

Claudia,

Wife of

PONTIUS PILATE

a n o v e l

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To the women who,
with love, finesse, and courage,
stand behind their man,
even in adverse circumstances.



1

AD 24 REGGIO

“Who is my father?”

Claudia was sitting with her grandmother on a stone bench in the garden reviewing her Latin. It wasn’t the first time she had asked, but so far she had never received a satisfactory answer.

Scribonia sighed heavily. “You need to ask your mother that question.”

“I have and she won’t answer.” Her mother, Julia, ordered her out of the room whenever she persisted.

Her grandmother rose, her mouth prim with impatience. “I have things to attend to. Practice your words on your tablet.” Without a backward look, she hurried away.

Claudia frowned and put the wax tablet down on the bench. *Why don’t they tell me who he is?* She knew it was not Tiberius, her mother’s third husband. He had divorced her long before Claudia was born. She would find out somehow, she resolved, and reluctantly returned to her Latin.

With the question lingering in the back of her mind, it took little to distract her from her studies. A butterfly settled delicately on a leaf and fanned its wings, but the beautiful creature suddenly flew

off into the blue sky before she could capture it. A small lizard caught her eye and she watched the creature's quick spurts of movement until it disappeared over the wall. The pear that Medina, their Syrian slave, had given her looked delicious, so she took a bite and savored its sweetness.

The garden in the center of their villa, which had been a refuge for her as a small child, now seemed confining as she grew older. Now, on her twelfth birthday, she longed to see something of the outside world. The faint sounds of the city could barely be heard, muffled by the thick walls of the villa. It was more a prison than a home, for only their two slaves were allowed out to go to the market for food.

Why are we not allowed to leave the villa?

She knew from her grandmother that the town was called Reggio and it was far from Rome.

Her grandmother told her their living situation had been ordered by the emperor, Caesar Augustus, Claudia's grandfather. A shadowy figure she'd never met but, from her grandmother's description, feared.

"Our lives depend on his favor," Grandmother had divulged to her one day. As the years ticked by, her mother and grandmother grew more apprehensive when speaking of him.

Julia's soft laughter came from the atrium. The latest soldier was leaving. Claudia was old enough to know why they came. Julia ignored her mother's admonishments, but when they argued, Claudia, who had learned to move quietly and listen unobtrusively from the shadows of the latticed pergola, learned many things.

"Augustus has eyes and ears everywhere, Julia. Sooner or later there will be a reckoning. The soldiers put their careers and perhaps even their lives in jeopardy. Do you not care, daughter, about the consequences? What of your daughter?"

Julia sighed impatiently and waved a languid hand. "They are probably transferred to another post. Don't be so gloomy, Mater."

Scribonia shook her head and walked away.

It didn't seem to matter how often or strongly her grandmother

voiced her opinion, Claudia's mother brushed it off and did as she pleased.

Hearing voices, Claudia rose from the bench and slowly approached the atrium, her soft footsteps making no sound on the tile floor. They were arguing again.

"Julia, you are forbidden their company. Do you wish to be sent back to the island, or worse?"

"I should be allowed a little entertainment, Mater, seeing as we must spend day after boring day within this accursed villa."

"He could take his wrath out on the child. Only the gods know why he did not order her exposed to the elements when she was born. Obviously she is not the child of Tiberius. I'm asking again. Whose is she?"

Claudia held her breath, and stood in the shadows, watching them.

"Perhaps someone resourceful who bribed the soldiers guarding me."

"Sempronius Gracchus? He got himself exiled to the African coast for his efforts."

Julia shrugged and Scribonia pressed her case. "If you hadn't treated Tiberius the way you did, you wouldn't be here now."

"Tiberius was a harsh man, Mater." Julia nearly spat out the words. "All of Rome knew he and Vipsana were expecting their first child. Do you think he wanted to divorce her and marry me? Tiberius hated me and we were both miserable. When our infant son died, it was the end of any pretense of marriage."

Scribonia paused and regarded her daughter, her eyebrows raised. "It was your actions that caused your father to send the divorce papers in Tiberius's name. The letter Gracchus wrote to your father asking him to allow you to divorce Tiberius was his undoing. He was too ambitious and your father knew it. He had the choice of executing you for your adulteries or banishing you from Rome. Your father spared your life, but what kind of a life do you have?"

Julia waved a hand in frustration. "You didn't have to come, Mater."

"I petitioned Augustus because of the child, Julia, and I am your

mother. I felt you needed me after five years on Pandataria, that barren island. Be thankful he allowed you to come back to the mainland.”

Julia’s shoulders sagged. “That was lonely, but it is lonely here too.” She turned to her mother. “I’m sorry. It was a sacrifice for you to come.”

Scribonia reached out and put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, a rare sign of affection for the austere woman. “I worry about Claudia. What will become of her?”

Julia shook her head slowly. “I don’t know. She is his grandchild, whoever the father.”

“A common Roman soldier, not a man of nobility. Was it Gracchus?”

Julia didn’t answer. Scribonia’s gray eyes flashed. “Well, it is done and you have an illegitimate child.”

“Why should it matter now? My father has not contacted us or acknowledged her.”

“Julia, in three years Claudia will be old enough to be married. What then?”

“I don’t know.”

Scribonia gave a huff of exasperation, then noticed Claudia standing in the shadows, but didn’t acknowledge her as she hurried away. “I must see to the weaving.”

Claudia regarded her mother. Julia had dyed her hair a red-gold in the fashion of the day. The blue *stola* enhanced eyes that could twinkle like tiny stars when she was excited, yet brood darkly when she was angry. She was still beautiful. At meals her mother ate little, always priding herself on keeping her well-proportioned figure. As Claudia gazed at her now, she wondered if her mother was eating enough; her face had a gaunt look.

Julia turned and faced her daughter. “Spying on us again, Claudia?”

“I heard you and Grandmother from the garden.”

“Your grandmother worries about too many things.”

“Mater, it’s my birthday. I was wondering . . .”

“Speak up, child, I am not one of the gods that I can read your mind.”

“I would like a pet to keep me company. Please, Mater?”

Julia looked at her daughter thoughtfully. “A pet?”

“I’m too old for the other toys. I want something alive.”

Julia tipped Claudia’s chin up with her finger. “I don’t know, child. I will speak with Medina. Perhaps when she goes to the marketplace she can find something.”

They had been allowed two slaves when they came to the villa, a pauper’s household to be sure, but the women were grateful Augustus allowed the help. Medina did the cooking, looked after the house, and helped with the weaving of cloth for their clothes. Cato, from the African coast, had to do everything from repairs on the villa to taking care of the small garden.

Medina had been Claudia’s nurse since she was born. She would do anything for her. Claudia hurried to find their servant.

The slave listened and folded her arms. “Your mother does not consider costs. The allowance from your grandfather is small. It barely covers our needs. A pet would require food, *Dominilla*.”

“But it is my birthday and that is the only thing I want. I have no one to play with. It would be company.”

The servant’s face softened. “This is no life for a child. If your mother did not tell you no, I will see what I can find.”

Claudia hugged her. “You are so good, Medina.”

The woman gave her a skeptical look. “Don’t let your hopes rise too high.”

Claudia returned to the garden. Medina was thrifty. She would bargain for day-old vegetables and fruit, and upon rare occasion, fish, then prepare them as only she could into tasty dishes. Claudia was sure Medina would find a bargain for her pet too.

She sat on the bench, swinging her feet, and let the name Sempronius Gracchus sift through her mind. She liked the sound of the name. Perhaps he was her father, but remembering that he’d been banished to a distant post, she wondered, Would she ever meet him?