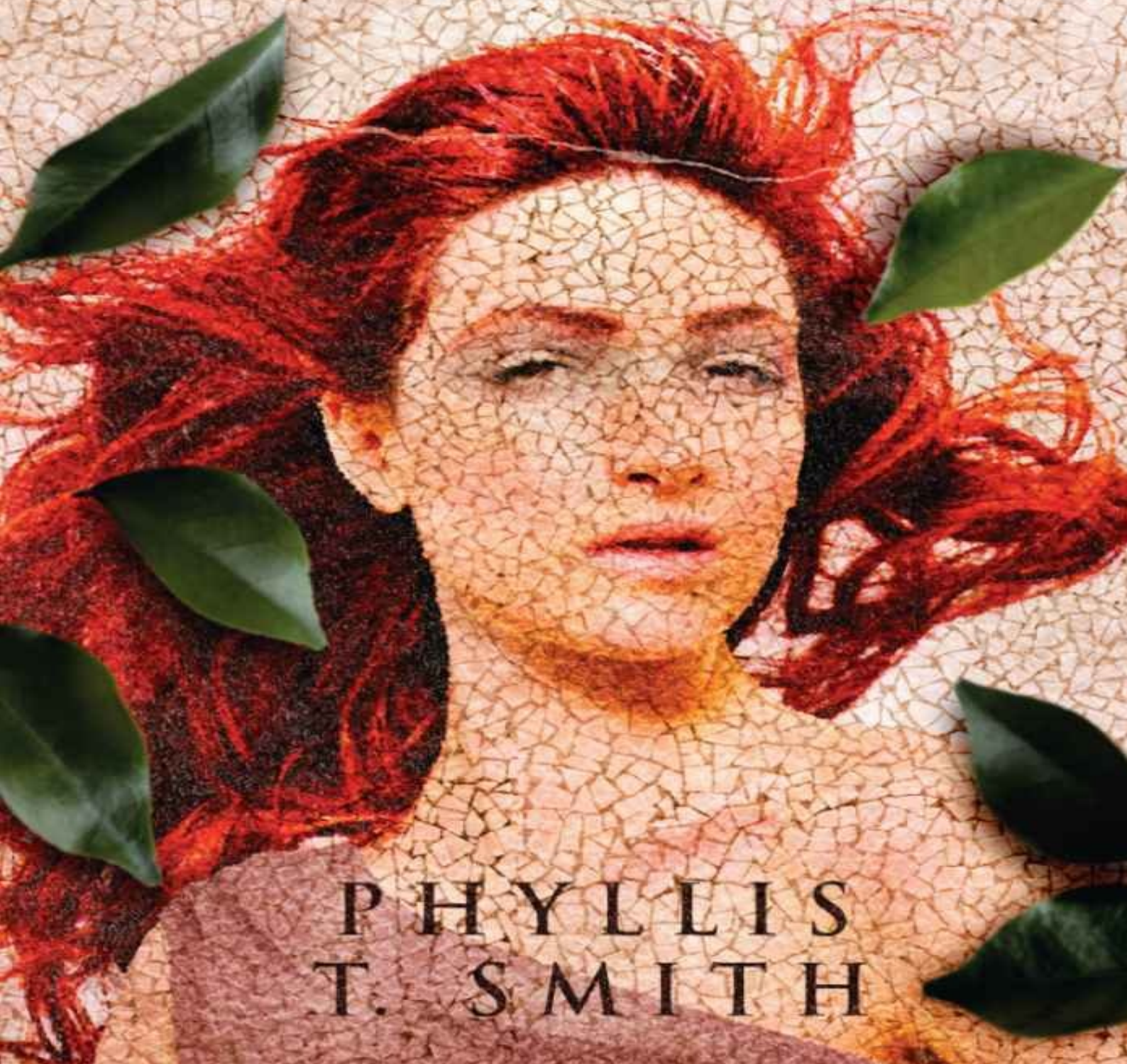


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This is a work of historical fiction. Apart from the well-known people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental.

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In memory of my mother

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*A woman preeminent among women, and who in all things resembled the gods more than
mankind, whose power no one felt except for the alleviation of trouble...*

—Velleius Paterculus

Leading Characters 

Livia Drusilla

Marcus Livius Drusus Claudianus, her father Alfidia, her mother

Secunda, her sister

Marcus Brutus, leader of the assassins of Julius Caesar Marcus Cicero, Rome's elder statesman
allied with the assassins Caesar Octavianus, Julius Caesar's posthumously adopted son
Tiberius Claudius Nero, a prominent military officer who marries Livia Little Tiberius and
Drusus, Livia's sons Julia, Caesar Octavianus's daughter

Rubria, wet nurse in Livia Drusilla's household Mark Antony, Julius Caesar's right-hand man
Octavia, Caesar Octavianus's sister

Cleopatra, queen of Egypt

Sextus Pompey, ruler of Sicily

Marcus Agrippa, Caesar Octavianus's friend and leading general Caecilia, Agrippa's wife

Gaius Maecenas, Caesar Octavianus's friend and advisor, patron of the arts



Chapter 1

I wonder sometimes how I will be remembered. As mother of my country, as men call me to my face, or as a monster? I know the rumors none dare speak aloud. Some believe I am a murderess many times over. They envy me, and they hate my power. In Rome, a woman's power, however circumspectly exercised, arouses revulsion.

