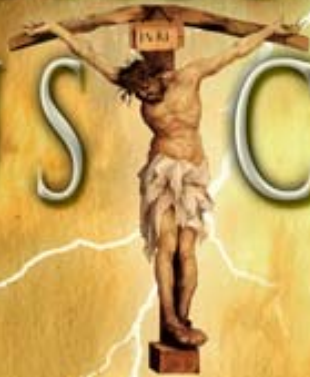


THE CONSPIRACY
TO ASSASSINATE
JESUS CHRIST



A NOVEL OF HISTORICAL FICTION & RELIGIOUS SUSPENSE

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CHAPTER 1. ROME: SEPTEMBER 14, 14 A.D.

“Governing Rome is like holding a wolf by the ears,” Tiberius raged, pacing about the stateroom floor of his magnificent imperial palace on the Palatine Hill in Rome. “In four days the Senate will confirm me as emperor and now I’m confronted with this!”

Architecturally brilliant, resplendent in art, the center of trade, religion and government for the world’s largest empire, Rome was the largest city in the known world and already more than seven centuries old; and at its center, Emperor Tiberius Claudius Nero. With him was his only son, Drusus, a relatively plain-looking twenty-seven year old, notoriously known for his quick, and often violent, temper.

“What are your instructions, father?” Drusus asked evenly.

“Mutiny is infectious. It must be stopped before it spreads to the other legions. You have full powers, taking careful consideration of Sejanus’ considerable experience and advice, to do whatever is required to remedy the situation.”

“Nothing more specific?”

Tiberius turned his back to Drusus and threw his hand in the air dismissively, “Coerce or conquer, minimize damage, secure the frontier lines, redistribute the leadership, restore order, punish the offenders. You know the procedure.”

“Yes, actually I do know the procedure, and it confounds me as to why you insist that I take Sejanus along. I do not require his assistance or his advice.”

“Such is the brashness of youth,” his father replied.

“But Sejanus is nine years younger than me and he just became sub-prefect of the Praetorian Guard. He is not qualified to—”

Tiberius spun around. “I shall decide who is qualified. Age is not the only arbiter of experience. He has been a part of the imperial family since his birth and repeatedly proven his administrative and military prowess. He is immensely clever and his loyalty to me, to us, is beyond question.”

Tiberius went silent for a moment, and then continued, softer this time. “He has provided me many times with wise counsel.” Almost an afterthought he added, “And he is General Blaesus’ nephew. That may count for something when speaking with the mutinous legions.”

“You do not trust my abilities,” Drusus pouted.

Tiberius walked over and put his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Drusus, you are the prince of the imperial family, second in line to the throne after Germanicus. Sejanus is not an heir-apparent and never will be. I want him there to help you, not undermine you. Do what I ask and make good use of his advice. He is destined to follow in your greatness, and you will be well served by him, as Augustus was by Agrippa.”

“I do not like the people he surrounds himself with. That man Pilate, his aide, is vindictive, arrogant, stubborn, and cruel. Are men not judged by the company they keep?”

“Yes, one’s company often reflects one’s character, but this is business, Drusus, not personal. The administration of the empire requires many talents. Sejanus obviously feels Pontius Pilate has useful qualities.” Before Drusus could respond, Tiberius added, “Now go and ready the contingent to recover my provinces and legions.”

Tiberius had been raised in the gloom of his larger-than-life stepfather, Octavian, the first emperor of Rome, later called Augustus. Now fifty-five years old and embittered by

decades of obscurity, Tiberius had grown into a cynical, dour man. He despised the intrigues and obsequious manners of the nobility who praised him now as emperor, the same men who had once scorned him.

Reciprocally, the nobility hated Tiberius for his unpredictable moods and cryptic wishes over the years that had led many a person to ruin or death. He demanded servility from all around him, and then dismissed their pretentious fawning.

It was a dangerous time, not that any ambitious person close to any Roman emperor was ever safe; or the other way round, for that matter.

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Up until Julius Caesar had been declared dictator for life, the Senate had been the dominant force in Roman politics. Although it could make no laws, it nevertheless carried the effective force of law and strongly influenced legislation.

