

## CHAPTER 1. 3 B.C.

My murder would many times be on the minds of men, but my end time would not be decided by them or any other person. The destiny of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of a history already written.

While still in the womb of my mother, Mary, I felt her debilitating fear. It made me anxious and unsettled, sometimes nauseous, and I remember the sensations as if they were only yesterday. I sensed my mother's all-consuming conflict between her maternal instincts and her great desire for self-preservation.

God gave his human creatures free will. With it come debate, arguments, conflict and sometimes violence. Still in the womb, I heard the early arguments Mother had with my stepfather, Joseph, whom I called Papa, and with whom she had not yet consummated their marriage. She worried that others would not believe her claim that she had been visited by a divine guardian bearing a heavenly message: that she was to bear a child—as a virgin. An abortion would have avoided the severe strain my birth placed on my parents' relationship, but Mother carried within her great moral integrity befitting the future mother of the Son of God. She would not deny God's plan, no matter what the consequence. But moral conviction and faith did not lessen her quiet anxiety and deathly fear.

To ease my parent's burden, my father in heaven sent a guardian to visit Papa with the same message that my mother had received. However, I knew in Papa's heart that he didn't truly believe it. I heard his doubts before I was born and, though he treated all his children equally and with great respect, there were times when I saw the doubt in his eyes, felt his doubt in the skipped beats of his heart when he looked at me and remembered. It was many years later, as I grew older and he discovered my special abilities, that Papa finally accepted that Mother had always been faithful to him. It is a testament to Papa's prodigious character that he successfully weathered God's traumatic test of his faith.

My parents faced an impossible choice. To declare Mother an adulteress, a crime punished with death by stoning, was irreconcilable to Papa; to live with what Papa then thought was a lie was divinely unforgivable; to abort my birth, inconceivable. While not an ideal solution it soon became apparent that the best way to handle the small town's questions was to not create the circumstance that would require an explanation.

Untenable to many who would later follow my message and believe in me, their pride impelling them to author creative reasons for my parent's unexplained departure from Nazareth, the simple truth was that we left Nazareth because of Mother's crippling fear of death by stoning, and for Papa's sake, to avoid the humiliation that would almost certainly befall our family from Mother's claim of a virgin birth.

Most of the village accepted Papa's plan to pursue business opportunities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, away from Nazareth but mostly away from anyone who knew them well. We traveled to the ancestral town of King David, trudging over the ridges and down the washes of a meandering, barren, cactus-laden trail; a gauntlet of blinding, blazing hot days and coal-black, thought-numbing frigid nights. It would take a fit man like Papa ten to twelve days to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the main trade centre of the area. A wife laden with child and carried by mule-drawn cart added several days to the trip.

With Mother's peace came mine and the remainder of my gestation was a relatively happy time. But peace, once again, was not to be ours for long. Papa had not considered that my birth would coincide with the tens of thousands of God's chosen people descending upon Jerusalem for the annual Passover pilgrimage. Bethlehem being south of Jerusalem and Nazareth being to the far north, Papa reasoned that meeting other Nazarenes here would be unlikely. Looking back, we all discovered God's will being done for my birth. We were surrounded by throngs of my people, nary a place to sleep. The spillover of pilgrims from Jerusalem as well as gentiles from points southeast to southwest just passing through, created conditions that were in many ways worse in Bethlehem than Jerusalem, save the absence of other Nazarenes. Even with the offer of a premium fee, there was simply no place available at any home or inn.

To Papa's eternal shame, I was born in a stable, in a trough from which cattle eat. But I felt Mother's immeasurable relief, freed of all her great burdens, in a single birthing event. Under the circumstances, any place that provided shelter and a modicum of privacy was more than happily accepted and she gave thanks to God for the blessing.

In culture and belief, Mother was Judean but her ancestral heritage included Phoenician, Syrian, Greek and Hittite bloodlines. Her ancestors were strong and hardy women, used to the demands of a rural lifestyle, and all of them hardly remembered in posterity, their names simply passed on through verbal traditions, with a few accomplished women more impassionedly remembered, including Tamar and Ruth.

