



Pauxillus Romanus Opprobrium



Jennifer Mueller

A Little Roman Scandal



*Romance
at Heart*
PUBLICATIONS

A LITTLE ROMAN SCANDAL

BY

JENNIFER MUELLER

©Copyright 2006 by

Romance At Heart Publications E-Novels

Edited by Jean Paquin
Cover Art by Jennifer Mueller

Publication by Romance At Heart ©2006
<http://rahpubs.com/>

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information and storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Dedication:

To Craig:
For giving me the chance to stay in a hotel
for two months in South Dakota where I came up with the idea for this story.

Reviewers say...

Linda L., The Romance Studio....

A Little Roman Scandal is a must read. I could feel the intensity of the characters after reading how badly the father had beat the mother then started on Livia. The story was so electrifying that I was spellbound. Ms. Mueller weaves stories that impress.

Valerie, Love Romances...

Jennifer Mueller manages to put a lot of emotion together with a good plot. She gives her readers a heroine who is in some way misused or mistreated, but manages to find the right man who helps her out of her predicament. Her heroines are also brave souls who know how to wait for the right opportunity and grab it with both hands. These are heroines that the reader knows deserve the happy endings that Ms. Mueller gives them.

A LITTLE ROMAN SCANDAL

By

JENNIFER MUELLER

A LITTLE ROMAN SCANDAL

** *Chapter 1* **

The cook had outdone himself on the meal; grilled damsons and pomegranate seeds, truffles and mushrooms, sausages on a silver grill, piping hot wild boar, lobsters garnished with asparagus, apples whose scent was a feast in itself, Syrian pears in a soufflé. It was all the best that could be purchased, but as far as feasts went, it was quite modest. The family prided itself on its fine standing in Rome, but they weren't the sort to have lavish feasts that people spent all night long at. Besides, there was business to take care of this night.

Claudius Quintus Gallus reentered the dining room and was surprised to find someone there, still more that it was a woman staring out an open door at the Pincian Hill mansion's garden. He thought all of the families were in the other room trying to entice him into matrimony with their daughters' attributes. He wouldn't have minded so much of it was their attributes they were indeed discussing with the girls themselves. Friends, hobbies, interests, travels, but he'd never heard so much talk of money and property in his life. He hadn't seen her at the meal, but then with so many people there, it would have been easy to overlook one. He didn't know how he could have missed her when he walked closer. From behind, she was tall and lithe. The sea green silk tunic and drape fell enticingly allowing the curves it was supposed to hide to show through quite well. Her dark brown hair was the image of an ideal Roman lady, curled high in front and covered in an exquisite net decorated in pearls and emeralds. His glass of wine and the women in the other room were forgotten.

"Would you care to see the garden close up instead of just through the door?"

She turned and he held his breath when she lifted her eyes. They were the same shade of sea green as her drape and glowed in the lamplight. She was gorgeous and literally dripping with more pearls and emeralds than he had seen in one spot before, and he had dined in some of the wealthiest homes in Rome, including the Emperor's. The pearls came from far away in India and China driving the price up, and the emeralds that could be found in only one place in Egypt were just as expensive to obtain. That was what the fathers throwing their daughters at him would notice if they were found talking. He could only see she was more beautiful than a statue of Venus.

"Would it get me out of all that talk I hardly understand? Perhaps if I knew who all their mistresses were, I might be able to keep track."

He smiled when no mention was made of dowries, fortunes, or even the wedding date. "The gardens are quite expansive, so I'm told. They would take some time to view, I would imagine, especially if you took your time."

"So you are told? Haven't you been here before then?"

"Only once briefly. It is the Censor's chance to show off his gift to his son for finally marrying."

She smiled and the last of his will power melted away. "Then how are you to give me a tour of somewhere you've never been yourself?"

"Come, we'll stumble around together. I don't understand half of what they're babbling about either. All this marriage talk is a bore."

"So that is why my father dragged me here. I wonder which one he was trying to entice. Knowing him the Censor's eighty year old father or his five year old son."

He was a well-built man dressed in the richest of brown Palmyra silks. His hair was dark brown and not curled in the current fashion, but it had lightened in the sun while it had the opposite effect on his skin, which had darkened considerably. He was in his early thirties and he had to be one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. Why couldn't her father ever find such a man for her to marry?

Claudius made no mention of the fact that he was to be married off from the offers that night. His father had invited all the parents who had offered their daughters for his son. The negotiations couldn't wait for some forty fathers to present their cases one by one, he would be an old man before anything was decided if that was the case. He had been of marriageable age for some years now, but it wasn't until he'd mentioned to his father that perhaps it was time that anything went forward. Of course none of the families knew that the others were there for the same reason as the invitations had been for his birthday, and many family and friends were there as well. Now he had listened to the same secretive whisper from each family as they pressed their suit for marriage thinking they were the only one; he never even met the girls. It was no wonder he had drunk so much wine already and the night was only half over.

