt?” *Am I distressingly plain...even ugly?*

“Claudia, quite the contrary, I have been thinking about what an enchanting combination of your mother’s fair-skinned and delicate Greek facial features and the thick, lustrous, almost black hair of your Roman centurian father you are. Almost startling.”

She cocked her head to the right as she continued to study me. “You have his long Roman nose...which makes your face more arresting than beautiful.” She nodded to herself. “And yet you seem to be growing into that nose of his.”

I was squirming, not at all certain about this strange emotional shift. My aunt had mostly ignored me for years and now seemed fascinated by me. However, I had to admit that it was pleasing—reassuring, to know that I was not unattractive. Especially from Sabina who seemed the quintessence of beauty.

Sabina continued to study my face. With difficulty, I maintained eye contact.

“But it is your eyes that command attention, Claudia. They are wholly your own, not those of your parents. Your eyes change color with the light or its absence, your mood, clothing. Right now, they are warm and almost amber-colored...dancing with excitement.”

Now I could feel the heat start to burn my cheeks. If Sabina noticed, she was undeterred. “I am more accustomed to your more usual attitude of intense observation of your surroundings, then, Claudia, your eyes look almost black. Revealing nothing at all. It can be more than unsettling.”

“All in all, Claudia, you have become a lovely woman. No longer are you the gangly, awkward girl of just last year. And those dark eyes of yours have no need of kohl to accent them. You seem serene, child, so extremely self-possessed.”

Was I? Had serenity become an attribute of mine?

Finally—thankfully—she was finished with her analysis

of my appearance, countenance and personality. Sabina launched into the story of her childhood years with my mother and their parents...my grandparents.

The sound of hooves as the three teams of horses pulled the carriages along was metronomic, calming, an acoustic aid to the memories Sabina shared with me. Rolling back the years, she carried me to a time when she and her little sister, Amara—my mother—were small and care-free sprites living on the beaches of Nauplia. The peaceful beachside town had been her beloved home until her marriage to Adrian at sixteen. It had been a paradise, she told me, filled with the simple joys of family. She shared what it was like to belong to a close-knit, loving family—such a stark contrast to my own upbringing.

Sabina sighed, and I could only imagine what sadness mingled with her happy recollections of childhood, of the images of her fisherman father and contented mother. I got the sense that she was trying hard to divert me from my present and future—to give me a fleeting taste of everyday life as it once was, for the duration of our trek.

“Amara and I were water nymphs,” she said dreamily. “Father insisted that in reality, we were daughters of Amphrite.” She paused and cast a critical glance at her own hands and arms. Her pale skin was lightly freckled. “Mother was always shouting at us to come in out of the sun, or risk looking like peasants by the time we were thirty!” Glancing at my olive skin, she added, “You have no such worries, my dear. The sun is far kinder to your skin type.” Then, scrutinizing me more carefully, she declared, “Claudia, you are becoming quite lovely.”

The erratic, jarring motion of the carriage made it seem almost as if we were riding on horseback. We had climbed out of coastal Athens and were now heading northwest along rocky trails to the Parnassus Mountains, where lay the sacred shrine of Delphi. I wondered if the remains of my mother and her forbidden lover lay among the rocks, if her spirit infused the waters.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TIBERIUS' TEMPLE, ROME

Lucius Pontius Pilate

I felt dazed. My vision swam as I tried to take in what the emperor had just said.

“Well?” Tiberius queried. He stood beside his throne grinning down at me while I, his young protégé, fingered the laurel crown he had impulsively tossed at me. “Lucius, SAY SOMETHING!” The tone of his voice served to summon his slaves once more, although there were no exploded statues to pick up. The four Syrian men who had scurried out from behind voluminous curtains in the rear of the room looked about furtively, then dashed back whence they had come.

The appointment Tiberius had suggested was far loftier than I'd expected. Prelate of Judea was an extraordinary role for a Tribune who had recently turned thirty-two. Judea was the ancient home of that fractious and unruly group of religious zealots known as the Jews. Because the province was so unstable, it was governed personally by the emperor, rather than the Senate. This meant that as Prelate, I would once again be directly responsible to Tiberius.

At once, I understood the naked hostility Sejanus had

shown me earlier. Valerius Gratus had been the Judean prelate for over ten years, and had been close to fifty at the time of his appointment.

Fingering the laurel wreath while scrambling for words, I thought back about the strange foreboding I'd sensed earlier, while waiting in the atrium. My beloved military career was indeed over, and this governorship—while an extreme honor—would involve a different kind of battle from any I'd experienced. I'd be required to fight with weapons I'd never wielded, using strategies I was unfamiliar with and had never desired to learn.

I knew a little about my predecessor; far too little, I suspected. But I recalled that in his attempts to bring peace and stability to the various factions within the Jewish people, Gratus had made no fewer than eight appointments, to the high priesthood. The latest was a man named Joseph Caiaphas. I could only hope that there had been wisdom in the choice.

The words of Cicero that I had studied as a schoolboy returned to me as I carefully stepped forward to give back the emperor's crown: "There are, therefore, instances of civic courage that are not inferior to the courage of the soldier. Indeed, civic service calls for even greater energy and even greater devotion."

In Judea, I would become the chief magistrate and head of the judicial system, carrying the laws of Tiberius's empire into a land that boiled and simmered with religious fervor. I swallowed a torrential deluge of misgivings, bowed deeply and said, "I am at your service, Princeps. I am eager to accept this great honor. Grateful that you consider me worthy."

Thinking the meeting over, I was beginning to back out of the chambers when Tiberius spoke again. "Lucius, you will need a wife out there. It is not seemly for a Roman Prefect to be a single man."

"In just two months, Princeps, I will have a wife."

Surprise evident in his voice, Tiberius replied, "Good for

you Lucius, good for you! What is the name of this fortunate woman?"

“Claudia, Princeps. Her name is Claudia Procula.”