Every death in my family circle has been laid at my door. People claim I am adept in the use of poisons. Oh, I have transgressed. But not in the way they think. It is when I remember my youth that I find myself recoiling. Do I recoil when I think of him, my beloved? No. But I paid a price in my soul, for loving him.

Old age can be a deceiver. My knees ache when I walk, but if I sit still, I do not feel so different from the girl I was. I tell myself I am the same. Then I glance down at my hands resting on the saffron folds of my stola, and I see blue veins under skin that is almost translucent. I cannot evade physical reality. And yet I believe I remain, in some essential way, the person I was at fifteen or twenty. Today I am called by the honorific Julia Augusta, but inside of me the girl Livia Drusilla still lives. Certainly, the decisions that girl made long ago shaped who I am now.

The time is approaching when I must move aside to make room for other guests at the banquet of life. It is necessary that I prepare to explain myself before the gods. Above all, I must be ready to account for the young woman I was.

My beloved wrote a record of his deeds for others to read. Of course he obscured distasteful truths. But I will write the story of my youth in a cipher only I know. I will be honest. There is no point in lying to the gods.

It will take courage to remember the days when I was Livia Drusilla. I wonder if I can do it without flinching.



The murder that shook the ground on which we walked, the murder all Rome remembers—I knew about it days before it happened.

I saw three men disappear into my father's study, and then I heard nothing, not even a bee buzz of conversation. What could they be doing in there if not talking?

I was borne forward by burning curiosity. Not the random inquisitiveness of a child; I had passed my fourteenth birthday. I wanted to learn every bit I could about the world in which my father moved, that of men who wielded power. I knew I could never enter that world, but it drew me as the sky draws a young bird.

Father's study was separated from the atrium by only a long curtain of heavy wool, dyed the color of raspberries. I tiptoed toward the curtain, so close that my face almost touched the rough fabric. I stood still, listening, and to my amazement heard not a sound.

I was used to hearing men's boisterous conversations coming from the study. Why would they be so quiet now? Were they telling secrets inside? My sister and I would whisper to each other. Our servants often whispered too. Whispering was something girls and slaves did, not men like my father.

I stood still, straining my ears to hear. At first, there was silence. Then a voice came, low but audible. "Not just him."

Another voice: "How many deaths would satisfy you, Tiberius Nero?"

The first voice, again: "As many as it takes to make us safe. I assure you I'm not bloodthirsty, but we're staking our lives here. Let's not behave like fools."

"Proscriptions again?"

Proscriptions. Before I was born, in the dictator Sulla's time, men's names had been posted on a wall—names of those who opposed him, or whose relatives or friends did, as well as those who had amassed enough wealth to arouse envy, or did anything else to draw suspicion or hostility from Sulla and his circle. Once their names went on the wall, these men were hunted down like wild beasts.

Father's voice rose, full of resolve and so much distaste he forgot to speak softly. "I won't have it. And Brutus won't have it. It's bad enough that we must put one man to death without trial." The voices dropped again.

A shiver ran through me. Because already I knew almost everything. I knew there was to be an assassination, and who was to die, and that my father was part of the plot.

Father lacked a son, and I was the elder of his two daughters. He had always shared much more of his mind with me than might have been expected with a girl child. He would speak about distant wars and kingdoms, and I would see the farthest reaches of the empire through his eyes. Or he would tell me his assessment of one public figure or another. He often voiced his discontent. He had been born into one wealthy and powerful noble family, adopted into another, and had always expected to serve in public office. In the past he had held important military and governmental posts. But under Julius Caesar's rule, he could play no role in Rome's government, at least none in accord with his principles.

When I was small, he spoke to me of political matters just to ease himself, I think. Sometimes when I asked him a question, he would give me a surprised smile, as if he was astonished that I absorbed everything he said. As I grew older, he came to expect my questions.