In contrast to her inner beauty and immaculate nature—born without personal or hereditary sin—and by the standards of our culture and place, my mother was relatively plain in appearance. Like most Judean women, she always wore a simple shawl whenever she was outside the house, which covered her long, coal-colored wavy hair. The small thin strips of linen, which she habitually applied to keep her hair tied back, were of different colors, chosen as to her mood, and being a small allowance of immodest adornment that she permitted herself. She stood four feet ten inches and was most endearing when she stood on her toes to chastise one of her children, all of whom were taller than her by the time we each reached puberty. Her soft-spoken and quiet demeanor usually caused others to strain forward to hear what she was saying, but that was not to say that she didn't allow those close to her to experience the joy of her adventurous spirit and effervescent personality, nor was she hesitant to authoritatively demand to be done what she felt was right or proper. Her nose was characteristic of many women of the region, fleshy and convexed with a slight bend at the tip, and her lips were full, the lower lip marginally protruding past the upper lip. Only the most attentive, who looked past her dark green, dove-like eyes and thick eyelids, were apt to discover her ineffable wisdom. Mother's olive-colored skin was youthfully resilient, and remarkably unblemished and smooth except for her hands, which were calloused and rough, having succumbed early in life to the hardships most rural women experienced from toiling upon a sun-bleached, harsh and unforgiving land.

Papa's bloodline was antithetical to Mother's; much less cosmopolitan, but honorably traceable back to the venerable patriarch, Abraham, with some earlier hereditary inheritance from the Sumerians and Nodites. More ambitious members of Papa's extended family laid claim to direct descendancy from the kings David and Solomon, though none were so bold as to claim descent from Adam. Papa's most recently remembered ancestors were carpenters, but also included smiths, masons and builders.

Trained as a mechanic in general but specializing in carpentry, he built not only furniture and kitchenware, but he repaired wagons, yokes and tools, and undertook all manner of home frame construction and repairs, especially roofing.

Papa was a muscular, barrel-chested man, weighing perhaps one hundred and forty-five pounds, and standing five feet five inches, the average height of men in the region. He had uncommon grey-colored eyes and an equally uncommon clarity of sight at short and long distances, often noting movement in fields and bushes long before anyone else. His ears were disproportionately larger and protruded more noticeably from his head than the average man, which he vainly attempted to cover with his stringy chestnut-colored hair, fastidiously managed to never be longer than the top of his shoulders. Romans were clean shaven, in fact generally having no body hair at all, so it was often a matter of subversive pride and nationalistic resistance against Rome for Judean men to have a beard. Papa proudly sported his always neatly trimmed beard and moustache.

His love for Mother and his actions to protect her when his faith in God and the human spirit were severely tested, revealed him to be a righteous, kind and sensitive man. He was the consummate family patriarch, raising his six children to the best of his abilities. His high moral character and intelligent understanding were pivotal influences when I was a young child. Even when wronged, he was nevertheless always sensitive to the wrong-doer's shame, and he would seek to find a way to save face for all. This trait led him to have many friends and no enemies.

Even before I was born, I was connected to everything, and I felt everything interconnected through me. Mother was seventeen years old and Papa was twenty-six when I was born, both of them untraditionally old to begin parenting. With my first breath, I was in ecstatic awe of all the human senses; the sights, sounds and smells of the stable and the surrounding town, the pinch of pain of my bodily awakening, the taste of Mother's milk, and the feelings of security and comfort in Mother's arms.

I could feel the essence of life coursing through me, from the fine threads of hair on my head, down to the curiously long-lost individual functioning of my toes. My entry into the world gloriously overwhelmed my senses. I was alive, self-aware and born ready to embrace all that the world had to offer, ready to learn everything I could, impassioned with a keen unqualified sense of divine purpose, although I was then far from understanding God's specific purpose for me. What I did know, though, was that I was charged with living the whole of the human experience, embracing the strengths and weaknesses of the human condition, to be tempted as I grew by all the sins of humankind, and evolving bodily over time as do all of the creatures and creations of my father in heaven. Otherwise, why would I not have simply appeared by God's hand as a grown man, ready to do God's will?