He opened the door and showed her out. They were soon surrounded by high pergolas covered in roses, fish pools with fountains in their centers, fig trees and rosemary, peacocks strutted around with their shrill call filling the night air, dark cypress trees competed with white lilies, doves cooed as they walked by. It was hard to tell where the mansion's gardens stopped and the public gardens dotting the Pincian Hill started.

"You don't sound like you wish to wed."

The beautiful face turned hard. "I have been planning all my life to become a wife as all Roman daughters should. If I had been told to marry the one arranged when I was a child and he hadn't died, I would have done my duty and become a proper matron even if I had never met him before. But this . . . I have been promised to six different men in the last six months and when a better offer comes along, he throws it all out the window, not caring what promises he breaks." She kept speaking as if in a daze. She knew it was poor manners, but she was unable to stop once she started. "One he broke off only a week before the wedding. He has lost far more influence from all those he as angered than he ever would have gained in marrying me off to any one of them. I have never even met the men from these matches; they lasted so short a time, some only a few days. I never even met the one I was to wed in only a few days. Now I am to wed a man who is fifty years my senior and dying at that, but he has no children. I would be his sole heir and my father would have his riches back forcing me to turn over what would then be mine. Even worse: what he is dying of he will give me on our wedding night." He watched her shudder at the thought. Her next words came as a whisper. "Should I forget bedding such a man because it brought me silks, jewels, and fine houses? Should I die slowly and excruciatingly because it made my father rich? He says I am causing a scandal by refusing to go through with it and he says nothing of the scandal he has caused. So I am not a perfect daughter. To my father, I don't want to be."

His smile faded as he realized she was not one of the brainwashed woman who had been proposed to him so far, girls who could only do as their father said and only waited to transfer that allegiance to him for the right price. She had a mind of her own and she wasn't afraid to show it. "If you are to wed already why has he brought you here?"

"Don't you see it? He is still looking for the better deal. All along, he has wanted a Senator or at least a Senator's son. He hasn't the money to attract one though. I suppose that

is why he dragged me here, to a birthday party of all things. His dowry isn't enough in the company I saw tonight so he thought one look at me would tip the scales." Her sea green eyes outlined in kohl, shaded with malachite dust, looked back at him; it was the only makeup she wore. Much less than any woman in Rome would dare be seen without leaving her room in the morning, which made it twice as little as any others there that night. The face he looked upon was all her own. There was nothing to disguise any flaws, she was stunning and so was the Arabian perfume that swirled around her in an expensive cloud.

"Any man Censor, Senator, or Plebian would be a fool not to have his scales tipped in your favor."

She smiled. The first smile he had seen from her. "You must be a friend of the birthday boy. If he is of the age to marry finally and with the number of parents here, tonight the offers must be flying thick. Just what has been offered to make a match tonight?"

"Many more than five million and that was the low end."

"And now you know why I am here to sweeten the pot."

"My mother would call that vain."

She laughed prettily. "Your mother hasn't endured being sold off like a sheep."

"That's not an excuse. All Roman daughters go through that, my mother included."

Her laugh settled into a wry grin. "It didn't take long for me to figure out why I have been dragged out here. He prefers to entertain his candidates at the brothels. There are some out there that actually have scruples though. Most of those he has tempted with me, I have heard that if only the dowry were higher they would undo the arrangements they had already made just from seeing me. Money obviously speaks louder than beauty or I wouldn't have been shuffled about as I have."

"How much may I ask is he offering?"

"Five hundred thousand sesterces."

"Your father plays with you if he offers such a paltry amount to tempt the Censor and a family such as this one, but if it was me for instance..." He paused not sure he should say what he was thinking, but in the end his reserve failed him. "I would take the offer without one sesterces in your dowry and the Censor would be a fool if he didn't see that a face and spirit like yours was worth the money lost from a more advantageous arrangement." Livia walked away from him, vanishing in the dark even though he knew she was only a few feet away.

"If I am going to stay, I am not going to do it spending my time talking of a man I loathe. What do you do with your life?"

"Doing my civic duty like everyone, waiting to get out from under my father's rule like any son my age." He didn't mention that his civic duty was as a Praetor, a judge - a quite prestigious title to have before one's name. Somehow, he doubted he would ever have found out so much if she had known he was the one being paraded around to entice.

"Somehow I doubt that. You don't look like anyone that sits around and waits for something to happen."