CHAPTER NINE

OUTSKIRTS OF THEBES, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

We stopped, and it looked as if it wasn't just to water the horses. And it was too early in the day to set up camp. I leaned out the side of the carriage as far as possible to watch the soldiers remove the wooden, cloth-covered saddles from their horses. One legionary was crouched down beside his mount, clearly worried about the animal's leg. Without thinking, I jumped out of the carriage and quickly walked over to him. Ignoring Sabina's startled, "Claudia, where are you going?" I knelt on the rocky ground.

"Is he lame?" I asked the soldier in Latin.

The legionary was dumbfounded. His mouth worked, but no words came out. I understood. Most Greek women did not speak Latin, or, if they did, it was with a terrible accent. Smiling at him in a way that I hoped was flirty and feminine, I said, "I think I can help. May I touch the horse?"

This time the soldier stammered his agreement—just in time, for I had already stood to calm the animal, who looked skittish from either pain or fatigue. His coat was soaked with sweat and his nostrils flared. In as soothing a tone as I could muster, I

murmured, “Aren’t you a splendid specimen of Andalusian!”

To my ear, Greek would have sounded far more reassuring, but I doubted this legionary or his horse spoke Greek. The sound of my words and the laying on of my cool hands calmed him. I could no longer see the whites of his eyes so I dropped back to my knees, fumbling a bit on a few sharp rocks that I feared might cut through the lavender fabric of the *peplos* Sabina had woven for me. Still murmuring nonsense in Latin, I palpated the horse’s leg but felt nothing that would cause lameness. When I lifted its hoof, I found the culprit: Wedged into the right bar—the turning point of the back of the hoof—was a thorn.

By this time, the soldier had knelt beside me, and he saw the problem as well. “*Optime puella,*” he said, and grasped the hoof with one hand, intending to pull the thorn out with the other.

“Careful—don’t break it off,” I cautioned, recalling the problem my uncle had had when one of his slaves had removed only part of a sharp twig from one of his prize horse’s hooves. The ensuing infection had festered for over a month.

Nodding, the legionary let go of the horse and stood. Rum-maging through a leather pack draped over his saddle, he pulled out a pair of forceps. By the time he knelt again at my side, a substantial crowd had assembled to watch the operation.

I could feel Uncle Adrian’s strong arms enfold me. He pulled me to my feet, laughed, then kissed the tip of my nose and gave me a quick hug. “Good work, Caritas,” he said. “All of those hours you spent working with my Alessandro and our horses have been put to good use!”

I could see Sabina standing behind her husband and I hurried to her side to apologize for my hasty gesture. To my surprise, she was smiling even more broadly than Uncle Adrian had. Noting that she held our small bags in her hands, I asked if we were staying where we were.

“Indeed we are!” she said, and made a sweeping gesture that took in all that I had not noticed in my singular focus on the

horse. The establishment in front of which we'd stopped was huge—a *stathmos* where all of us, horses and humans, could surely find shelter and food. The barns must have been filled to overflowing with barley. Now I could see my equine friend's nostrils flaring for a different reason. He smelled food.

So this was Thebes, the city leveled by Alexander several centuries earlier. My mind reeled with the myths. This was said to be the birthplace of Hercules, and the site where the Sphinx had posed her famous riddle to Oedipus: "What is a creature that may have two, three, or four feet, can move in air, water, and on land, and moves more slowly the more feet it has?" His correct answer had so enraged the Sphinx that she'd leapt to her death from the Theban Acropolis—or so went the myth.

Everywhere I looked, I imagined the glory of the place as it had once been. This was a virtual feast for the imagination of a young girl who had scarcely left her home in Athens. I could spy the ruins of the Cadmean Fortress over a rise beyond the *stathmos* and could not help but consider all the successful battles fought by the city-state against Athens and Sparta. And then came the final and devastating destruction, brought upon the city by its own rebellion against the peaceful union of Greek city-states that Philip of Macedonia had instituted. *The hubris of man continually foments his passion and lust for power.*

My stomach growled so loudly that both Sabina and Adrian laughed. "Come," said my uncle, "let's go wash and then enjoy some wine and good food."

CHAPTER TEN

AQUILEIA, WESTERN ITALIA

Lucius Pontius Pilate

“Well, Quintillus, we’ve made far better time than I had planned. After just three days, we are on the outskirts of Aquileia. At this rate, we may even reach Caesarea before the end of the month. What do you think Quintillus? Can we make it before the Fides?”

As it was already the middle of September, getting to Judea by the first of October would be a remarkable feat. I smiled at the thought; Fides was one of my favorites on the long list of Roman gods and goddesses. Although I thought of them as mythical, this goddess stood for the virtues of trust and good faith I worked hard to personify.

The centurion’s gaze remained on me for mere seconds before he returned to surveying the Aquileian landscape—on guard, tirelessly. Although we traveled within the confines of the Empire, Quintillus was well aware of the temptations presented by a phalanx of Roman soldiers to young and foolish boys native to the land. Our preference was to disarm them peacefully, or simply scare them off with warnings, but if they surprised our legionnaires, they risked their own deaths. The day before, in

Bononia, a ragtag group of four Etruscans—none older than thirteen or fourteen—had appeared out of nowhere, brandishing swords and hollering. They'd been cut down in minutes. No one celebrated their deaths.

Quintillus and I had been together since that long-ago battle after which I had become Tribune. That had been just eight years ago, but on days like this one, it felt like twenty. It had been eight non-stop years of death—luckily, not our own.

At least three times throughout those years, I'd felt certain my time had come. On the ground under a substantial Germanian warrior; alone and cornered by three horsemen; and finally, standing and waiting for a mortal blow I was sure would come. Each time, Quintillus had appeared out of nowhere, brandishing his gladius or pila, or—in that last case—one in each hand. Two of the four Germans confronting me had toppled, my comrade's swords finding their hearts. The other two ran.

Quintillus's skill on the battlefield exceeded that of any man I had ever known or studied. Tiberius had pinned five medals on his chest, Augustus, three—all before he'd turned twenty. Frequently, I wondered just what I had done to merit the allegiance and steadfastness of this centurion.

Like me, Quintillus was a Samnite. Proud, stalwart, and fearsome warriors, the Samnites lived along the ridge of the Apennine Mountains in south-central Italy. They came very close to defeating the Romans in three wars but ultimately, the Romans won the day. Practically speaking, their country was no more.