Father talked often of liberty and the right form of government. Caesar, he said, was not just a dictator—that was an honorable office, circumscribed by law—but a tyrant. Five years ago he had

ignited a civil war, and seized power. He had overturned the supremacy of the Senate and done just as he pleased. In his arrogance, Caesar had even renamed one of the months of the year—the most beautiful summer month—Julius, after himself. Lately his supporters, at his instigation, had begun demanding he don a crown and call himself king. I knew that Father believed that the Republic was being destroyed by this one man. He had not, however, intimated to me that he and his friends intended to act.

I see myself staring at the curtain, straining to hear more, a slender, red-haired girl with dark eyes too large for my face—a face now drained of color. The fact that Caesar was to die did not appall me. I had been taught to regard him as Rome's enemy, and I had never met him. I had only watched him from a distance as he rode down the Sacred Way in triumph, wearing a faint, ironic smile as he listened to the people's cheers. But I understood my father's danger. Caesar would not forgive an attempt on his life.

Perhaps I made some small noise without realizing it, or touched the curtain and caused it to move. One of the men in the study sensed my presence and ripped the curtain aside. My heart jumped. Father's friends stared at me with horrified expressions.

Father looked startled and embarrassed but said hastily, "Don't be concerned about the child. She will tell no one."

"Gods above!" This from Tiberius Nero, the youngest man present. "We're babbling to too many people. Now your daughter knows? This is absurd."

Another of the men, a white-haired senator, his toga trimmed with purple, gazed into my eyes. "Child, what did you hear?"

The gravity with which he spoke terrified me. I could not swallow and barely managed to whisper, "I think...you are going to kill Caesar."

The senator's face hardened. He looked as if he wished to strike me dead to assure my silence.

"Be easy, my friends," my father said. "It will go no further. Will it, Livia Drusilla?"

I stood hunched with fear and shame, but his addressing me so formally, by my full name, made me straighten my spine. "I will say nothing," I said.

"If she should talk—" Tiberius Nero began.

"But she won't," Father said. "She has given us her word. I assure you my daughter is neither a liar nor a fool."

Tiberius Nero looked at me the way men do at slaves offered for sale. "Is this—?"

"Yes, my firstborn," Father said.

"Ah," Tiberius Nero said.

I disliked his eyes on me. I stared back, my chin raised. After a moment, he glanced away.

He was a tall man with a sharp nose and watery eyes. At that time he was thirty-eight years old. I had never seen him before. The other two men present were longtime friends of my father. They gazed at me searchingly, trying, I suppose, to guess if I had sense enough to keep their secret.

All three left with uneasy expressions. When they were gone, my father put an arm around me. "Now, daughter, it's wrong to eavesdrop on men's conversations. Haven't your mother and I raised you better than that?"

Close to tears, I turned my head and pressed my face against his shoulder. I hated it when he rebuked me, though he always did it gently. "Oh, Father—"

"Shhh."

I lowered my voice. "I'm afraid for you."

"You needn't be." Father spoke in a whisper. "I won't strike a blow. Only senators will take part. I merely stand ready, as several others do, to assume a post of official authority when the way

is cleared. That's not very heroic or dangerous, is it?"

—I whispered back, "~~But you're part of a plot to kill the most powerful man in Rome. If it fails, you'll be in great danger.~~" Horrible imaginings filled my mind: Caesar ordering Father's execution or, because our family was a noble one, sending him a dagger and a note, *Salvage your honor*.

"The plot won't fail," Father said.

"I think you will be in danger even if it doesn't fail. Haven't I heard you say the people love Caesar? Surely he has friends who will want to avenge him?"

"Just see that you don't speak of this, and all will be well." He squeezed my shoulder. "Tiberius Nero..."

"Yes, Father?"

"He was Caesar's officer. But he has come over to our side. A fine fellow, of excellent birth. He is actually a second cousin of mine."

I said nothing.

"You will marry him."

In the course of things, Father was bound to find me a husband in the next year or two, so an announcement of this kind was to be expected. Yet a wave of dismay swept over me. I blurted out my first thought. "You are giving me to him to induce him to turn traitor to Caesar?"

"Of course not. What a thing to say!" Father avoided meeting my gaze.

I knew what I surmised was true, at least to a degree. I was part of the inducement—that is, my dowry was, and the privilege of an alliance with my father. But to say outright that he would wed me to a man as a bribe for abandoning his loyalty—that was wrong. It was crude and stupid of me to speak of such a matter with blunt honesty.

In those days, I often uttered foolish truths. My mother struggled in vain to break me of this habit, with a birch rod. Father was far more lenient. He would chuckle sometimes at what I said and suggest that I give a matter more thought. He even seemed delighted when some words of mine could make him pause and think.