Claudius laughed heartily. "Perhaps you are right, perhaps I have caused him enough heartbreak already, and now I just bide my time until he has forgotten and sets me free."

Livia grinned. "I can see that a bit more."

"What sort of life do you have when your father isn't being so fickle?" She was silent for a time listening to the peacocks. Claudius walked over to her and found her standing as still as one of the statues that littered the grounds.

“My mother died when I was young so I spent much of my life being raised by my uncle and his wife on the Seleucia side of the city at the bridge across the Euphrates on the trade routes to the east.”

And that, Claudius thought, explained her well; it also explained the jewels. Seleucia held great fortunes in its fortified walls as the gateway to the east and its exotic goods.

“They treat me as their own child even now that I have my own house to live in. They raised me properly and gave me all the freedom I desired. They have given me the love my father refused me. I returned to enter into a marriage that was arranged even before I left for Seleucia when I was all of four. I came only because I knew I would spend no more than a few nights in my father’s house. That man was dead, dead for years. My father used it solely as a means to get me here so he could do this to me. I cannot take my own case to the courts since only males may see to such a thing. He watches me like a hawk to see that I do not write my uncle to come and plead my case. I know no one in the city to trust with such a task, or one who will not be frightened of my father once he finds out I am trying to leave. One of my brothers died in a posting in Alexandria and the other in a riding accident just outside the city. I am all that is left. I have no other family to turn to.”

“As well as your father’s last chance to ally himself with a worthy family.”

“Yes.” She practically spat the word out.

“While you are still free to associate with handsome young men, would you perhaps care to accompany me to a play tomorrow evening?”

“And cause my father scandal? I get in enough trouble contradicting his words.” The household dog ran over and she bent to rub its ears. The dozens of pearl and emerald necklaces fell aside. Dripping in them did not show taste or restraint like Cato advocated for the rich. In all other regards, she was quite restrained in her dress compared to the others there, but it did cover the bruises from what looked like someone half strangling her. The dark bruises showed up easily against her fair skin even with only the moonlight to see by. Despite that he didn’t know her name, he ran his finger gently over one of the bruises. She shivered slightly and he knew it wasn’t from the cool evening.

She felt no shame in his finding out about them. Even she didn’t understand why she was talking of them at all, even why she told him so much of her life. All she could figure was she needed someone to talk to. “I refused to wear as many jewels as he wanted me to tempt the esteemed Censor so he gave me a reason to wear them.”

Claudius’s throat went dry as he stood once more. “One word to the Censor and he will be punished for what he has done.” He whispered, having trouble bringing it to words. Women may not have had as many rights as men, but their men were expected to protect them to the point they didn’t need them.

“You’re assuming I would survive the night in his house if I said one word that would get him in trouble.” He ran his finger over the bruise again. “But perhaps if I cause a little scandal, the old bastard I am to marry will think again about his choice of a wife.”

Claudius smiled faintly. “You don’t even know my name. I might be more of a scandal than even you want to take on.”

She smiled back like an image of Venus herself. “I’m not saying yes to take to your bed, I’m not even saying yes to being alone with you. I think the theatre is safe enough for a first scandal, don’t you think?”

He laughed. “I am Claudius.”

“Livia.”

A slave appeared at her side and he saw her jump. She truly was scared of her father; it surprised him that she had contemplated what she did so easily knowing the consequences could be painful.

“My lady, your father is eager to find where you had gone to. He is ready to talk to the Censor about your suit.”

“Tell him I left, he can talk to the Censor himself. He should have told me why he was bringing me and yes, you can tell him I’ll not help him catch another one. Claudius I will see you tomorrow evening near the Viminalis gate. The villa is grey marble with an iron door, across from the fountain.” Before the slave could answer, she had headed for the gate and her chair to take her home. Claudius quite enjoyed the view as she left, but he worried about what bruises she might have to hide from such defiance.

“Sir?” The stout Gaulish slave asked quietly.

“Yes, Lapidacus.”

“You did not tell her that her father was going to discuss you, did you?”

“If her father found out I was interested in her, he would sell her like an unwanted piece of furniture.”

“Isn’t that what all of them are here to do? Try to sell their daughter to your family for the highest price?”

“He’s engaged her six times in six months and the seventh is arranged to marry her in a few weeks.”

“You, too, shall have an arrangement by the end of the evening.”

Claudius shifted his gaze a bit saddened. “I know.” Lapidacus started to walk off. “Tell my father not to speak to her father. Do that instead of telling her father she left. I don’t know her father’s name though.”

“She is Livia Pollia, Sir. Her father Annius is a Praetor as well.” Claudius looked back at the gate where she had disappeared, at last realizing why she was as trapped as she was. He had the power in his own right to see she was barred from leaving the city. He hadn’t the need to go to anyone for the favor.