Senators were not elected but one could become a senator by meeting significant certain financial criteria and being assigned to one of the four main magisterial offices; quaestors, the lowest office, praetor, censors, and consul, the latter office comprising the empire's two chief magistrates.

The senators met in the Curia, or Senate House, which had already been a central fixture of the city of Rome for hundreds of years. The current Curia was been completed by Augustus after Julius Caesar began reconstruction to replace the building burned down in riots leading up to the civil war that established Caesar's dictatorial hold on the empire.

Underneath the impressively carved, complexly detailed wooden ceiling, rising over one hundred feet above the occupants, stood Tiberius, outlining his plans for addressing the Pannonian mutiny. The crisis was so critical to the security and future existence of the empire that almost all six hundred senators were in attendance, an extremely rarer occurrence, and sandwiched shoulder to shoulder on the three low marble tiers that rose to the left and right of the central multi-colored stone walkway.

The tier closest to the central walkway was occupied by former consuls, the middle tier by praetors, less senior senators, and other middle-level officials and the upper tier by newly admitted senators and others of the lowest ranks. At the end opposite from the main doors, on each of the two highest tiers, were permanently fixed two official marble curule chairs in which sat the two currently appointed consuls. At the same end on the central walkway was the emperor's chair, an exquisite construction of gold and ivory.

There was also no public gallery in the Curia and the general public was banned.

Tiberius concluded, "Rome is threatened by the very troops who swore to protect the empire from her enemies. The consequences of fifteen thousand angry veteran soldiers marching on Rome are too terrible even to contemplate."

Murmurs of agreement arose among the senators throughout the house.

"It is betrayal of the highest order and the mutiny must be put down swiftly, and with force, if necessary."

Tiberius then turned and exited the Senate floor without waiting for a response. On cue, the senators rose as one and applauded, exchanging nods of approval; a few shouting the emperor's praises.

"Bah! Senators; men fit to be slaves," he muttered under his breath as he left the venerable building to meet up with his newly formed mission team, soon to be dispatched to Pannonia. The contingent comprised leading men of State and two Praetorian cohorts strengthened with the emperor's personal German Guard, a considerable part of the

Praetorian cavalry, and a number of handpicked men from other cohorts; together, about twenty-four hundred men, all under the direction of his only son, Drusus. No one knew better than Tiberius the many dangers that lay just beyond the northern borders.

Considered by many to be one of Rome's greatest living generals, his campaigns in Pannonia, Illyricum, Rhaetia and Germany had laid the foundations of the northern frontier. The proximity of dangerous barbarian tribes, especially Quadi and Marcomanni across the Danube, required massive numbers of men and numerous limes or fortifications along the Roman side of the river to maintain the security of the empire's northern border.

The Roman Empire, comprising a population of about forty-five million, was controlled by an army, including auxiliaries, of about four hundred thousand men. Quartered just ten days' march from Rome in their summer camp in Pannonia were the VIII Augustus, IX Hispania and XV Apollinaris legions, all under the command of governor and General Junius Quintus Blaesus.

Combined with the four legions in neighboring Lower Germania and another four legions in Upper Germania, the eleven legions represented almost half of Rome's entire military might. It was the greatest concentration of power in the Roman Empire and, arguably, throughout the world.

Blaesus' three legions were now in revolt. With the very real threat of a mutiny spreading to the eight neighboring legions, the Roman Empire's entire northern frontier was virtually defenseless and open to attack from its fiercest enemies. Even more worrying to Tiberius, there was nothing to stop the capital from being sacked and ravaged by Rome's own unstoppable fighting force.

CHAPTER 19. JERUSALEM: FRIDAY APRIL 7, 30 A.D. - 12:00 A.M. (15 NISAN, 3790)

East of the wall of Jerusalem, near the foot of the Mount of Olives and beside the black brook of Kidron, was a garden enclosed by a small stone wall, the garden's name, Gethsemane, meaning 'oil press' in Aramaic.

Jesus and his disciples had just left the upper room of the guesthouse where Jesus announced over supper that one of his disciples would betray him and another would deny him no less than three times.

They came to the garden to retire for the night as they had, with permission of the owner of the garden, the two previous nights, sleeping under the twisted shadows cast by moonlight on the gnarled branches of nine ancient hollow-trunk olive trees, some more than eight hundred years old.