As a babe, I observed everything, feeling a great urge to communicate with everyone, but words would not form. I had time though, lots of time; but I could still hardly wait.

I drunk in every sensuous experience during my first two years in Bethlehem, the 'house of bread' and city of David, later the place where David was anointed by Samuel as a future king, and prophesied to be the birthplace of the Messiah. It was for that reason that I particularly remembered as a toddler the pungent waft of aromatic oils that momentarily preceded two finely dressed men, themselves accompanied by a host of near-equally well-attired assistants. The two kingly men said they had followed an unprecedented astronomical event, the birth of a new star in the heavens that led them to me. They bore gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which made my family's life quite comfortable as I grew to adolescence, and empowered me with the means to gain the worldly knowledge I would need to fulfill God's purpose.

The two princes, as my family liked to remember them, were Zoroastrian astrologers who believed in a universal and transcendental god, the Uncreated Creator to whom all worship must be directed. My destiny would one day lead me back to their culture. Upon discovering what they believed to be my true nature, the two men had confided in Papa that they had been acting as royal agents of Herod Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea, Edom and Samaria when I was born, and one of the sons of Herod the Great. The princes had been charged with seeking out the recently born, rumored descendant of King David, who Herod Archelaus believed would one day threaten his rule. The two princes resolved in their hearts that they would be judged harshly by the Uncreated Creator on their Judgment Day if they were party to any scheme of Herod's that might lead to my harm. They returned to their homeland by a circuitous route that gave my family and me an opportunity to escape the ethnarch and his spies.

Rumor had spread that, upon learning of the two princes' deception, Herod had fallen into a rage and issued orders to murder every male in his kingdom under two years of age. It was a sad aspect of the human condition, as I repeatedly learned over my lifetime, that humankind prefers to destroy that which is a threat or not understood. Or perhaps it was a divinely intended character flaw in the creation of man? It certainly was no chance event that my father in heaven would one day use that very flaw to help me achieve my great purpose.

Praise and glory to God that Herod had been convinced by others not to act on his infanticidal desire. If Herod had only been familiar with the Scriptures, the book of the prophet Micah of Moresheth-Gath would have told him where to find me.

That was the second of many times that my murder would be on the minds of men.

## CHAPTER 2. JERUSALEM: 26 A.D.

Jerusalem: a bone-dry landscape that is home to the gigantic, nocturnal, hairy, quick and agile Camel Spider, the prolific insect-hunting Carabid Beetle, and, of course the slow, ovoviviparous, nocturnal Yellow Scorpion, with its extremely painful sting.

Transients are scarce, and locals scratch their living from the sun-baked soil, which breeds hard men and women who eke out a meager existence in the shadow of a hostile and arrogant oppressor.

The Roman Province of Judea came into existence in 6 A.D. after Herod Archelaus, son of King Herod the Great, was deposed by Augustus and banished to Vienne in Gaul. Samaria, Judea, and Idumea were then combined and placed under the governorship of a Roman Prefect.

Judea was tiny compared to other Roman territories, measuring roughly one hundred miles north to south and forty-four miles east to west. It comprised three large, ethnically diverse groups; Jews, Samaritans and pagans.

“Viper bastards; all of them.” That was Pontius Pilate’s summation of the people he had been sent to govern in 26 A.D., from his headquarters in Caesarea, Judea. He was the fifth prefect appointed to the post responsible for administrating the areas of Judea, Samaria, and the area south as far as the Dead Sea to Gaza.

For most of the year, Pilate and his wife, Claudia Procula, lived at the luxurious governor’s palace in the city of Caesarea, about sixty miles northwest of Jerusalem, traditional capital of Judea and still the center of Jewish life. Caesarea was primarily pagan and became the province’s capital as well as the territory’s Roman administration headquarters, so the governor’s residence and a small army were also located here.