“Is there a chance, sir, that she will be the one that your father chooses? How will you ever know if they never talk?”

“Forty fathers, Lapidacus, the odds are slim it would be her, in view of what she told me. Just keep my father from talking to him, only have him not do it by actually forbidding it. That might get her father suspicious about why. Hopefully he will be too mad at being put off to realize she left before it became a lost cause.”

“Yes, sir.” Lapidacus left him there in the garden with the sound of the peacocks in the night.

Claudius let out a deep breath. “It may save you one beating at least.” He muttered to the woman that was unable to hear him before he went back to the party and drank heavily to numb his ears about money and nothing.

** *Chapter 2* **

Livia answered the door when Claudius knocked, but she did not ask him in. She was dressed much more sedately in a fine pale yellow linen stola, but she still wore more necklaces than usual to cover her neck, this time in warm honeyed amber and deep red carnelian. Of course, she could have worn anything and he would have thought her a vision. Claudius was having a hard time consoling himself that he would have to marry another when he saw her again. Her hair was much simpler in the Greek style held with only a single ribbon. Beautiful and yet not requiring hours to obtain or for that matter a maid which might give her father cause to wonder why she spent so much time on her toilet.

“What about your father?”

“He dines with the old man tonight. They are to retire to the brothels afterwards. He’ll not find me gone unless I don’t return until dawn.”

“Was that any of your doing?”

She shook her head slowly. “He goes almost every night. It is a faithful habit of his. I just take advantage of it as often as possible.” Livia closed the door behind them and hailed a litter for them, a hired one not of the house that could tell of where she went and had loyalty to another. They rode for a ways in silence.

“Livia, I don’t want you to get hurt. I can help you.” Her leaving still worried him. Of course, he could always just not let her go back. That idea was having more and more advantages every time he looked at her. In full light, he could see that she was tanned from her life in the east, not using any means to lighten it into Roman fashion or having hidden from the sun in the first place. She in fact wore no makeup at all. He was beginning to see the advantages to a woman that didn’t fuss over her appearance. He could never convince those that didn’t possess such skin and features as hers to adopt the practice. His own mother resorted to more and more to keep her youthful appearance every time he returned. Livia met his gaze with cold eyes. The warmth he had seen in them the night before had vanished. It was as if she was a different woman all together. A woman that was just as alluring and sensual, but now he saw hardness, strength, and pride.

“You just met me yesterday. What am I to you?”

“Do you think you can tell me how you are beaten and then not have me worry about causing it by coming out with me? I have a bit more feelings than a gladiator that you may have slipped out to see trying to cause a scandal already.” She slapped him hard before he ever saw it coming. Claudius had no chance to defend himself. She had strength to her and he saw red for a moment. When he opened his eyes she was just leaning close to his face and her perfume assailed his nose again not overpowering, just enough to be tantalizing. It was an alluring scent that sent his memories back to his travels further east.

Her words came out in a whisper, but there was no disguising the anger in them. “If I try to leave the gates of Rome, I am stopped and my father beats me for it. I am no bored wife that looks to keep herself amused. I choose to see such things undone before I become no better than them. I was hoping that perhaps I was finding I had a reason not to leave the gates. I usually pride myself on my judgment of people I must have been wrong last night. Let me out of the litter, I’ll walk back.”

He grabbed her hand and it stopped her from calling out to the bearers. He had

misjudged her in regards to the new elements he had seen. They were the judgments of one trying to find a fault, trying to find a reason to push her away. He took a breath realizing that if he was trying that hard, he knew he had truly found the woman he wanted to marry.

“Livia, I am sorry for what I said. My own engagement is soon to be announced and I can assure you they would not have worried about sinking so low in doing such a thing.” Claudius couldn’t stop the words from coming out of his mouth. “I fear that I won’t want to be without you now that I have seen you again.”

“I think the fighting you did dulled your wits. No one in their right mind would take on my father. He won’t listen to anyone else. Not as long as he thinks he’s better than everyone.”

“Maybe you should just take your case before Emperor Trajanus and see if your father finds him impressive enough.”

She laughed, but the sound of it wasn’t in the least happy. “And just who would take my case to him for me? You? What would that wife to be of yours think?”

“I could not care less what someone else may think. I am not wed yet.” He could see her freeze literally.

But then she reached over with her handkerchief and dabbed at the corner of his mouth. When she pulled it away, he could see she had drawn blood. The ring she wore had stung him. Her voice and look had softened. She was once again the woman he had met the night before. “Do you listen to nothing I say? It’s foolish to go against him unless . . .” Claudius said nothing, knowing the truth had already dawned on her. “You know what I think and you don’t argue with me.” She spoke little more than a whisper. He smiled faintly even if she had just slapped him. “Then you think me a fool?” She looked up at him and he knew that she was conflicted as well as a little bit confused.