The study was a special place for me; it was where Father and I had our best talks. It always smelled faintly of the preservative oil used on the parchment scrolls. Two of the walls held shelves of Father's favorite books—volumes of history and political philosophy and accounts of the lives of men who had fought for the Republic. On another wall was a magnificent mural, depicting the Battle of Zama. A corner niche held a bust of Cincinnatus, that selfless patriot who saved Rome from invaders, then immediately gave up power. In this study, I always felt so valued, so close to my father.

My stomach tightened because I had displeased him, the one person in the world I most wanted to please. "Are you angry at me?" I asked.

For answer, he kissed me on the forehead. "Run along, child."

I started out of the study, but another thought came to me. I turned. Father was leaning over his writing table, looking down at some document—a muscular man with iron-gray hair, our family's rock.

I knew I ought to keep silent. I had already given him cause to reproach me. Fear gnawed at me, though, and I ached for reassurance, so I walked back and whispered in his ear, "Father, who will govern Rome when Caesar is dead?"

"The Senate. Who else?"

"But you always say the Senate has failed to govern. We have had bloodshed for nearly a hundred years. Won't there be more of that if Caesar dies?"

"The Senate will govern justly now and command the people's loyalty. Marcus Brutus is an able and upright man. He will lead us."

Brutus was an important figure in the Senate. Moreover, he was directly descended from the man who, centuries ago, had led the successful revolt against Rome's evil king, Tarquin. His ancestor had, more than anyone, been responsible for the founding of the Republic. It was natural that Caesar's opponents looked to him for leadership now.

"No more talk of this. Now run along, Livia."

I started to go, but then turned. The more personal meaning of the day had just begun to seem real. "Tiberius Nero—is it absolutely necessary that I marry him?"

"Why, I've promised you to him, child."

"You could tell him you changed your mind. Couldn't you?"

"I've given him my word."

"Father, I don't like him."

"Don't like him? You don't even know him. You're beginning to make me truly angry, Livia. Now—" He made a shooing motion with his hands.



I ran out to the garden. Tears burned my eyes. How could Father give me to Tiberius Nero? I'd felt an immediate distaste for the man. He had gazed at me as if he were inspecting a slave, and when I had returned his stare, he glanced away, giving me no personal acknowledgment at all.

What did Father mean by saying Tiberius Nero was a fine fellow? Father's exact words were *A fine fellow, of excellent birth*. As far as I could tell, if his birth was excellent, nothing else about him was. Not his looks, not his manner. I remembered the snatch of conversation I had overheard. The man had been advocating proscriptions, hadn't he? He would condemn men for their associations and opinions, just to protect himself. *How many killings would satisfy you, Tiberius Nero?* he had been asked. His answer: *As many as it takes to make us safe*. Was that how a fine fellow spoke?

Our garden was like a huge courtyard, the heart and focal point of the house, which surrounded it on four sides. Here, where no street noises penetrated, one could almost believe one was not in Rome but in some bucolic setting. Now, early in March, a few flowers had begun to bud, hinting at the garden's coming springtime glory. I had sought this place as a refuge. At least for a few moments, I could be by myself and sort out my feelings.

Nothing that had happened before to me had prepared me for the blow I had just suffered. It seemed Father had told me I did not matter to him. He had bartered me away, and then dismissed me. The only worse fate than finding out that Father did not care about me was losing him entirely—and I risked that if the plot against Caesar was discovered.

A statue of Diana stood by the little pool near the garden's north side. The sculptor had depicted the goddess as a huntress and had painted her in lifelike colors, with hair the shade of wheat and eyes the gray of storm clouds. She looked like a girl of my age graced with divine freedom. Wearing a tunic that stopped above her knees, she stepped forward, holding a bow in her hand.

People said that of all the Olympians, Diana had the most tender love for the people of Rome. She never seemed as remote and out of reach to me as other gods and goddesses.

I glanced around to make sure that I was alone in the garden, then approached Diana's statue and held out my hands, palms up in supplication. I whispered, "Goddess, I have no sacrifice to give you. But I promise you a gift—soon, very soon. I beg you, whatever happens to Caesar, please,

please keep my father safe from harm. And please make it so I don't have to marry Tiberius Nero."

~~—A moment later, a slave came looking for me, sent by my mother to fetch me to dinner. I knew Mother would be angry if I did not hurry, and so I went inside and paused only to wash my hands in the copper bowl at the entrance to the dining room. The first course had been set on the central table. My mother and father reclined on couches, already eating. My eleven-year-old sister, Secunda, perched on the dining room's third couch. I sat down beside her.~~

Mother, as always, was impeccably dressed for dinner. She wore an emerald necklace that my father had bought her at great cost, and she had her flame-colored hair piled on her head in a crown of ringlets. She possessed a natural poise and a gift for always arranging her body in an attractive way when she reclined, so her stola fell in elegant folds. People said I looked like her, though only our coloring was the same. I certainly had not inherited her grace.