Pilate and Claudia were sitting alone on separate bronze couches of immaculate craftsmanship in the main atrium, which was usually the center of social activity in the spectacular palace. The atrium was a perfect architectural adaptation to the Mediterranean heat, a room open to the sky to allow fresh air to circulate in and among the corridors and rooms. Most of the atrium floor was a mosaic of highly polished multicolored stones, like many homes of nobility, but the center of the governor’s atrium comprised a large square of *giallo antico*, or numidic yellow marble, quarried in Numidia in North Africa. Out of the center of the gleaming marble floor rose the navel of the atrium, a pool centerpiece, or *impluvium*, made from the same numidic marble, which caught the rainwater that fell through the open ceiling. When the first governor of Judea had arrived, he Hellenized this room. Hidden eaves troughs, channels and pipes collected additional rainwater from the roofs which all conjoined behind, and poured out through the mouth of, a large carved face of the god Jove on one end of the pool.

“We’ve always agreed that this posting was a stepping stone, dear,” Claudia responded. “A few years here and, with a little support from the gods and the good graces of Lucius, you’ll have a governorship worthy of your talents.”

Claudia was referring to Lucius Aelius Sejanus, Prefect of the Praetorian Guard since 15 A.D., who had, from obscurity over an eleven-year period, navigated constant deadly intrigue in Rome to become, next to the emperor, Tiberius Claudius Nero, the most powerful man in the Roman Empire.

Around 21 A.D., Sejanus had successfully lobbied to have the geographically-dispersed Praetorians centralized in one huge barracks on the city perimeter, called the *Castra Praetoria*. In one fateful event, Sejanus converted the Guard from a force charged with keeping the peace in and around the Italian towns, into an elite military and political force that would invariably be at the epicenter of every subsequent imperial power shift in Rome for centuries to come. The participation of the commander of the Praetorians became pivotal to the intrigues of the Emperor as well as to all those who would conspire against the throne.

With unbridled ambition, ruthlessness and hellacious opportunism, Sejanus' meteoric rise to power was fueled by a volatile political climate of contrary and indecisive leadership in Rome, significant judicial loopholes, aristocratic jealousies, and the devilry of a paranoid and unfathomably powerful emperor. Within only a few years, the intelligent and ambitious prefect had rendered himself indispensable to the Emperor in all matters. Such was the uncommon manner in which Sejanus rose to prominence, his power steeped in Tiberius' weaknesses and paranoia, and fueled by the fierce animosity which divided Rome's aristocracy.

Claudia added, "Did I overhear one of the recently arrived imperial messengers say that the Emperor now lives on Capri?"

Pilate replied, "Yes, Sejanus mentioned it in one of his recent correspondences to me. Tiberius loathes Rome—"

"Surely Sejanus didn't write that?" Claudia said.

"No, he didn't but what one reads between the lines can be as important as what is actually written. Sejanus doesn't confide in me but he does help me stay informed by dropping hints and bits of private information. He is a master at knowing who not to disappoint and he's a man who can make and break careers with one command." Pilate lightly and slowly punched his right fist into the palm of his left hand; a mannerism Claudia recognized all too well when Pilate had something on his mind. "Uhm, sweetheart," Pilate continued, "do you know remember our discussion before we left about why Sejanus posted me here?"

"Of course; it wasn't that long ago," she smiled.

"Well, there was more that I couldn't tell you then."

Intuitively, Claudia replied, "Don't tell me anything that a lady shouldn't hear, darling."

Pilate hesitated and then spoke quickly, "One of the reasons he sent me here is to ensure that his portion of the annual tithe to the Temple of Jerusalem is secured and flows back to him."

"Tithe?"

"The Judeans are required by their faith to donate—"

"Isn't that a contradiction; 'required' and 'donate?'"

Pilate tilted his head with a quizzical look and then smiled; such a clever woman, he thought. "I never gave it a thought. Anyway, there are about four million Judeans spread across the Empire. They call this international cultural and religious entity their Diaspora and every member ... sends," Pilate made a differential bow to Claudia, "a drachma once a year to the Temple."

"You receive a percentage of Sejanus' portion?" Claudia asked, already knowing the answer.

Pilate nodded.

Claudia raised her eyebrows and nodded back, "You promised Lucius that you'd do your best. He expects no less, you know."