A man of few words, when Quintillus chose to speak, I listened carefully and usually took his advice. That included his counsel regarding this achingly long, 5,000-mile journey. Tiberius had sent a wax tablet by messenger, offering to pay for eight of us to make the trip to Caesarea by sea. I was sorely tempted, knowing that it would cut some three weeks off the trip, but something had pricked at the back of my mind, telling me to *be careful*.

Scrutinizing the tablet, I noticed that it lacked the seal of Tiberius Caesar. I took it to the stables, where Quintillus was working with the horses, to ask for his opinion. He looked up from the stallion he was grooming, expressionless.

“We could go by sea—saving us many days,” I said. “Doing so would allow me to accompany Claudia from Athens to Caesarea. What are your thoughts, my friend?”

He studied me. Although Quintillus was aware of my impending marriage, he had never mentioned it or asked me any questions about my wife-to-be. Not that it would have mattered if he had; I knew next to nothing about Claudia Procula. I wondered if he would say something about her now, but his gaze dropped to study the tablet for a moment. Then he raised an eyebrow and derisively muttered, “Sejanus.”

There wasn’t a legionary who did not know Sejanus, but Quintillus had been a trainer when Sejanus and I were just beginning our service. He had witnessed the brutality of the young man in the wake of our last chariot race. A soldier’s horse was his partner; its well-being could make the difference between life and death for the legion. Quintillus had viewed Sejanus’s selfish, wholly unwarranted savagery as iniquity, not merely a character flaw. In the trainer’s mind, the young legion’s actions had warranted far worse than the flogging and two weeks of double drills that he suffered. Quintillus would have executed the young soldier, nothing less, and considered the act virtuous.

Each January fifth, when Quintillus recited the *Sacramentum Militare*, he did so with heartfelt conviction: “I shall faithfully execute all that the Emperor commands, I shall never desert the service, and I shall not seek to avoid death for the Roman Republic.” His grandfather had been one of the first Roman legionaries under the Marian reforms instituted by Gaius Marius, and none who knew him or fought with him ever doubted that he would gladly die for the Empire.

Until 100 BC, the army of the Roman Republic had been

comprised of citizen-soldiers. Only men of wealth and property could join the military, as they alone could afford the cost of their own arms and equipment. By 100 BC, few citizens were volunteering. Worried about an invasion, Marius began to recruit all able-bodied men, even the landless poor, promising them weapons and equipment from Rome. Effectively, he had broken the law but his initiative ended up saving the city from attack by Germanian tribes. His reforms were eventually made law, and resulted in a paid standing army equipped to handle the expanding Roman Empire.

The idea of marshaling an eight-man unit to accompany me to Judea had been Sejanus's. As prefect of the Praetorian Guards, he had the authority to make it happen. Once Quintillus had spoken his name, I could picture Sejanus writing out the spurious message and sending his slave to deliver it. His face must have exhibited the same loathing I'd been subjected to during our last meeting at the palace. He'd thought he was dangling a temptation that could not be refused—one that would end with the humiliation of his arch enemy.

Quintillus said no more about Sejanus, nor did he take any time to ponder the offer. He merely reminded me of the momentousness of the first impression I would make upon my arrival. It was critical that the new Judean prelate look like he had the full power of the Roman Empire behind him. Eight of us traveling alone, arriving by sea, would look weak and insubstantial, maybe even timid. This was precisely the impression that Sejanus had hoped I'd make on the canny zealots of Judea.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEBES, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

“Would you like a bit of wine with your dinner, young lady?”

Looking across the table at my aunt and uncle, I blushed with delight when Sabina answered for me in the affirmative. I had never had wine before. Sabina and Adrian did not drink it with dinner at home; the only time I’d ever seen it in the house was in the *andron*, when Adrian was entertaining his friends and business associates.

The serving woman was back in a flash with a large jug filled to the brim with red wine. Pouring a healthy amount into each of our goblets, she smiled and said, “Your dinner will be ready in just a few minutes.”

As she raised her cup to Adrian and me, Sabina’s smile was broader than I had ever seen it, her mood light, festive, and gay. I thought I understood why.

“Claudia, may the gods shine on you,” she said, “but most especially, *your* God—the One who reigns over all the rest.”

Both Adrian and I drank deeply, each of us recalling the time Sabina and I had spoken about gods and God.

She laughed gracefully. “I’ll admit that it’s humiliating to be taught about God by your ten-year-old niece, but...” She paused, abruptly solemn, and glanced over at Adrian. He nodded almost imperceptibly—but I caught it.

They have talked about that day. More than once!

“I was angry at you, Claudia. For years. Unjustly.” With her cheeks flushed from the wine and emotion, and those violet eyes glistening in the light of the candlelight, my aunt was so beautiful that she took my breath away.

“You see,” she continued, “you said the exact words that your mother had. Before she left for Delphi. Word for word.”

I should have been surprised by this revelation, but I wasn’t. Maybe it was because we were approaching Delphi, or because I was now a woman. The dreams had begun again, and with them came a sharpening of my vision—not the literal kind, but another level of perception that had nothing to do with my eyesight. I knew things that I’d never been taught. My tending to the horse earlier that day was but one example. Yes, I had been around Uncle Adrian’s stable throughout my childhood, but no one had ever shown me the hoof of a horse. Yet, I knew there might be a thorn, and exactly where to look for it. What’s more, I had absolutely no fear of that frightened ton of flesh, that beast looking at me fearfully, the whites of his eyes rolling. It was almost as if I could read his thoughts and he mine.

I had developed a confidence far beyond what I’d felt upon mastering scholarly readings. Instead of just knowledge—or maybe in addition to it—I felt I was in possession of a sense of kindness, a generosity of spirit far beyond what was normal for a fifteen-year-old soul. I was readying myself for an apprenticeship in this new kind of wisdom that I cannot properly express in language.