Jesus nodded cursorily and addressed his group, "Please wait here for me while I go over there to pray to my Father." Jesus left eight of his disciples near the entrance to the garden and took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. As they walked on slowly in the pale moonlight, Peter spoke, "Teacher, you look ill. Was the food or drink at supper perhaps tainted?"

Jesus wrapped his right arm around Peter's shoulders and looked at the ground, as if memorizing every pebble and stone that passed beneath his feet, "Peter, I feel an almost overwhelming sense of deathly sorrow."

Peter took Jesus' left hand in his, "You needn't fear the Sanhedrin or the Romans, teacher. We have always evaded them before and we will continue to do so. We have friends everywhere and know many places where they can never find us; but to see you like this teacher, troubles me more. You have always been in control of every situation, knowing the correct response for every circumstance, and choosing compassion or admonishment as appropriate. Why is tonight any different?"

Jesus turned to Peter and took Peter's hands in one hand and caressed Peter's loose curled locks several times with the other. He looked into Peter's eyes and spoke despondently, "There's something I must do. Please wait here and stay awake with me my friend." Jesus then turned and slowly walked alone a little further towards a small rocky grotto.

John tugged gently at Peter's sleeve, "He seems inconsolable; his power is gone."

"He has been under a great strain, brother," Peter replied. "His carries a great weight. Everyone pursues him and many wish him harm. But his power and strength come from our Father," Peter raised a hand halfway towards the night sky, "His power will never go away. He goes now to commune with Yahweh."

John asked, "And what should we do?"

"There is nothing we can do but wait and watch over him from a distance."

Jesus entered the grotto, climbing down several stairs that had been roughly hewn from the packed clay earth. Blue streaks of moonlight gathered into a beam that landed at an oblique angle to the side of a small cistern dug directly below the ceiling opening into which rain water collected. Off to one side was an aged, well-worn press, still in use for making olive oil.

He dropped to his knees within the moon beam and clasped his hands together in prayer. Crying loudly, tears streaming, hands shaking, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. I am in unbearable agony at the thought of dying. Tell me please that this is your plan and that this is what you want me to do.” Jesus fell forward, trembling, and prostrated himself, “Let it be by your will, not mine. Could redemption of the world not be completed in some less terrible way than with the cross? Father, I do not understand your terrible wrath and vengeance.”

After a time he curled into a fetal position, whimpering, “Why now? I am still young. There is so much more that I could do for you ... the wickedness and abominations of the world ... relieve suffering ...” Then, almost imperceptibly, “I want to live.” He sobbed and rolled heavenward, wrapping his arms around his rib cage.

So powerful is the mind that it can alter the physical constructs of the body. Enormous volumes of adrenalin coursed rapidly through Jesus’ body, the matrix of blood vessels surrounding his sweat glands dilating and rupturing. Jesus literally sweated blood, so great was his anguish.

Time passed imperceptibly and it seemed an eternity that he had been writhing in agony on the ground. He gradually became aware again of his surroundings and struggled to stand, “Why is heaven deaf to my pleas?”

Still shaking and weak from his ordeal, he stumbled up the grotto steps and out into the fresh, cool midnight air. He felt a burst of strength course through his body and he walked timorously along the barely visible path back towards his disciples.

Jesus gently rustled Peter awake, “I asked little of you. Could you not have stayed awake with me for even one hour?”

“I am sorry, master. The last few days have been very difficult. It is past the sixth hour of night and we were all exhausted. I personally feel helpless to be of any comfort to you. Please tell me how can we aid you?”

“I understand, Peter. Your spirit is willing but your flesh is weak. Still, you could most help me by staying awake and praying fervently that you don’t enter into the coming temptations. Take this precious time to prepare yourselves for the severe trial you are about to face.”

“We are already prepared, teacher; ready to face any challenge. Even if all others fail you, I will persevere, whatever may come. I am prepared to lay down my life for you, teacher.”

Jesus looked into Peter’s eyes, patted him on his shoulder, looked up towards the clear night sky, and turned back towards the grotto without saying another word. Peter watched in despair as Jesus walked unsurely along the ominous shadow-specked footpath and disappeared once more into the grotto.