"And I give no less." How do I disclose the whole truth to Claudia about my mission for Sejanus without losing her? Will she ever forgive me? "I still remember my disappointment—my

resentment, to tell you the truth—when he asked me to accept this post. All those years of dedication and work; all the pig dung jobs and dirty—”

Claudia shot Pilate a stern look, “Language, dear.”

“Sorry; all the . . . dirty tricks and subterfuge to advance Sejanus’ career and gain the Emperor’s favor. And then he offers me governorship of this third-rate province of no value to anyone.”

“He must have thought he was bestowing an honor upon you.”

“To some extent, perhaps, but Sejanus has been rapidly using up his considerable wealth as well as his inheritance from his father who died, hmm, about five years ago if I recall, to acquire political influence. He needs money and he wants me to help him collect it. I suspect his motivation for *promoting* me to this post was a little more self-serving.”

“We share in that need,” Claudia replied matter-of-factly. She stood up, walked over to Pilate, pulled him up from his couch and embraced him tightly around his waist. “The solution is mutually beneficial, dear. He is a very clever man. He always has his reasons.” She looked up into Pilate’s eyes, “This isn’t what you really want to discuss, is it.”

Pilate looked over her shoulder stared off into the distance as if he hadn’t heard her. “I’d feel more useful, and could possibly extract more out of this dung heap sooner if I knew what his real reasons were for sending me to this land of habitual complainers, none of whom can get along with their neighbor, let alone with the rest of the world.”

“It’s not so bad. There are plenty of opportunities here and we’re still young. Let’s make the most of it and plan to be in a good financial and social position to make the next move when it comes.”

Pilate gently broke away from Claudia, sat on the edge of the center pool and stared at the rhythmic ripples that danced across the water, while Claudia returned to her couch.

On record, Pilate’s family heralded from Samnium, a region of the southern Apennines in Italy. The Samnites battled the Romans for control of Italy from about 354 B.C. until the Romans final broke the Samnites’ power in 290. In 82, the Roman dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla instigated a campaign of genocide against them. His efforts were so successful that it was recorded that the towns of Samnium had become villages, and many vanished altogether. The Samnites were assimilated as Roman citizens and Pilate’s family descended from a long line of subsequent knights. A few members even rose to occupy senatorial honors.

However, in other circles, Pontius Pilate was rumored to be the son of a Roman officer and a local girl in a Scottish hill fort called Dun Geal next to a Roman camp in the hamlet of Fortingall, Perthshire, which lay at the entrance to picturesque Glen Lyon, Scotland’s longest glen.

Pilate never spoke of his adventures before meeting Claudia or of his upbringing, and he’d close her out whenever she brought up the topic. Still, she gleaned bits and pieces over time and believed that he met, and became closely associated with, Sejanus during the mutiny of the three legions in Pannonia.

Unlike Pilate, Claudia heralded from an aristocratic bloodline as a granddaughter of Emperor Augustus, Tiberius’ predecessor.

Claudia and Pontius made an unlikely couple. It was Sejanus who arranged for his faithful but undiplomatic and vulgar lieutenant to marry the sophisticated, intelligent and sensitive Claudia. Pilate’s marriage to Claudia kept him accessible by Sejanus but far away from the Roman court. And,

because wives were not generally permitted to accompany their military husbands, it was Sejanus who also acquired permission from Tiberius, Claudia's stepfather, to let her go to Judea with Pilate.

Most wives of Roman diplomats naturally preferred the comfort and social life of Rome rather than face the very real routine dangers and relative discomfort of a Roman province. Claudia's desire to stay with Pilate, especially considering his posting to the reeking armpit of the Roman Empire, spoke volumes for the love that had grown in her for him.

Her imperial relationship helped her to secure some of Rome's best historians and philosophers in preparation for her husband's undetermined length of stay in Judea. Claudia had also received hands-on accounts from Praetorian officers who had once served as legionaries in Judea and Syria, as to what to expect when they arrived.

All of the accounts she had heard were more or less true. The place had few redeeming qualities. Still, a good job done here would hopefully lead her husband to a governorship of some more desirable Roman territory.