"Well, daughter," she said, "your father says he has told you the news."

I glanced at Father. His jaw tightened, and he gave me a meaningful look. I felt he was silently reminding me of my promise not to speak of the plot to kill Caesar.

I understood that Mother referred to my coming betrothal, nothing else. Returning her gaze, I said, "Father has told me that I must marry." I could not keep myself from adding, "But I hope he will change his mind." I spoke in a mild voice and looked down at my plate, into which a slave was ladling fish stew.

"And why do you hope he will change his mind?" Mother asked.

"Because I do not like Tiberius Nero," I said.

Beside me, my sister gave an uneasy giggle.

"Alfidia," my father began, addressing Mother.

"No, please, Marcus, why not let Livia talk? Usually her chatter pleases you. Livia, I'm sorry to hear that you do not like your future husband. Can you tell me how he has fallen short?"

"I don't think he is a man of character," I said. "He switched sides, and that doesn't speak well for his loyalty. And he talks like a coward."

"You misjudge him," Father said. "To see one's error and come to follow better counsel in politics is not disloyalty but wisdom. You are right that Tiberius Nero is cautious, but who can blame him in these times? He is a courageous man, a fine soldier."

"I don't believe it." I kept my eyes lowered, but I was contradicting Father on the basis of no knowledge at all.

"Why, Caesar has repeatedly commended him for his bravery in battle. And Caesar—whatever else we might say of him—knows how to judge men."

"Does he?" I raised my eyes. "Is that why he keeps Brutus at his right hand?"

Father looked stricken. Probably for an instant he thought I was about to speak of Brutus's involvement in the plan to kill Caesar. Mother saw his dismay but did not understand its cause. "You see?" she said to my father. "This is what comes of spoiling her. Forgive me, but you have only yourself to blame. You talk to her of great matters and puff up her pride. And you make excuses when she disobeys me. Is it any wonder that she feels she can even speak rudely to her father at the dinner table?"

"Father," I said, "you taught me that without honesty there can be no honor. I'm only speaking the truth." I added, with more humility, "What seems to me to be the truth."

"Go to bed," Mother said. "You don't deserve dinner."

I looked at my father in appeal. I didn't care about dinner. Food would have sat in my stomach like a stone. But I wanted him to defend me.

He said nothing.

"Go," Mother said.

I rose and ran to my bedchamber, where I threw myself across my sleeping couch and wept.



Gradually, the sunlight entering from the small window in my chamber faded. By the time night came, I had stopped crying. I sat on my bed and looked out the window at the crescent moon, wondering how long I would be able to live at home before I had to marry Tiberius Nero. I hoped our betrothal would be lengthy, but I doubted that it would be. Many girls married at just my age.

The idea of marriage was not in itself frightening. But nothing about Tiberius Nero appealed to me, and I dreaded marrying him. I asked myself if there was a way for me to escape. What if at the wedding I raved like a madwoman or fell to the ground and began frothing at the mouth as if I had the falling sickness? Surely Tiberius Nero would not want to marry me then. Or suppose I refused to say the words of consent at the ceremony, or spat the consecrated cake out of my mouth? Then there could be no marriage. I thought of these possibilities to comfort myself, and tried to convince myself that the marriage was not inevitable. Then I lay down and cried myself to sleep.

I had a very strange dream.

I climbed up steps of polished red stone and heard, of all things, a chicken clucking. At my feet was a hen that gazed up at me with bright, curious eyes. Though she had blood on her feathers, she seemed unhurt. She disappeared, and I found myself walking down a curving path into an enormous, lush garden filled with flowers in full bloom. In the center of the garden stood a huge statue of Diana. As I watched, the statue turned into a being of flesh and blood and leaped down from its pedestal, moving with the grace and strength of a lioness.

Diana's living face was far more beautiful than any sculpture, and it shone like a lantern. "I am the protector of the Roman people," the goddess said. "You promised me a gift. Do you know what it will be?"

I shook my head. "Perhaps a lamb?"

She stroked my hair. "Wait. In time you will know."



The next evening my parents attended a dinner party at the home of friends, and my sister and I ate alone. I picked at my food. Even the oysters I ordinarily loved had lost all flavor. Seeing how miserable I was, Secunda said, "Think, when you marry you'll be in charge of your own house just as Mother is. You'll like that."

"I won't like being married to Tiberius Nero," I said.

Later in my bedchamber, I reviewed part of Aristotle's *Politics*, which I had begun to study with my tutor. I lay down the parchment scroll on my little writing table only after I heard Mother and Father arrive home. Mother always scolded me if I stayed up late reading by the light of an oil lamp. Thinking of what Secunda had said, I imagined being a married woman, able to read until dawn if I wanted. But no, I would have to go to bed with my husband, wouldn't I?