“I never told you I fought,” he added changing the subject. She held out his hand and ran her fingers over his palms. When she lifted her eyes, his breathing stopped.

“I felt the calluses last night when you touched my bruises. You are far too refined to have gotten them through honest labor. That left only fighting. Would it by any chance be what your father does not forget?”

“It was a decision he fought with all his breath. He said he had me destined for higher things. Of course, I served with Trajanus himself. It did more for my career than he thought it would. I still practice even if it has been several years since I fought in earnest. I must say I could have used an arm like yours in battle a few times.”

She tried to hide the smile, but in the end, it won out. “I’m not going to say I’m sorry for doing it after that comment. You deserved it.”

“True.” He started to smile himself and then she changed the subject.

“Do you think me a fool?” She asked again.

The smile fell from his face without effort. “Never.”

“If you don’t think me a fool then what am I? I studied the arts of a wife, spinning, weaving, sewing, dance, singing, and music. I have studied the arts of men as well. Greek, law, philosophy, mathematics, literature, science. My uncle saw to it that I learned his business. I have the skill of bargaining learned well, I have traveled the empire in his search for new wares to bring to Rome and make a fortune that few can match. In spite of all that I can’t figure out what you are playing at?”

Claudius pressed his palms against his eyes. He could still feel the effects of the wine from the night before. It was afternoon before he had woken, not sure how he had found his way across the city to his bed in the apartment he kept. “Livia, I am not playing at anything. I was

tired of all the talk inside and I found someone I enjoyed meeting immensely, that I was a praetor did not seem important. It figured in none of the conversation. I will admit I watched my words when I realized you didn't know who I was. I have wealth, I have position, I have power. For the Gods' sake, I have the ear of the Emperor, but when it comes to women, none see anything more than a large bank vault. That was my house last night, my birthday party, my father the Censor. I am very good at my job. As a judge, I have seen every kind of person and I would say that you do not care about any of that even if you have all the trappings of it yourself."

Her eyes narrowed. She would give him no quarter. "If you are to be engaged yourself, why, pray tell, did you ask me to come tonight?"

He pulled his hands away from his face and looked her full in those sea green eyes. "Because I know which woman I should like to marry even if the choice is not mine to make."

She turned away from him staring out a gap in the litter's drapes. "Is there somewhere we could go and just talk? I doubt I shall get much of a chance once I am married. At home, I am all but a prisoner and ignored. I can go to a play anytime."

"That truly will create a scandal." She didn't turn to look at him and she did not smile, but he could see she was pale. He had truly shocked her. Claudius called out to the bearers giving them directions to a new address.

Livia hardly heard, the declaration he made showed her situation all the more evident and in fact showed her, how hopeless it was. A bit of flirting had been a diversion for a day, but he had no more choice than she did. It was only when she noticed the seedy neighborhood they were traveling through, the Aventine Hill section of Rome, that she came back to reality.

"Where are we?"

"I keep an apartment here. I have many friends from the army that wouldn't feel quite comfortable at my father's house. You don't mind coming to this part of town, do you? I thought if you wish to keep this from gossip, it would be far quieter. There is the house you were at last night we could go to as well."

She smiled faintly at last.

"Before you decide who it is you wish to marry you should perhaps find out that this one anyway spent quite a number of her days in markets haggling over the collection of jewels you see, even if my uncle could pay the price they asked and then some. As well, I traveled to the far reaches of the empire with my uncle in search of goods that Rome craves. I have spent more of my days in rough company than you, even if I never served in the Army. That was my entire life."

"In this case you'd find that it only tipped you more in my favor." They came to a stop not much further down the road while Livia still blushed from his words. She seemed to put more stock in what he said when it wasn't only in praise of her face; she had obviously heard such praise before and thought little of it. Claudius showed her to a second floor apartment to which he opened the door. It was no hovel, but neither was it a showplace of any caliber. The whitewashed walls were dingy from years of cooking fires. The furniture was sparse and basic, but it was clean. Claudius froze when he heard a voice out of a room that should have been unoccupied.

"It seems that this is the only way I can find you. You never showed up for breakfast this morning."

"Father." When Claudius stepped aside and Livia was visible, it was his father's turn to stop in surprise. The speaker was a tall man wrapped in his senatorial toga; hair not yet grayed and still very fit for his age. He had to go to the gym every day or by the grandness of his

clothes, he perhaps had one in his own home. "This is Livia Pollia."

His dark brown eyes narrowed as he recognized the name.