I sat in silence, enjoying vicariously Sabina’s delight in being with the man she loved. Instead of her usual light dinner with her friends, she sat dining with her husband. And, as if that

were not enough, she now understood some things about herself and her baby sister—my mother. Things that had been long suppressed. Sabina’s joy was contagious; it seemed to spill out and over the whole of the large dining room—the *gleumata*—and imprint itself onto the faces of other diners.

I had read about these places designed specifically for drinking and revelry. Most of the long wooden tables were filled with men and a few women—on their way to intoxication, from the sounds of their conversations, which were loud enough to be easily overheard. I noticed one dinner table, far across the room, occupied by what seemed to be a family traveling—just like us. Elsewhere, three women approached a table of soldiers, hesitated for a few moments, then took seats next to the legionaries. As I watched, one of the women stood up, giggling and weaving from side to side, and extended her hand to the man she’d sat next to. Hand in hand, they left through one of the exit doors.

I was spellbound, knowing exactly where they were headed and what they would be doing.

“Claudia...” Adrian could not hide his amusement at my fascination with the ways of men and women fueled by wine. Suppressing his smile with difficulty, he looked up at the serving girl, who was standing by me looking anxious—as if she’d done something wrong. Apparently, she had asked me more than once if I wanted the fish or chicken, but I’d been oblivious to her queries. Hastily, I replied, “Oh—the fish, please. I am sorry I didn’t hear you before...I suppose I was woolgathering.”

The girl nodded but did not return my smile. I doubted she had a lot to smile at. Very dark complected and about my age, I guessed that she was a slave from Syria or Thrace. I wondered if her duties extended beyond serving meals, and suspected they did.

When I turned my attention back to Sabina, she was leaning over to kiss Adrian’s cheek. This was a surprisingly public demonstration of affection, and I was touched by the tenderness

with which my uncle regarded her.

Why did they never have children? They are obviously in love, even after so many years...

Sabina's next comment took me aback. Had I inadvertently spoken my thoughts aloud, or had her tongue simply been loosened by the wine she was unaccustomed to?

"I had an accident when I was a couple of years younger than you, Claudia," she said quietly. "One that left me infertile." As I watched her, the joy drained from her face. "Amara, who was just five years old when it happened, stood at the foot of my bed and declared that one day, she would have a baby. A girl. And that child would end up becoming my daughter."

Now, the tears coursed freely down her face, taking with them the carefully applied kohl and ochre. Ignoring the effect, Sabina pushed on. "I am so very sorry, Claudia. You were such a tiny little thing. But each time I looked at you, all I could think of was my baby sister, those astounding words. How could she have known?"

I am sure that the abrupt silence in that room filled with intoxicated people existed only in my mind. And yet, it seemed that everything came to a halt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PERGAMUM, ASIA MINOR

Lucius Pontius Pilate

After over two weeks of driving the horses and our eighty men over ten hours per day, we reached the outskirts of Pergamum, capital of the empire's province of Asia.

I had never been this far east and was surprised and impressed by the condition of the roads we had built throughout our empire. Although I knew that our soldiers had begun working with surveyor on them almost immediately upon gaining new territories, I'd not seen the evidence in far-flung places such as Asia. My heart swelled with pride at the engineering marvel of these roads, which eased our eastward journey considerably. If these conditions held as we continued, I calculated that Caesarea was just ten or eleven days away.

We decided a celebration of our good fortune was in order. Cheers resounded throughout the beautiful land about ten miles south of the city when I announced that we would rest where we stood for the next three days. Our temporary camp was on the bank near the mouth of a large river. Thankfully, we had seen no more rebellious youngsters since Bononia. The towering trees offered excellent protection from an ambush, which seemed un-

likely since our survey of the area revealed only birds above and many fish leaping from the waters of the clear river. We would eat well that evening.

The soldiers were divided into *contuberniums*, sub-units of eight, to quickly construct the vast camp. The first unit paced out the rectangular dimensions to begin digging the *fossae*. A one by one and a half meter trenches surrounded the entire camp and would serve as defensive traps in case of a surprise attack.

Legionary *contubernium* tents went up quickly for servants led pack mules carrying tent poles, folder tents and heavy equipment. These large eight man tents encircled the perimeter, the centerions and tribunes each their own tent with mine, the Praetorium, the largest, in the center.

Within two hours, the *encampment* was complete.

Quintillus and I sat sipping wine in my tent. I suspected many of the men were on their way into the city in search of a bathhouse, followed by a *popina* where they could enjoy wine and women.

Quintillus broke the silence. “Claudia is the niece of Adrian—the Greek at the last chariot race at Circus Maximus.” It was a statement, not a question. Neither of us had mentioned her name for over two weeks, but the man spoke as if he were replying to something I had said just a moment earlier.

I smiled. It had always been that way between the two of us. “Yes, she is,” I responded.

“He is a wealthy man.” Another question masquerading as a statement.

I smiled again, enjoying the pure pleasure of sitting motionless on a cushion instead of a bouncing atop a horse. I thought back to that day at Circus Maximus, and the strange confluence of circumstances that had placed me in the company of a wealthy landowner from Athens. “A man with a future written in the stars needs a wife,” he’d said. “An extraordinary woman.” The man was commanding, eloquent, and persuasive. “Her name

is Claudia. She is my eleven-year-old niece, daughter of a Roman centurion. In five years, she will be ready to wed. Claudia speaks fluent Latin as well as Greek, and has just mastered the ideas within my own copy of Plato's *Republic*. Her education will continue under my tutelage. Your bride will be thoroughly schooled in moral education and *ludus litterarius*, as well as philosophy."

The Greek's knowledge of and adherence to the basics of classical Roman education did not escape his listener.

"Her dowry will be extravagant, as my wife and I have no children of our own." Adrian seemed an honest man. The omission of the identity of the girl's mother must have seemed advisable for some reason, and I didn't press him. He pulled out a scroll and handed it to me.

Unfurling it, I saw that it was headed, *Pledge of Betrothal*, and read on:

Claudia Procula, the niece of Adrian and Sabina Procula, is betrothed to Lucius Pontius Pilate upon the occasion of her fifteenth birthday, September 5th. Her dowry includes 1000 drachmas, a Gallic slave, and 1200 minae for the wedding celebration, set to begin on, Saturnalia, Julian Year 28.