"Did you learn anything useful from all those teachers you commissioned?" Pilate asked. It was uncanny the number of times in their married life that one of them would speak about what the other was thinking.

"I picked up bits of history, culture and, of course, the current political climate."

Pilate poured himself a goblet of Thasosian wine from his highly coveted stock and strolled back over to his couch. "One of the great advantages that I enjoy about having so many Roman gods and goddesses is that it gives me a generous choice by which to invoke and curse."

Claudia turned to look at Pilate and saw his smile, "Oh, Pontius, I know you're just having some light fun at the gods' expense but you truly ought to show more respect."

"You're right, of course. I don't mean to offend you but perhaps you could be a little less sensitive too?" It was not a subject that he wanted to have yet again with his pious wife. He thought, why can't I just keep my big mouth shut? Before Claudia could reply, he said, "Tell me something—anything—that you remember about the history of this refuse pile."

Claudia pondered a moment, "Well, it was Julius Caesar who first granted certain exclusive rights to the Judean communities, apparently because he respected the fact that their ancestral laws predated those of Rome. He gave them *collegia* privileges; the right to assemble as a religious group, to govern and tax themselves ... uhm ... to enforce their own discipline, and to be exempt from military service and emperor worship."

"Now that you mention it, I can't think of any other religious group in the Empire that has these rights," Pilate said, "aside from our own, of course."

"Not only that, but Caesar forbade all other religious societies other than our own and Judaism to have a presence in Rome. My teachers suggested that the granting of these exclusive rights explains why the contempt for Judeans seems so widespread across the Empire."

"It's not so much the rights, well, yes it is partially about their rights," Pilate corrected, "but what really aggravates me is how they are quick to exploit and lord their rights over everyone else," Pilate said bitterly.

"Would any culture behave differently?"

Pilate ignored the question, "Did you know that they claim to be the chosen people of the One True God?"

"So are we with our gods."

"It's these kinds of subtleties Claudia that makes me think that you are ill-equipped to deal with the vagaries of politics and government administration."

“There’s no need for that, Pontius. Vent your annoyance on someone who is paid to take your abuse and temper tantrums.”

“I’m sorry, Claudia. It came out wrong. What I meant to say is that their religion hides their supreme arrogance. They declare their god as supreme to all others, and then proclaim themselves God’s preferential people.”

“I understood that.”

“Did you deduce that they will never be happy under Roman rule; that they will remain a problem forever?”

“Truthfully, no.” Claudia smiled thinly.

Pilate sipped his wine, swirled it about his taste buds, and then gulped noisily.

“That, sweetheart, is why this region has always had, and always will have, revolt after revolt, and there will never be peace. Why did Sejanus send me here? What did I do to him?”

Claudia strolled over to Pilate again, sipped the remaining wine in his goblet, and passed the goblet back to him. Pilate looked into the empty goblet and then cast a mock frown. Claudia strolled away sideways, enough that Pilate could see the feigned indifference in her face.

“Caesar erred when he created special rights for one group to the detriment of all others,” Pilate reflected. “It was inevitable that it would lead to wide-spread anti-Judean sentiment. I heard that a year or so ago, we were forced to reduce one of our centurions to the ranks after representatives of the people complained incessantly to Rome about his overt display of contempt for the priests by lifting his skirt in the Temple precinct and farting.”

Claudia twisted her nose, “Oh, Pontius, I don’t need that kind of detail, but, as you say, flaunting their privileges and exemptions certainly doesn’t help. Perhaps you are right, Pontius. I admit that I don’t have a head for the nuances of government, nor the patience to oblige foreign cultures.” She shook her head and waved her hand as if to shoo away a foul image inside her head.

“Anyway,” Claudia continued, “Caesar decided to place the authority for all these exclusive rights under the auspices of the Judean synagogue and its legal body, called the Sanhedrin.”

“How did Caesar get involved in all this local intrigue in the first place?” Pilate asked. “It seems so ... beneath him. Judea certainly isn’t of any military or economic importance.”