"I see you spent the day checking up on me. I am at the disadvantage." She murmured, but Claudius only smiled at the accusation as he pulled out a chair for her.

His eyes sparkled with amusement. The smile stayed there until he looked back at his father. It was not replaced with fear though, instead a business-like attitude. He had defied him before. He was not above doing it again.

"I assume you are seeking me out to inform me who I am to marry and how much it brought you. They must have been unforgivably demanding to meet me for you to come here. We both know how much you loathe the idea of this place."

"No, I came to ask you who it is you would marry, but the answer is rather evident under the circumstances."

Claudius's head spun quickly in his father's direction as he heated up some wine to offer his guests. "What?"

"You've had the chance to meet all the candidates as have your mother and I. We only invited the ones we felt were worthy. As my only son, we prefer you to be happy as well as connected. I don't remember us ever saying that we should make the decision for you, though I could understand how you thought it might be the case. You are a Praetor son; you don't get that position if you haven't proven yourself a man."

"I don't think you mean me." Livia murmured to herself.

Claudius's father heard her and smiled. "Cato, the highly regarded Senator, Titus Livius, the historian, were both in your mother's family as well as many being among the first Senators elected when the Republic was formed some three hundred years ago when being a Senator actually meant something, not to mention a dozen consuls of Rome as well. If legend can be believed, you are even descended from Aeneas, King of Latium. You are the last of that great line. Yes, your father pushed that on me every time he saw me last night. I found it very strange when the slave came telling me not to meet with him privately and it was my son that gave the request."

Her head shot up and he saw her sea green eyes for the first time. There was a hell of a lot more than just lineage showing in them. It was no wonder his son had chosen her. "What had you planned, son, making her your mistress if you didn't know of our decision until just now?"

Claudius turned to his father as Livia went to the window as far across the room as she could get. She twirled the cup of wine in her hand absentmindedly. Claudius looked over at her and the sparkle in his eyes grew. "Seeing her tonight, perhaps I was thinking of defying you again even if she never told me of her family's ancestors. I can see she is no woman who would consider being a mistress. I have always thought of her as my choice for wife"

"So let's go to her father and make the arrangements." His father Gaius, announced as if he was at Senate orating to the assembled Curia.

"I am engaged to be married. The wedding is to take place in a month." Livia announced from across the room.

Gaius spun in her direction. "You knew of this, son?"

Claudius nodded as he poured himself another glass of wine. "Her father took her last night without even telling her the name of the man who it was for. I was annoyed at everyone in sight and she told me a bit more than I think she wanted to say to someone she didn't know. Which is probably why she is over there away from us? Seven engagements in six months, her

father would readily break that one too if we showed interest, but officially she is not able to marry. And knowing what I do know, I don't think she would want to give her father the satisfaction of getting what he wants."

Claudius walked over to her. His back kept them shielded from the gaze of his father. Still she leaned out the window as if it would keep her from his father's gaze even more.

"You met me only yesterday." Claudius reached over and ran a callused finger along her neck. His fingers brushed aside the necklaces and the bruises jumped out at him dark against her skin.

"Most marriages in Rome are made of less. You can decide yourself that I am not an ass your father has arranged for you before you are stuck with me for good."

Livia snorted in disbelief. "Should I trust such words? There seems to be much that you have left out of what you tell me."

"I may have kept some from you last night, but I swear you have heard all I have to hide now. You seem to me one that has a few secrets of her own to keep. I have only one question. Do you wish to trust your father's judgment in the matter or your own?"

"Do you always know what to say?"

He smiled. "My posting gives me lots of practice at taking people's measure."

"And here I thought you'd be saying something romantic if you're trying so hard to impress me."

Claudius couldn't help but laugh. Her own countenance remained stony. She resembled one of the statues from the night before. "I didn't think it proper to make such overtures to a lady I hardly know."

"And proposing marriage is?"

"You've never even met the men your father was to have you marry."

"True." She whispered so quietly he could hardly hear her.

"You still haven't answered the question."

"Which one? Should I marry or should my father pay?"

"You make it sound like it is only a way to get out of an undesirable marriage."

Livia turned to him at that. "A moment ago I should marry you without knowing anything about you. Are you fussy or is it that you wish to hear that I find you handsome, well dressed, and distinguished. I know nothing else of you and you have told me nothing else."

"At least you didn't say rich, propertied, and powerful."

Livia shook her head. "I have money enough to make my own life. What I don't have is freedom. Should I jump in to this with both feet and possibly find myself with a man worse than my father. You are right, there are secrets of my own that I have not told you. They are all reasons I would think twice about marrying any man I did not know."

"You know whose son I am. That doesn't tell you anything?"