I was mesmerized by this Greek. He reminded me of a tutor my father had hired for me as a boy, the man who introduced me to Cincinnatus, Cicero, and some of the Greek philosophers.

Claudia. I had never heard the name. Pronouncing it again in my mind, I decided I liked the sound of it. As Adrian Procula and I shook hands, I could see Quintillus standing behind the Greek. Expression inscrutable.

That was five years ago. I was beginning to sense how quickly time passed. Adrian had prescribed our wedding day as the beginning of Saturnalia: I would be married to Claudia Procula by the start of the new year. Just as every Roman did, I observed the joy of that feast, The gifts, festivities, and light-

heartedness made this a most opportune day for a wedding.

That said, my religious beliefs tended more toward ritual than faith. My father, a farmer, had taught me the prayer to Father Mars, and from the time I was a small boy, we would make the *adortio* upon entering our home altar. On each of the four March Festival Days, we carefully prepared the offering—the *suove-tauilla*: a triple sacrifice of pig, bull, and ram.

As I entered into my adult life as a legionary, that ritual remained unchanged. The first meals the cooks made upon completion of the fort and temple outside of Pergamum consisted of the fruits of the triple sacrifice. As prelate and former Legate, I was first to enter the temple *capite velato* at our camp. A fold of my toga covering my head, I raised my right hand to my lips and rotated my body to the right, as prescribed, and intoned:

Father Mars, I pray and beseech thee that thou be gracious and merciful to me, my house, and my household; to which intent I have bidden this suove-taurilia to be led around my land, my ground, my farm; that thou keep away, ward off and removed sickness, seen and unseen, barrenness and destruction, ruin and unseasonable influence; and that thou permit my harvests, my grain, my vineyards and my plantations to flourish and come to good issue, preserve in health my shepherds and my flocks, and give good health and strength to me, my house, and my household To this intent, to the intent of purifying my farm, my land, and my ground, and of making an expiation, as I have said, deign to accept the offering of these suckling victims. Father Mars, to the same intent, deign to accept the offering of these suckling offerings.

I thought back to that day five years earlier, when I'd heard, "Tribune, where are you going? Caesar has bid you appear at the

palace to receive the laurel wreath.”

We had been returning from that first Germania war. My appearance at the Circus had been a spontaneous, perhaps even frivolous move on my part.

A brand-new tribune, just twenty-eight years of age, full of myself and reckless, I'd decided to stop and indulge in one last chariot race. I suspected—correctly, as it would turn out—that it would be my last. Although more exhausted than I had ever been, I *needed* to experience the thrill of this other kind of battle.

Quintillus had followed me—unhappily—into the arena.

I had forgotten the immensity of the place. More than 250,000 people filled the stadium. A full purple awning covered more than thirty rows. *Was Caesar Augustus here? Would he be watching me compete recklessly against charioteers who raced several times per week, when I myself had not stepped into a chariot for six years?*

The colors worn by the charioteers were a rainbow signifying their native country; blues and pale yellow, with the red and gold of the Romans predominating. How was it that I felt impelled to enter a race that I had not even known about, starting in under a quarter of an hour? How was it that the team hastily commandeered for me consisted of friendly horses from my days of legionary training? They snickered and snorted happily when I approached, prompting their usurped driver to give them—and me—a look of disgust as he wandered off unsteadily.

Was he drunk? What if I hadn't appeared?

I flashed back to that dreadful day when Sejanus had killed his horses in anger over his loss to me. These horses had nothing to fear and they knew it as I whispered into each one's ear. The lead horse, Ademus, snuffled back.

They remember me!

There was very little time before the start of the race, so I beckoned to Quintillus to jog up to the herald's booth and enter

my name into the competition so we could be announced. Seconds after he returned, the Emperor stood and dropped the cloth, signaling that it was time to get into position for the start of the race. I had just enough time to stare pointedly at Quintillus as we lined up at the gate.

Waiting for us at the Palace? Quintillus had the grace to smile and nod at the fact that Caesar may have ‘bid me appear at the palace’ but that we would have been waiting there for a time since the Emperor was here.

I could see the bloodstained whites of the eyes of the charioteer to my right. No more than five feet separated us. He was in gold—a Corinthian. His team was three big chestnuts and a Persian, taller and stockier than my Arabs. *Would their size be an advantage?* On my left was a diminutive Macedonian I estimated to be half my size and weight. *Undoubtedly, his lightness will augment his agility and speed.*

Before my self-doubts could paralyze me, the trumpets sounded, the gates opened, and we were off.

The noise! How do these animals stand the constant bedlam?

Strangely, by the end of the first lap, it had all come back to me. Ademus and his fellow horses were fast, but they knew seven laps was a long race. I could see the Corinthian advancing on my right—too fast, too early. He was driving thoughtlessly. I pulled back on my reins even harder; getting stuck between a foolish driver and the wall of the track could mean death. My boys responded instantly.

By the fifth lap, only five of thirty-five teams remained in the race. One by one, all of the other teams had lost wheels, or crashed, forced to drop out. Three charioteers—one of them the Corinthian—had also crashed and been dragged a few feet, but all three had managed to sever the reins from around their waists and escape the deadly hooves overtaking them.

During the sixth lap, I began to let the reins loose, then

looser. Ademus lowered his head, raised it, and then all four ran like the wind.

How was it that someone began to chant my name? It must have been someone who had witnessed the dreadful battle just days earlier. Soon, the entire crowd was on its feet shouting *Lucius! Pontius! Pilate!*

Quintillus, reading my mind as usual, interrupted my recollections.

“Five years, Lucius. They have vanished.” Shaking his head, he chuckled, “I used to laugh at my father when he spoke about how quickly the years pass by.” He was mirroring my own thoughts as we both pondered the passage of time since that fortuitous meeting with the Greek. He poured another generous serving of wine, first into my cup, then into his, and raised his arm in a toast.

“To the man with his future written in the stars.”

