

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

The Christian of the twenty-first century will be a mystic-one who has 'experienced' something or he will not be Christian.

Karl Rahner

Prologue

They were 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 (The 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. 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. At first, they resembled butterflies until our carriage drew close enough to see the scarves. I looked out the window to see some of the soft cloths puddling on the dirt streets only to be trampled by the next column of tightly grouped soldiers. The morning sun turned the helmets and shields of the marching men to a radiance so bright it could not be withstood by the naked eye. I closed my eyes tightly against the glare and in vain hopes that these familiar faces of the onlookers were just another dream. Terrified that when I reopened them, I would see those

same faces filled with hatred, mouths now 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 worlds. 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 over thirty days. The heat makes it almost impossible to sleep at night- it never cools off here.” Only midmorning and the temperature had to be over ninety. The fall weather in Rome had been glorious. So different from this unrelenting, insufferable heat.

Antonia was unfooled by either my reply or my attempt at a smile. I did not blame her. I knew the motion of my lips was more rictus than smile...that we were heading toward a doom of the kind the world had never seen. I knew that there was nothing I could do or say to stop it. Upon opening my eyes, 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 of 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 the words recited by Christians for the last thirty years, “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and died,” had terrorized me in my dream, echoing as I know they will, as I have seen in my visions, through the centuries. To be memorialized in something that will be called the ‘Apostles Creed.’

These slanderous claims, and all the others like them, no longer break my heart; but 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, 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 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 Demetrius and Sabina. Only they knew that I was the last Oracle. My true identity remained a secret to all others—although my husband speculated that to be the cause of my foreknowledge of so much.

I ask that you permit a conceit. This book will be told in two voices. My own and that of my husband. Perhaps that seems presumptuous? Or worse, specious? Near the end of his life, almost daily, my husband told me that I knew him better than he knew himself. And he talked incessantly about how close he had come to refusing the thunderous command of the Jews. When Lucius gave me his diaries, including the letters exchanged with Seneca, this book designed itself.

Could I have intervened? When the famed Stoic philosopher directed his every thought? Incited a hatred toward the Jews that cost him and the world no less than everything?

You decide.

CHAPTER ONE

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 a nanny’s arms and infused me with more knowledge than did my later classical 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, not many, God, was a certainty I shared with the Hebrews.

Too young. Absurd. Inconceivable.

I know. I think that too as I write these many years later. But the truth is this. By the time my kind adopted parents had decided I was old enough at nine to study philosophy, mathematics, rhetoric, classical Latin, and Greek, Sabina hired tutors. The best in Athens. And could not understand why they lasted just days.

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

I looked up from the scroll of Plato’s Republic I was reading. 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 would have 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 must have been over forty because she had been Mother’s older sister by ten years but her beauty remained. Sabina had competed in the Heraean Games twice and won laurel crowns each time for her long-distance marathon races. Her shape had changed little since those days. Her stola was dark violet with a light lavender shawl tied at her narrow waist with gold braid. A gold armband served as Sabina’s only jewelry.

Touching her long blonde braid, her expression and her voice softened. “Why do these men quit tutoring you Claudia? What happens to make them want to leave so suddenly? Alejandro could not leave this home fast enough. It was almost as if he thought you...” Abruptly, she covered her mouth momentarily then let the long slender fingers drop back down to her side then Sabina closed her eyes and murmured the prayer I had heard 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. “The 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. Those turquoise eyes hardened into flint. “You have no right. Even with all of your mother’s gifts, *never...ever...* did she speak cruelly. Know this Claudia, utter one more viperous word, and you will be out of this house.”

Impossibly, her eyes grew 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 was the supernatural knowledge that I had done nothing to merit. I also learned that once loathsome, pitiless words were uttered, no power in this world or in another could cauterize the wounds they made. They bled into eternity.

Lucias Pontius Pilate

CHAPTER TWO

I was born to be a warrior. Until I donned the tunic, body armor and shoulder plates of the legionnaire, I had 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. Over one hundred Roman soldiers had died from exposure and exhaustion before we met a single German. Stupidity. Incompetence. Inexcusable in a leader. My anger upon finally meeting our enemy whipped my speed, tactics, and deadliness into something manic, crazed, unstoppable. At the end of that first day, outnumbered by three to one, exhausted and improperly clothed, the Germans had fled. And the live Roman soldiers were cheering my name.

“LUCIAS!”

“PONTIUS!”

“PILATE!”

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

Was it destiny too that caused Tiberius to ride into the blood-soaked German soil just as the men had hauled me on top of a human litter shouting my name? And was it fate that caused the next emperor of Rome to smile. Then reach behind him to grab a laurel wreath, remove my helmet from my head and replace it with the wreath? Wordlessly crowning me as Tribune, on my very first day of battle. All while the men were shouting my three names so loudly that the trees of that forest shook?

Had I known Claudia then, and had she told me of my future, would I have turned away from the rapid rise in the best army in the world? Could I have become a lawyer like my brother? Or a physician like my uncle?