She stood, her full height letting her almost look him in the eyes. "I arrived in Rome six months ago. I haven't lived here since I was five. I know no one to ask such questions of except my father. A man I have to fear stealing my own property so that I cannot even leave it in the house. My procurator has to visit the vault boxes every time I go out just so I can put on my own jewels. Then he has to return them to their place even before I sleep else they are gone in the morning. Had I known he turned into a thief, I would have left them at home. Had I known he would beat me . . ." She stopped what she was saying unable to continue the thought. "Had I known his purpose, I never would have come at all."

The cloud of perfume filled his nose again and he couldn't help the words coming out.

“Then I never would have met you.”

“What makes you so sure I am the one you want to marry?”

“The most beautiful woman there last night was all but ignoring the son of one of the richest men in Rome and one of the most powerful Senators in the city, a Censor no less.”

“You know I didn’t know who you were.” Livia leaned back out the window. “No wonder my father beat me when he found out I left.”

“What? How did he find out? I had the slave not tell him what you said and not have my father speak to him.”

She smiled faintly at the thought of what he had done, even though she knew it would have put her out of the running with his father, but obviously not with Claudius himself. His face had fallen at her words; she could see he was devastated to hear such a thing. “You forgot the bearers of my father’s litter. Father came home in a terror, but none so much as when it was mentioned I had been home for hours.” Claudius laid a hand on her back in comfort and she bit back a cry of pain he never saw. There was a long silence as the sounds of the street rattled below them. “I will marry you Claudius.”

“To escape your marriage plans and your father?”

“No.” He had been avoiding looking at her after he had found out he hadn’t prevented another beating. “To live with a man that finds the way I have been treated deplorable, it is the best start I have been offered in all of this.” Livia smiled faintly, the first he had seen from her in some time. “And to one like I wished my father would find for me and never did.”

“She has accepted, father.” Claudius called out.

Gaius came over with an expansive smile. “Good. Good. Then we’ll go see your father in the morning.”

“No.” Livia snapped. “Claudius is right. I won’t let him have the satisfaction of getting what he wants.”

“Then what are you going to do? Negotiate this yourself?”

“Father, in jest I had told her I would take her without a single sesterces in her dowry. It wouldn’t be right for me to take one now. In truth, there are no negotiations to worry about.”

“But . . .” Gaius finally got after a stammer or two.

“My Uncle Marius has been my guardian since I was five. When he arrives, you can deal with him. He can sign the documents in my father’s place. He will have my best interest in mind and not his bank balance. He is also a lawyer so he is well suited to the task.”

Gaius rubbed his chin in thought as he walked across the room. “Ah yes, the uncle. You do realize if he hadn’t raised you there would have been no invitation last night. It is you and your uncle who impressed Aelia and me. But I do have one question: your mother’s family is well documented, but I have heard nothing about your father or his family. Why do you defy him so?”

Livia returned to the table, her face bent over her cup as if she could see the past in it. “My grandfather was just a plebeian who was importing goods and then overnight, it suddenly came into fashion. He was one of the few that were set for the transporting of goods and he became wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. My father and uncle were just toddlers at the time so he bought a villa and slaves and had them educated as well as any patrician while he sought public office. My grandfather was elected Senator, after a long career as Tribune and several other positions that plebeians can hold. My father, it was decided, should go into public service and my uncle into law. It was time for them to marry. My grandfather offered huge amounts to the families he thought worthy enough. When I say huge I mean staggering. None of this five

hundred thousand sesterces that my father thinks will attract a man worthy of his ego. My mother's family accepted, as did my aunt, who is descended from Marcus Antonius. Things were fine until my grandfather died. My uncle wasn't settled being a lawyer and he left for Seleucia. My father wasn't the businessman that either of them was. The trade that had made him wealthy could have continued to keep him in gold and slaves, but he wanted to play the great socialite and he left the running of the business to others. Orgies, banquets until dawn where they vomited to be able to keep eating the rest of the night, mistresses, and brothels, those became his business. My mother tried to deal with what was happening, but she had no authority to change things with my father still here. If he had left, she could have replaced the men, but when they started stealing, there was nothing for her to do as he kept spending while nothing was coming in. He refused to curtail his spending to accommodate that. He wanted to become Quaestor and he spent lavishly throwing games and spectacles to gain the favor of the voters. He lost and, to top it off, he was so far in debt it was laughable even in a city where almost everyone is. My Uncle Marius gave him a loan once. He engages in the common trade of luxury goods, but it makes him more money than even my grandfather's business and my father hates him for it. If he had handled that loan properly, he could have turned his fortunes around, but that too is gone now. No one in the city will loan him any more. He has defaulted in paying back those that loaned him the money to repay the original loans. The common story is that my mother died about that time, and she did die, but what is not known is that I was witness to her death. I may have been only five, but one remembers their father beating their mother to death."