I was not ignorant about the physical part of marriage. In fact, I had once walked in on our steward and one of the slave girls as they copulated standing up in the kitchen, their clothes bunched up to their waists. I remembered how their legs looked, hers pale and slim, his dark and hairy. The girl had been bent over a table, and the man grunted with pleasure. I was repelled. What I saw was

like the coupling of two animals. I did not want to believe it had anything to do with me, that I could ever be in the girl's place.

My own longings were different, shrouded in a dreamy mist. I imagined a young man's face, beautiful as if sculpted by Phidias, the outward sign of spiritual perfection. He and I would share the union of two pure souls, the kind of virtuous love Plato wrote about.

Foolishly, I had imagined one day marrying a paragon and experiencing an exalted love. Now I knew I never would. Instead I would marry Tiberius Nero.

Just as I was about to blow out the lamp's small flame and get into bed, I heard a knock on my bedchamber door. Father entered. "Come to the atrium with me," he said.

I draped a shawl over my sleeping tunica and obeyed him. Only one tiny lamp illuminated the atrium. It was set on the altar near the entranceway, before the statuette of the Lar, the god protector of our family.

Father walked to the tall, wide cabinet next to the altar and threw open its door. Shelves held wax portrait masks—rows of stern male faces.

"You know whose portraits these are, don't you, Livia?"

"They're of your ancestors."

"And yours," Father said. "Generation after generation, they held high office. Some even led armies that fought for Rome. Their blood flows in your veins."

Father often spoke to me of the history of Rome and the roles our own forebears had played in it. His stories always stirred me and made me feel as if I knew the men who had come before us and shaped our destiny. I would wish it were possible for me to join the line of heroes he told me about. But how could a female perform great deeds for Rome?

"Livia, ever since you were small, I have known you were unusual." Father touched my head, and I could see the glint of his teeth in the lamplight as, for a moment, he smiled. "Some people would say I have given you a rather odd upbringing, but it never seemed wrong to treat you as a reasonable being like myself, or to encourage you to think. It is possible that one day you will be a very wise woman. See that you are good as well as wise, will you?"

"Yes, Father," I said, warmed by his words.

"Perhaps Tiberius Nero is not the man you deserve," he said.

"Then—" I was about to throw my arms around Father, to shower him with thanks for setting me free.

"I do not say he is not a good man. I say it is possible—possible—he is not the man I would pick for you if my hands were untied. Listen to me, my daughter. I will not command you but talk to you as if you were my equal. These are not normal times. We must strike for liberty now. Nothing less than Rome's future is at stake. It's necessary to bind Tiberius Nero close. He is one of Caesar's most admired officers, with many friends among the soldiers. His allegiance matters. Do you understand?"

I pressed my lips together and, looking down, nodded.

"If you were my son, and I asked you to pick up a sword and fight for Rome even if it might cost you your life, would you say no to me?"

I shook my head.

Father put his hand under my chin and raised my face. He stroked a lock of my hair back from my forehead where it had tumbled. "I think you would ride off to battle very bravely. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"What you can do for our cause is marry this man."

"I would rather die in battle," I said.

As soon as I had spoken those words, I knew they were a lie. Fight in battle? I would do that willingly. But die? Even a heroic death did not appeal to me.

Father smiled sadly.

A thought pierced me: I would never die in battle, but he might. Young as I was, I perceived that the death of Caesar, the man who held the state together, might unleash chaos. All sorts of unknown perils lay ahead. If marrying Tiberius Nero could help keep the ground firm under Father's feet, I would do it.

"I will marry Tiberius Nero," I said. I made myself add, "If it's for the liberty of Rome, I'll do it gladly."

Father bent and kissed me. After a moment, he said, "You must not only marry him but be a good influence on him. His allegiance has been doubtful in the past. But if he cares for you—if you serve him and are a loving wife to him and bind him to you with ties of true affection—he may ask your opinion at a moment when it matters. Never be overbearing, but be his confidante and friend. Gently, gently. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes, Father."

Father gazed at me with pride and tenderness. "You will be the mother of noble sons."



Chapter 2

On the morning of the Ides of March, my sister and I sat reading a Greek play with Xeno, our tutor. Antigone was about to be sealed alive inside her tomb. On the fourth finger of my left hand I wore a gold band—the betrothal ring that Tiberius Nero had sent me, in token of our coming marriage.

A slave entered the schoolroom and said that our father wished to speak to us at once, that an event of great importance had taken place. He added that our tutor was free to leave for the day. Xeno looked amazed to be dismissed in this abrupt fashion by a slave. Secunda, too, was astonished. Father never called us away from our lessons.