Jesus threw himself onto his knees and prayed, castigating himself in the relative darkness, his Father silent, left alone to face the entire unbroken assault of the legions of hell. Writhing in the agony of a billion billion sinned souls living and yet to be born, Jesus took upon himself all the wickedness, iniquities and evils of the world.

Sometime later he again indulged himself in another fleeting reprieve from the demons to return to his followers. “Again they sleep ... so fitfully,” Jesus shook his head, “despite the demonic fury that is sweeping down upon us all. How sad that even now they still do not comprehend the divine meaning of my Father’s message.”

This time Jesus let them sleep. Their time for preparation had come and gone and God’s great die had been cast. He returned once more to the grotto to stand before the

sweeping hordes of manifest evil that ceaselessly poured out of Pandemonium's Gates. Time coagulated; imperceptible but inexorably unyielding, unforgiving, relentless.

Again, Jesus lay prostrate on the cool grotto floor. Then slowly, in the absolute blackness of ultimate despair, a pinhole of light began to grow into a gently brilliant aura before Jesus. His eyes opened wide and he raised his head. A holy, majestic and righteous form manifested itself, though it did not yield itself wholly to reason. Jesus beheld himself in its through-shining luster, kindling in him divine enlightenment, "Father, I understand at last. Your silence reveals the great spiritual truth. It was my profound sense of mortality and unwillingness to give up life that was essential to the completion of your Divine Plan."

Jesus pulled himself off the floor and as he stood fully erect, the light moved to envelope him. He could feel renewed strength coursing through his body as the aura slowly dissipated. "I do ... understand." Victoriously reenergized and armed with deific comprehension, Jesus walked with long determined strides back towards his disciples as he spoke to the heavens, "Your will shall be done."

Upon arriving, Jesus saw that his disciples were still asleep but this time shook Peter and the others awake, "Come, rise and let us be going. The opportunity to render the one last service I asked of you is past." Then as he marched purposely ahead of them, he waved his hand in an arc without looking back and declared, "The cripple is no more."

Gone was the frail visionary, teacher and prophet, terrified and laden with crushing fear and doubt. Now present was the omniscient Son of God, luminary of spiritual Awakening, immaculate herald of love and liberation, deliverer of the perfect atonement.

More than six hours had passed since his final supping with his disciples. In the distance, even before he heard them, Jesus could see a flickering halo of light draw nearer, "The hour is upon us and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

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Though secular work was generally forbidden after noon on the preparation day before the Passover, this night was different. Unusual threats called for unusual remedies.

The storm of death arrived in the garden of Gethsemane in the guise of Judas, who was leading Aran Eliasaph, six temple guards, Caiaphas' servant Malchus, and a large rabble armed with swords, clubs and torches. Eerie shadows danced through the twisted branches of the centuries-old olive sentinels as they silently watched the lit-up throng stomp towards destiny.

Though a freed slave, Malchus took great pride in tending to every need of the country's arguably most powerful Judean. A husky and stout man who once trained in gladiatorial school, Malchus often acted as Caiaphas' bodyguard in public places. And, despite his servile station, his title and physical size usually commanded at least feigning respect from the populace at large. Not fully trusting Eliasaph to carry out his instructions exactly, Caiaphas had sent Malchus along to act as Caiaphas' eyes and ears and to report on everything that transpired during the arrest.

A movement in the darkness startled Eliasaph into stopping abruptly, which had an almost comic domino effect on the guards and the mob.

"Who is there?" commanded Eliasaph into the darkness.

"Who do you seek?" Jesus replied.

"Why do you think we are looking for someone and not something?"

"Noisy men with swords and torches marching in the middle of night look only for people."

“Hhmpf. I seek Jesus the Nazarene.”

“I am he.”

Eliasaph turned to Judas and whispered, “I must be certain that this is Jesus and not a martyring follower who stands in his place.”

A torch bearer followed as Judas stepped towards Jesus with a long stride and a practiced smile, embraced him and said “Greetings, Rabbi.” With scorching irony, Judas’ kiss became the quintessential symbol of betrayal for all of history yet to unfold.

Jesus looked away, “Judas, do what you set out to do.” Judas quickly stepped back feeling flush, looked at Eliasaph and nodded, and then turned his head towards the ground.