We drank long into that quiet night, listening to the pleasant gurgle of the river. Later, we heard the sounds of men returning from the city, all appetites sated. Finally, we slept—all but the two soldiers on watch.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEBES, MACEDONIA

Claudia Procula

My smile was broad as I opened my mouth to reply to Sabina with the expected, *Of course I forgive you, Aunt. You have nothing in the world to be sorry for.* Part of me was astonished at the foreknowledge my five-year-old mother had demonstrated—but only part. I recognized that small child and wondered at our connection.

But the words of absolution refused to leave my lips. All of a sudden, I felt nailed to the chair I sat on, overwhelmed with foreboding about my life and the man I would marry, feeling a deep and profound sorrow that threatened to consume me.

Just then, the serving girl materialized at our table with an overflowing tray of food. Carefully placing platters of lamb in front of Sabina and Adrian and a succulent-looking fish dish in front of me, the server pulled a variety of condiments from her many-pocketed apron and placed them before us, then stood back to ask, “Do you need anything else?”

“No, thank you, this looks excellent,” said my uncle, inhaling audibly. We had not eaten since the night before and then only some cheese and olives. Sensing our impatience to begin,

the server managed a tentative smile and floated away.

The aroma and appearance of the plates excited my appetite and drove away the awful presentiment that had threatened to overwhelm me. Glancing over at my aunt and uncle, I could see they shared my eagerness. Without another word, we began to eat.

After a half hour when my only thoughts were of what lay on the plate before me, I sat back, satiated, and gazed at Sabina. She was absorbed in cutting the last bit of lamb off the bone, and did not meet my gaze until she'd popped the morsel into her mouth.

"What?" she said, staring back at me with her hand over her mouth. She looked like a child caught eating a forbidden dessert. She looked ten years younger without the makeup that had been washed away by her tears.

"Aunt Sabina, you asked if I could forgive you, and I've yet to answer." I extended my arms as if to embrace the room, and continued, "What's to forgive?" Before she could regain her earlier mordant mood or infer that I was trivializing her concern, I hastily continued, "I think I understand how painful my presence must have been in those early days. Each time you looked at me or heard my voice, you must have been reminded of your sister's dire prediction. There is no need to forgive a natural human response to grief."

I caught the glance that passed between my aunt and uncle and knew what they were thinking. *She is just like Amara. She has her gifts. Perhaps even greater ones.*

It was as if they'd spoken these thoughts aloud, but I didn't dwell on them, for fear our unaccustomed lightness would come to an end. Taking another sip of the wine, I leaned forward across the table. "Tell me about him," I said—but perhaps my change of subject was too abrupt. Sabina lifted an eyebrow in puzzlement and Adrian remained silent.

I clarified. "Tell me about the man you would have me

marry in six weeks time.”

Once again, a glance passed between my guardians—this time prolonged.

I waited.

Uncle Adrian opened his mouth, then closed it. He stared down at his empty plate and cleared his throat. Finally, he met my gaze. “Claudia, until this moment you have resisted our attempts to tell you about him. Why now?”

Sabina busied herself by toying with the remains of her dinner.

“Uncle, I feel...light. The wine is very likely a factor in that, but more than that, I feel such immense gratitude for you and Aunt Sabina. I am aware of the sacrifices my presence in your lives has required...” I hesitated, then continued. “I am so grateful for your love. I feel...*happy*.” As I watched their faces grow tender, I wondered at the truth of that simple statement, and at the sense of peace I felt deep down for the first time I could remember. I was learning an all-important lesson: This life is filled with confusion, sorrow, pain, and disappointment. When moments of untrammelled joy such as this one come along, one must hold on to them—make them last.

I knew I would treasure this moment for the rest of my life. I couldn’t help wondering if my mother was, in some mystical way, guiding me. “Uncle, for the first time, I feel ready to begin my new life—before, back at your home in Athens, all I felt was reluctance...to leave the life of a child and learn the ways of a woman. I am...excited, fearful, and curious, all at once.” I stared at him and Sabina, willing them to understand.

Adrian regarded me gravely. Opening his mouth, he began to say something but stopped at a slight movement from Sabina. She had barely moved but it was some kind of signal. *Do not ask any more questions*. I was grateful because I had no other words to use.

Then nodded. “Right after your eleventh birthday...do you

recall that I traveled to Rome on business?”

At my answering nod, his eyes glowed and he grew animated. “As a member of our Agora, I had been invited to a meeting to discuss the expansion of the Pax Romana with Caesar Augustus, but the Emperor was still very ill. There were several of us from the provinces who had traveled for many days to make the meeting. Marcus Calvus was the consul charged with organizing the conference. He and ten other Senators opened their homes to those of us who had traveled long distances.”

Turning to Sabina, he took her hand and said, “I wish you had been there, my love. You would have enjoyed meeting Marcus’s wife, Felicia.”

Sabina squeezed his hand, then murmured, “Do go on, Adrian. I’ve not heard all of these details before.”

“A friend of Marcus’s invited us all to the chariot races at Circus Maximus. Apparently, the man had some of his own chariot teams entered.” Adrian’s broad grin at the memory took twenty years off of his face. “I always wanted to enter the chariot races myself, but...” His voice trailed off and a faraway look passed over him.

“You were too busy with the farm,” I interjected, “along with your responsibilities in the Agora and...life!” Both Sabina and Adrian chuckled at my completion of his thought.

“Ah, but these races... They were *larger* than life, my dear! Neither of you can imagine the number of people at the stadium that day—why I’ll wager there were 250,000! That is the equivalent of the whole population of Athens!”

Both Sabina and I exclaimed aloud. It truly was unimaginable.

“Marcus tried to explain to me the significance of a last-minute switch in charioteers, but the noise of the people cheering made it impossible to hear anything. He signaled that he would explain later. The stadium had staggered gates that were spring-loaded. You would not believe the veritable explosion when

thirty-five four-horse chariots burst forth and thundered through seven laps. What a contest!”

Both Sabina and I had our elbows on the table at this point, listening intently. I had never heard my uncle so passionate about anything—not even Plato.

“With perfect timing, the man who had entered the race at the very last minute made his move. Deftly, he edged past the other teams one by one, somehow—miraculously—avoiding the crashed chariots of those who had miscalculated. My host and I were on our feet cheering, along with the rest of the crowd, at this brave man’s audacity and command of his horses. I had never seen or heard such an uproar.”