I felt sure that the event could only be an attempt to assassinate Caesar. My mouth went dry. Was Caesar dead? Or could the plot have failed? Might he still be alive, and ready to avenge himself on his enemies, including my father?

Mother stood with Father in his study. Father's hand rested on her shoulder. Mother looked as if the earth had split open beneath her feet.

"This is a great day, my daughters," Father said. "Word has come that Caesar is dead. The tyrant—the man who would be *king*—" Father's lip curled as he spoke that last word, anathema to Romans. "He has been put to death by members of the Senate." Dispassionately, he told us some of the details of Caesar's death, then glanced round at my mother, my sister, and me. "You three must stay inside. There may be upheaval. I'll go down to the Forum and see how matters stand."

"You should stay inside too," Mother said.

Father shook his head. "My place is at Marcus Brutus's side." Without another word, he left us.

Mother said there was no point in being idle while we waited for news, and she led my sister and me into the spinning room. All three of us got busy spinning wool. Even as I worked, fear

gripped me. “I wish Father hadn’t gone out,” I said. “There will surely be uproar. The common people loved Caesar.” They admired him, I knew, for his military victories, and he had wooed them with public games and festivals and with largesse. In particular, he was the hero of the poor. By contrast, the Senate—six hundred men appointed for life, mostly aristocrats—had little claim on the people’s love.

“If the rabble riot, I hope the Senate will deal firmly with them,” Mother said. “They require an iron hand.”

“If they riot, will they come up the Palatine?” Secunda asked.

“I don’t know,” Mother said.

We lived on the Palatine Hill, the premier dwelling of Rome’s aristocratic families, and our house was on the north side, overlooking the Forum. If the common people sought to avenge Caesar, they might surge up the Palatine’s slope, into our neighborhood. I imagined them breaking into the house to vent their fury on us.

“Mother,” I said, “if I go outside and stand on the doorstep and look down the hill, maybe I’ll see something. I won’t be in danger if I just slip out for a moment and look.”

“Didn’t you hear your father say we must all stay inside?”

“But if only we could know what is happening!”

Mother forbade me to go out, but she dispatched our steward, Staius, to go to the Forum and gather news. After he had gone, she said, “Livia, your father’s friends killed no one but Caesar. They did not harm Mark Antony. Why do you think they let him live?”

“They did it to show that they are just and not vengeful.”

“But Antony was Caesar’s right-hand man, was he not?”

“Yes.”

“Your father is a wise and learned man,” Mother said, “but he can be too noble for his own good.” Her face tightened. “Gods above, the rest of them—the leaders—what if they are all too noble?”



I knew—as all Rome did—that Caesar had carried on a love affair and fathered a son by the queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. He continued to live with his Roman wife, Calpurnia, a plump matron I had seen carried through the streets in her litter. On the eve of his assassination, Calpurnia had a nightmare. She awoke in terror, convinced that her husband would not return from the next day’s Senate session alive. She begged Caesar to stay home, and he agreed. But the next morning Decimus Brutus—Marcus Brutus’s co-conspirator and distant cousin—arrived to escort Caesar to the Senate meeting. The assassins planned to strike that day, and Decimus feared that the plot would be discovered if there was a delay. So he pricked Caesar’s pride. How, he asked, could the ruler of Rome cower in his house because his wife had a bad dream?

In the end, Caesar went to the Senate session, held in Pompey’s theater. Inside the theater, a senator fell at Caesar’s feet and clutched at the folds of his toga like a desperate supplicant. Caesar tried to pull away, but before he could, the other conspirators set upon him. More than fifty men stabbed him, wounding each other in their frenzy. Many of them had fought against him in the last civil war and afterward received his mercy.

When Caesar lay dead, the assassins raced to the Forum. They held up their bloody knives and shouted, “Rome is free! Rome is free!”

People fled from them. Fear, not rejoicing, was the reaction of most of Rome's citizens. And we—my mother, sister, and I—felt fear, too.



“Oh, Mistress, Pompey's theater was set afire, and there are looters all over the market district,” Staius told my mother when he returned home. “They are smashing their way into houses and shops.”

“Board up our windows and nail the door shut!” Mother cried.

For a long time, the whole house reverberated with hammer blows. Mother, Secunda, and I stood near the entranceway. Four of the slaves nailed planks over the windows. I looked at Secunda. My sister's face had turned a milky white.

Anything could happen to us. The savage rabble might break into our home, and Father was not there to protect us. Who would? The slaves? They would flee. Law and order had broken down. We might be raped, murdered.

When the house was boarded up, the sudden silence seemed eerie. I felt like some small helpless beast in a hunter's snare. The sensation was new to me. Whatever Rome's political troubles, I had never before had cause to fear. We could do nothing but wait. Mother, Secunda, and I had no heart for spinning wool. We sat in Father's study and spoke little. Then, suddenly, we heard a tremendous banging on the front door.