Claudia shrugged, “I can’t speak for his motivation, of course, but I can tell you the state of things before he became involved.” Pilate nodded and reached for a refill of Thasosian wine. “Before Caesar, there was a patriotic, warlike, priestly Judean family called the Hasmoneans, who led the Judeans for the previous hundred and thirty years. They belonged to a part of the Judean nation which remained loyal to their god, whom they called, uhm ... Yahweh.”

Pilate rolled his eyes, “Oh, I know all about Yahweh.”

“Of course you do, dear.” She beamed a sincere smile and then continued, “About ninety years ago, there were two Hasmonean brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobolus, who co-ruled but quarreled bitterly about who should be king and eventually became deadlocked in their dispute. To make matters worse, a large group of priests called the Pharisees refused to accept either brother as ruler. The brothers invited Pompey and his armies into Israel to mediate. Pompey graciously accepted the mediation request. When Pompey arrived in Jerusalem he proceeded to take the city by assault. The city fell to him after a three-month siege, I think on the Passover of 691 A.U.C.”

“You never cease to amaze me with your recollection of names and dates. You would have made an excellent educator.”

“Women as educators? Oh, Pontius, what Roman would ever listen to a woman teacher?”

Pilate awkwardly cleared his throat and pointed at himself.

“Of course *you* would dear. That’s why I love you.” Claudia took Pilate’s empty goblet from his hand and gave him a peck in return. “Pompey entered the holiest place of the temple, and thus forever estranged the Pharisaic party from Rome. However, he did not spoil the temple. He appointed Hyrcanus as its high priest, thus marking the end of Judean autonomy. The kingdom of Judah ceased to exist when we incorporated it into the Empire as the province of Judea.”

Pilate added, “And the strong relationship Rome had with King Herod did not survive his death ... what, twenty years ago now?”

“So you were just toying with me about not knowing any of this country’s history,” Claudia said coyly.

Pilate suddenly turned to Claudia, his brow furled, eyes squinted, teeth gritted, “I think I have done you a great injustice by bringing you here, sweetheart.”

Claudia turned and strolled briskly over to Pilate and wrapped her arms around him. “Oh, darling, we’ve talked about this many times. I did the research. I knew exactly what I was getting myself into.” She pulled her head back so that she could look into his eyes, and then smiled, “Well, in theory anyway.” He stared deeply into her eyes and beamed a rare smile, the kind that only she could coax from him. He pulled himself out of her embrace, stood arms length from her and held each of her hands in each of his. “I didn’t tell you ... everything. I couldn’t. It was—is—a matter of state security. Sejanus put me in an irreconcilable situation. I couldn’t tell you the whole truth because Sejanus wouldn’t allow it. He’d—“

“Couldn’t tell me what?” Pilate could feel a slight tremble in Claudia’s hands.

“Come sit down with me.” Pilate and Claudia sat down on Pilate’s bronze couch. “Sejanus made my promotion to Judea contingent on my not telling you everything. But seeing the sacrifices you have made, enduring the inhospitableness of these people, never once complaining ... I ...”

Claudia had not seen her husband so emotionally vulnerable since the day he proposed to her, “What do you want to say, darling. You can tell me anything. I’ll always stand by you. What have you done?”

“It’s not exactly like that but I may have inadvertently put you in harm’s way ... if anything ever happened to you, I think I’d—“

“Sshh.” Claudia placed her index finger on Pilate’s lips. “Just tell me. We’ll solve it together, whatever it is.” She cupped Pilate’s face in her hands and kissed him on his lips. “Come, I’m the wife of a military commander in a hostile country. There will always be risks. I accept them as our way of life.”

Pilate looked into her hazel eyes, “I know you do and I love you all the more because of it; and I know you had other suitors and could have lived very well within the ranks of nobility rather than marry me and follow me into this human cesspool.”

“It’s not so bad—“

“It is, and I’ve made it worse.”

“Okay, Pontius. I understand you feel guilty about something. Now, for my own sanity, tell me what it is.”

Pilate stood up and took several slow deliberate steps, then turned around, “Sejanus wants me to instigate a revolt here in Judea.”