Adrian’s eyes shone as he brought his story to its breathless conclusion. “Suddenly, the brave charioteer crossed the finish—he had won. First a few voices, then many, then all cheered his name: *Lucius Pontius Pilate*. When I turned a questioning eye to my host, he explained that this brave man had arrived directly from battle in Germania, where he had been instrumental in an important win. For his efforts, he had been elevated by Tiberius to the rank of tribune at just twenty-eight years of age. I could hear the murmur as the crowd talked about his exploits just as we were.”

At this point, my uncle turned and looked directly into my eyes. “I decided then and there, my dear, that *this* man was your destiny.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CAESAREA, JUDEA
Lucius Pontius Pilate

Finally, we arrived in Caesarea, capital of Judea. With a population of around 400,000, it was about the same size as Athens and two thirds the size of Rome.

An entire town constituted of dazzling white stone...the reports of it do not do it justice. How would one put words to a place such as this?

I had to close my eyes against the glare of this brilliant sea of white. The harbor alone was more magnificent than any I'd seen. Without being sure why, I led the legate—160 Roman cavalry officers including the subalterns—along the promenade of the most famous harbor in the world, rather than directly north to the palace—my new home.

Recalling Sejanus's attempt to taint my entrance into Judea, I slowed my stallion to a walk, fully aware of the majestic impression made by the horses in perfect cadence and the bright scarlet-and-gold uniforms contrasting with the stark white stone. Truly, our overall aspect was nothing short of magnificent.

Quintillus pulled his horse up to ride beside me for just a moment. When he was sure he'd gotten my attention, he bowed

his head, then lifted it again to meet my gaze. His eyes were luminous. Pride, respect and admiration—*This was the perfect method for the new Prelate to arrive.*

Then he pulled his horse to a complete stop to permit the long line of soldiers astride their horses to advance ahead. The centurion would be the last in the procession.

The men understood their roles, and, despite having put in ten-to-twelve-hour days during the past week, sat taller in their saddles. The slow rhythm of the horses was a welcome relief after the canter that had gotten them here. Even the horses perked up as more and more people flooded the streets and rooftops, attracted by the sound of our entrance into the walled city. Although it was October and not yet midday, the intense desert heat rose in shimmery waves off of the broad roads.

From astride our horses, my men and I surveyed the beauty of the place and marveled at its Roman engineering. We could see the aqueduct bringing water from many miles away, the stadium, Caesar's temple...and finally, the hippodrome, where the chariot races were held. Wistfully, I gazed at the immense circular stone structure. *It looks as large as the Circus Maximus in Rome!* I thought, as I recalled that Herod had been granted that title of King of Judea by the Roman Senate in acknowledgment of his unflagging loyalty as well as genius in creating Caesarea. The small naval station at Straton's Tower had been a dilapidated Jewish settlement until Herod saw past the unforgiving coastline to envision and then execute the first manmade harbor in the world. My heart swelled with pride at the symmetry, style, and utility of this marvelous, ingenious fortification.

Roman engineers had brilliantly executed Herod's sagacious vision by sinking numerous large wooden frames filled with stones and rubble deep under the water, along with Roman hydraulic concrete. The concrete, made by combining volcanic ash, lime, and water, hardened into fifty-ton rocks, effectively creating an underwater foundation for a breakwater that would

extend more than 1,500 feet into the ocean in a horseshoe shape, thus protecting the entire bay. Massive white columns were then erected on the promenade to form the mainstay of the wall that encircled the city.

As I led the century slowly along the promenade, I noted inlets in the wall that provided landing places for mariners and a circular terrace for disembarking passengers. Adjacent to the harbor were rows of houses, also built of white stone on streets radiating symmetrically from the promenade.

Where there had been just a few people—maybe fifty—there were now a few hundred, and more were assembling by the moment as our convoy passed through the city.

Well Herod, after seeing the marvels of your city, I am eager to experience the wonders of the palace you built. I am confident it will not disappoint!

Without thinking, I stopped and dismounted in order to stare up at the colossal statues at the mouth of the harbor. I had to tip my head back in order to salute the image of Augustus Caesar, a fifty-foot-statue cleverly conjoined with one of the twenty-, maybe thirty-foot columns as if it sat on a gigantic pedestal. Just as I did so, the murmuring of the now several hundred people gathered faded to silence.

As one, they turned toward a group of men hurrying down the main street.

The lead figure was dressed exotically, a large turban with a vertical blue stripe covering most of his white hair. The hem of his white linen tunic flapped in time with his rapid strides. Over it, he wore a blue robe; an apron-like garment was tied over that, featuring gold writing in what looked to me like Hebrew.

Caiaphas. It has to be.

My men remained mounted, the strain in their postures becoming evident as a few of the stallions began to snake—lowering and waving their heads side to side.

It would take only a word, a gesture, from one of these

Judeans to incite mayhem—I wondered if the men held rocks in the pockets of those capacious robes. The crowd’s silence was ominous, as if waiting for an invitation to aggression. I had to do something. Now.

Jumping up onto the base of one of the columns supporting the statue of Caesar Augustus, I shouted in Greek to my men, “Welcome to our new home! Thank you all for your steadfastness during this month-long journey. Quintillus will lead you to your new quarters so that you can water and rest your horses and get some rest yourselves. The first few glasses of wine are on me!”

I knew that most of my soldiers did not speak Greek but a few did—enough that the others would get the gist of my words instantly. *We are released!* An appreciative roar arose from the men as they took off. Even the apprehensive townspeople broke into smiles at their exuberance.

I suspected that these priests spoke even better Greek than I. And knew precisely what I had just done; albeit wondering if their new Prelate was a fool to leave himself wholly unprotected.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CAESAREA, JUDEA
Lucius Pontius Pilate

While waiting for the priest and his entourage to approach, I recalled Cicero's description of the Jews as people born to be slaves. The immensity of my new responsibility weighed as heavily on me as if it were one of the gigantic stone pillars on the promenade.