Eliasaph retrieved the leather pouch from under his tunic that Caiaphas had given him earlier, and made no secret of its presentation to Judas, “Thirty coins, as agreed. Now be off with you,” commanded Eliasaph.

Any other time, I would teach you manners with the back of my hand, you rapacious mosquito, Judas thought. Then thinking back to Jesus: *I can’t bear to look into his eyes. What is this feeling? It is not familiar. He makes me feel ... sad but I have no cause to be; and embarrassed but I am not. I am proud to have our people be rid of his blasphemous presence. I feel ... shame? But I do not warrant it. Why should I feel shame when it is he who should be ashamed of his deceit, first raising my hopes and then sending me into utter despair?*

Judas’ eye squinted and then opened wide, his eyebrow rising. *It’s his calm and self-righteous forgiving manner that vexes me. Facing death, he is still a master of presentation. He mixes his fool’s courage with artful humility to grant me his forgiveness that is not his to give ... yet another demonstration of his arrogant superiority over us all. Why could he not be as gracious with his forgiveness when he chastised me so grievously before my peers all those times before? Damn his forgiveness! I don’t need it. In a day he will be dead, buried and forgotten. I, however, will be on my way to starting a new life.*

Jesus stared penetratingly at Eliasaph, “Am I leading a rebellion that requires you to come with clubs and swords to arrest me? All this past week I sat in the temple teaching and you did not seize me then. What brings you now, and in this private place?”

Before anyone could react, a temple guard struck Jesus across the face, “How dare you presume to question.”

Peter and John advanced forward, reaching for their hidden weapons but Jesus raised his hand and spoke to Eliasaph, “If I have ever said anything that is not true, present your witnesses and let us hear what they have to say; otherwise tell me why you hit me.”

Responding to a quick wiggle of Eliasaph’s finger, the six temple guards began to advance. Malchus moved quickly ahead of the guards and grabbed Jesus’ wrist, attempting to twist Jesus’ arm behind his back.

“No one touches the master!” cried Peter, who this time was ready. Despite Jesus’ earlier commandment, he drew his short sword deftly and swung it down upon Malchus’ head. Though totally surprised by the move, Malchus, as part of the action of twisting Jesus’ arm, was already stepping back and to the side of Jesus as Peter’s sword followed through.

Malchus felt sudden warmth just before screaming pain fired through his brain. He fell to his knees, clutching what remained of his right ear. The torch lights around him became hazy, their lights oscillating, and the ground all around him spinning.

“Stop!” Jesus roared, “There will be no more of this.” Jesus twisted towards Peter and raised his hand, “Put your weapon away. All those who live by the sword, die by the sword.” As he spoke, Jesus knelt down beside Malchus, picked up the bloodied ear from the ground and held it in its proper place beside Malchus’ head.

“But master—”

Jesus continued to kneel, holding Malchus' head while turning his own to speak to Peter, "Do you think that I could not appeal to my Father in heaven in this moment of need, and that he would not immediately send twelve legions of angels to aid me?"

Judas interrupted and spoke fervently, "Then do it master! Save yourself. Then we will all truly know your awesome power, and Judea may at last be free."

For Malchus, the flickering light began to come back into focus. The pain was gone and new warmth coursed through his being. A man's face appeared before him, eyes filled with a gentleness and love that melted away all of Malchus' animosity.

Jesus rose with a saddened look and slowly shook his head at Judas, "Think Judas; if I do that, how will the prophecy in the scriptures be fulfilled?"

Moments passed as these immortal words at last registered plainly with all of Jesus' disciples. Guilt by association would lead to an inevitable fate. Slowly, one by one, each of the disciples backed away and slipped into the darkness. Judas too, without ever again making eye contact with Jesus, retreated into the darkness that had become his friend. *And yet, I cannot shake the feeling of shame.*

Peter was the last to go.

The temple guards prepared to make chase but Eliasaph commanded, "Let them go. We have their leader. Without him, they are nothing and they will do nothing. Our purpose is righteous and time is on our side. They will all live in fear for the rest of their lives." Eliasaph turned to face Jesus, "Meanwhile, this man has an appointment with the high priest."