Mother pulled Secunda and me into her arms and pressed our faces into her bosom, as if she wanted to shield us from the sight of what was coming, a crowd of killers bursting into our house. My nostrils filled with the scent of her perfume, and I could hear her racing heart.

I had an awareness of my own soft flesh, my vulnerable body. In my imagination, savage hands dragged me away from my mother. Enemies surrounded me on all sides, as Caesar had been surrounded. They violated me, and then stabbed me again and again with knives, just as Caesar had been stabbed. A well of fear swallowed me up.

Then I heard a familiar voice that almost sang with relief. “It's the master!” Staius called from the entranceway. “Take the nails out of the door! He's shouting to be let in!”

Mother released Secunda and me, rose, and smoothed her stola.

Soon Father was with us, saying that there had been some looting, rioting, and deaths, but the city was by and large peaceful now. The horrors we had conjured up seemed ridiculous. Secunda and I looked at each other and giggled. Even Mother laughed. But we were wrong to imagine that we were safe.



Caesar's funeral was strictly a political event; my mother, sister, and I did not go, but Father did. So did Marcus Brutus and Caesar's other assassins. “Will there be a funeral address?” I asked Father as we stood in the entranceway before he took leave of us. He wore a toga, its folds carefully arranged.

“Of course,” Father said. “That's customary. Caesar served Rome well in some respects. We will honor him for that.”

“Who will the speaker be?”

“Antony.”

I heard Mother draw in a sharp breath. “Are you saying, husband, that Antony will be allowed to give a speech to people in the Forum?”

An uneasy expression flickered across Father’s face. “That was Brutus’s decision. He put all the arrangements for the funeral in Antony’s hands.”

“But why?” Mother asked.

“To conciliate Antony.” Father spoke in a clipped voice. “Alfidia, Antony is no Caesar. He is a pleasure-loving fool, drunk half the time. He can be appeased. Brutus is right to smooth his ruffled feathers.”

Father always spoke Marcus Brutus’s name with deep respect. He had a reputation for integrity, and by some alchemy of personality, he inspired confidence in others much as Caesar had—though Brutus’s magic worked within a narrower, more select group.

After Father left for the Forum, Mother looked at me and said, “I met Antony once. He has small eyes, like a pig. My father used to say pigs are more cunning than dogs, but without a dog’s loyalty.”

“Mother, on Grandfather’s farm—” my sister began.

“Be quiet,” Mother said. “I’m not talking to you, you foolish child, I am talking to your sister. Go inside to your tutor.” She glanced at me. “You come into my sitting room.”

We went into the small alcove that Mother kept for her own private use. Like Father’s study, it was divided from the atrium by a curtain. There was a couch, and wall shelves holding rare Greek pottery, very old pieces that had come down to her from her own family. “Sit,” Mother commanded me.

I sat.

Mother sat on the couch beside me. “I have often thought,” she said, “that women are the only true adults in the world, and men are a species of children. When babies are born, when the sick are struggling for life, when the old die, you will see women about, but rarely men. Women carry the burden of the family’s survival on their backs. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“Yes,” I said, though I didn’t really. To me, it seemed all the world’s great matters were in men’s hands.

Mother brushed a loose lock of hair back from my face, no tenderness in the gesture. “Just look how messy your hair is. Do you even bother to glance in the mirror? And you almost a wife.” She grimaced. “I’ve never liked it that your father talks about politics with you. It’s a man’s game. Why you want to fill your head with it, I can’t imagine.”

“It’s important,” I said. When I talked to Father it was as if I were brought up to a mountaintop and looked out at an endless vista. By contrast, Mother oversaw the cooking of meals, the spinning of wool, and the sweeping of floors. Where was the excitement and the challenge in any of that? “Politics matters.”

“Does it? I think it’s mostly fools’ posturing.” Mother shifted her shoulders. “I’m sure Caesar was a terrible man, just as your father says. He wanted all the power in his own hands. Imagine, noblemen having to bow to another man, as if they were his slaves. Still—for him to have been slaughtered at a Senate session was very strange and unsettling. And now—why would Brutus let his main henchman address the people?” Her face tensed. “What is he thinking of?” She looked at me as if she expected me to pierce Brutus’s mind for her.

Father rarely discussed politics with Mother. She had never much wanted him to, as far as I could tell. Yet I think it rankled that I, not she, should share a part of her husband’s mind. Now feeling a threat coming toward her family from this sphere, she turned to me.

“Mother, there are men in politics whose greatest aim is to look exalted in their own eyes. It could be that Brutus is like that. To let Antony speak in public, with Caesar’s blood still wet, makes

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