I ran through my mission in my head. I am the personal representative of Tiberius to these fractious groups of religious zealots who fight among themselves over each jot of their strange, endless lists of laws. Because of the instability of this place, Judea remains under the Emperor instead of the Senate. Each and every rule and code that is passed by Rome is up to me to enforce. Especially the tax code.

Although my position was now higher than legate, the head of a Legion of 5000, I had decided to wear the uniform of a tribune for my last journey as a soldier. Hot and uncomfortable as the helmet, shoulder plates, woolen tunic, body armor, and shield were, I was proud to wear the scarlet and gold symbol of the empire I would happily give my life for.

*Roman, remember by your strength to rule
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,
to spare the conquered, battle down the proud.*

More and more people had amassed in the five minutes that I'd waited, and now there were hundreds of them and just one of me. I realized that my decision to stand at the foot of a statue that the Jews considered blasphemous might have been imprudent. I considered but quickly dismissed the idea of moving. If I changed position now, it could be interpreted as weakness.

As I shifted my weight from my left leg to my right, I mused about the speed with which I could be killed. A few words from just one of these strange people and a mob could be incited. I had seen it happen before: a large group of civilians milling about, no weapons in evidence, seemingly peaceful, when suddenly a young boy decides to be a patriot. Within minutes, the friendly crowd turns into a murderous mob.

Quintillus knew the danger I was in when I sent him away with the men. I could tell from the look on his face. It was the same on the day we went into Circus Maximus instead of up to Caesar Augustus's palace. 'Don't be a fool, Lucius,' his glance had told me. And yet, there was admiration there, too.

Are my actions fatuous or courageous? This question will be answered in just a few minutes. The time it takes to distinguish the valiant from the craven can be just seconds...

During my formative education, I had been fairly single-minded. I'd wanted to be a soldier. But then my favorite Greek tutor had introduced me to philosophy—to his beloved Stoicism.

To wealthy Roman families, the *Grammaticus* could be taught well by Romans, but a good education presumed a foundation in philosophy—and that required a Greek tutor. Demetrius had been my favorite. Patient, skilled, and most importantly, a

lover of learning, Demetrius had known precisely how to win the heart and mind of a twelve-year-old Roman boy: immersion in the battle of Thermopylae and the feats of the Spartan commander, Dienekes. In this chapter of history, 300 Spartans held off a Persian army of close to a million men.

As I watched the crowd around me grow larger and more restless, I could hear Demetrius quoting a soldier imploring Dienekes: “The Persian soldiers are so numerous that when they fire, the mass of their arrows blocks out the sun.”

Laughing Dienekes replied, “Good, then we’ll have our battle in the shade.”

At the approach of the Jewish religious leaders, I sprang off the column and pulled myself to my full height. I did not consider myself a tall man, but next to these Jews, I felt gigantic.

We make a most colorful pair, Caiaphas and I. I wonder if he is sweating as profusely as I under those three layers of cloth?

Striding forward until I was practically on top of the man, I extended my right hand. “Hello Caiaphas. My name is Lucius Pontius Pilate. Emperor Tiberius has appointed me the new Prefect of Judea.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

OUTSKIRTS OF DELPHI

Claudia Procula

We had been traveling for two weeks and three days and I could sense a change in the air that could only mean we were getting close to Delphi. I knelt on the wooden bench of the carriage in order to extend the upper half of my body out of the small, high window.

“Claudia, get down from there or—”

Just as the words left Sabina’s lips, the carriage jolted to the side, tipping about forty-five degrees. I tumbled out the window and landed on my head hard. *We must have hit a sizable boulder.*

I was lying next to the carriage with several good-sized sharp rocks digging into my back. I blinked several times to try and make Sabina’s four eyes turn back into two. As I started to sit up, I felt a hand press me back down from behind. It was not Sabina’s for she stood in front of me.

“*Damnum...despoinis mou!* I fear you have suffered damage to your brain...perhaps a concussion. If you check the back of your head, you’ll feel a very large, and I suspect painful swelling. One that is growing. Please take your time rising. If

you'll allow me to assist you..."

I recognized the voice. It was the soldier I had helped with the lame horse, addressing me in both Greek and Latin.

Unusual, I thought.

Taking his advice, I accepted his strong hand and rose very slowly. The world spun and I fought back nausea. "You're an aesculapia?" I asked. It seemed clear from his remarks that the fellow had some type of medical training. Although I tried to focus on his answer, all I could hear was the sound of hammering—like an anvil on iron. What had begun as a minor headache was fast becoming all-consuming. The soldier's face was close enough to mine that I could see the stubble on his chin. His mouth was moving, but, for the life of me, I could not understand what he was saying. His face was spinning...he had four eyes...

I glanced back at the carriage, which remained on its side. Several soldiers seemed to be laboring over one of its wheels, which had clearly been badly damaged.

My aunt and uncle were nowhere to be seen, though, granted, just turning my head to look for them caused a distracting, fiery pain in my head. I closed my eyes for just a minute... and when I opened them, the pain was gone.

It seemed as if mere minutes had passed, but I no longer lay on rough stones but in a bed. A real bed. Carefully, I moved my head to see if the pain would return. When it did not, I cautiously rose to a sitting position and was surprised to find that I was in my nightclothes.

Where am I?

Cautiously, I swung my legs over the side of the bed, stood, staggered a little, then steadied myself. I walked gingerly over to a good-sized window, which was shuttered against the sun. I unlatched the shutters and opened them wide but no sun came in—just chilly mountain air. It was past nightfall. I had been asleep for much longer than a few minutes.

When my eyes adjusted, I could see the peaks of Mount Parnassus in the moonlight. I imagined that I could see the oracular shrine at Delphi and hear the song of the underground river at the Castalian spring, though it was not really possible to do either at that moment. I felt as if I could stand in front of that window, breathing that hyper-oxygenated air for the rest of my life.

I was home.

Claudia, breathe deeply. Make this last. Bathe each cell in the sacred air, and store up enough of it to last the rest of your life.

I was just fifteen, How could I possibly know that I would come back to this place? That I would die here, like an animal returning to its den?