"Jupiter forget having him thrown out of the senate. I'll have him stripped of citizenship if not thrown to the lions!" Giaus roared. "Do you have any proof of this?" He asked as an afterthought. All he saw was fear in her eyes, everything he had seen before was gone.

Then she felt strong hands slip onto her shoulders. Livia leaned back against Claudius without really thinking that she hardly knew him. He was the only real support she had. Claudius took it as permission to show the bruises. His fingers pushed aside the amber and carnelian and she watched Giaus pale.

"If he knew you had seen him do such a thing, why did he send you to your uncle? You could have told him?"

"My father never saw me there. One of the slaves came and found me and before my father realized what was going on, he got permission to take me to my uncle."

"And your uncle has never done anything about it?"

Her eyes rose from the cup in her hands. "I never told him. He has raised me like one of his own, paying for me to survive, if nothing else. All of my finery on top of that, taking me on travels across the empire, seeing me educated. He is the one that paid for everything. He loved me when I had lost it from my own parents. It would bring scandal to the family that is not so benign. I think he has suspicions of how my mother died, but he doesn't know I could prove it. I'm sure my uncle thinks me long wed and halfway towards starting a family."

Claudius grinned. "We could always start on that so as not to disappoint him."

"Claudius!" Giaus gasped. "You would say such things in front of your father. Children Aghhh! I'm leaving." His somewhat overacted anger faded as he looked back at Livia with a wink. "I will see what I can do about your father. Morals have gotten more than one man in trouble with the Censors, let alone a Senator beating that which should be sacred to him especially considering you have the best blood lines I think I have ever heard. You could have gained him great favor. I think I see your point about not letting him get what he wants." He elegantly draped his toga around him before taking his leave of them. He would give the

neighbors something to take about for some time to come. They were silent for a time as the fact that they were truly alone sank in, but Claudius didn't move from her side while she rested against him.

"I should be getting home."

"Are you hungry?" He asked ignoring her words.

"A bit."

Claudius started to pull some food down from the shelf, but he froze when he turned back to ask her to get the plates. Blood was seeping through her tunic in a dark red pool. His own tunic was covered as well where she had leaned back against him.

"Livia." She turned around without a clue as to what was wrong. "You're bleeding. You should never have left bed this morning."

"It's not as bad as all that."

"I'll be the judge of that." He slowly undid the fasteners for her stola at the shoulders. He pulled down the fabric carefully, only to find she had been bound tightly with linen strips. A knife from the shelf quickly slit it open. When he finally pulled the bandages away, it was to find her back a bruised and bloody mess. He had been in war and still he felt like gagging. He knew that it was more because it had been done to her of all people than the actual damage.

"Why did you come and meet me at all?"

"You have to ask?"

Claudius smiled to himself. He obviously wasn't the only one that had been interested the night before. His smile from her answer faded as he swore he could see the outline of a signet ring in one of the bruises.

Livia gasped as he wiped away the blood. "I'm sorry." He whispered for the pain that he was causing her.

"It doesn't really hurt as bad as it looks."

Claudius saw a tear slid down her cheek and he knew she was lying. The real reason she had grown pale and withdrawn at times was clearly not her being offended at what he said, not all the time anyway. "You are not going back."

"He'll take it out on my slaves if I don't. I won't have them beaten in my place."

"I'll go get them and see them safe before he returns." He silently went back to cleaning her wounds. "No, I'll go get Lucius and send him to get them out of there."

"What are you thinking?"

Claudius smiled to himself. "Lucius would brook no objections if he demanded anything from your father's house even if it wasn't yours. After his stint in the Army, he's been a trainer for the gladiators."

"No, what are you thinking with regards to me?"

"A little Roman scandal should do your father nicely. You cavorting around the Aventine and with few knowing I am the Censor's son, I think we can see he truly falls. You wouldn't mind living with me here, would you? After all you said you were use to rougher accommodations."

"Bring me a tablet to send instructions. Chrysogonus, my procurator, won't do anything without my say even if it means escaping my father. He wouldn't leave me there alone with him if he thought Lucius was wrong and I would come back later."

Claudius returned with a tablet and watched her as she wrote. "How many slaves do you have?"

"Only four here, my procurator, my ladies maid, a cook and a masseuse. Why?"

He went back to cleaning her back. "Wait a minute; what do you mean here?"

She smiled even as he heard her gasp when he found a particularly tender spot. "Women may own property that their fathers cannot touch legally though I know for a fact my father has been proclaiming what I own far and wide as his."

"A few slaves, a bit of jewelry I can see, you made it sound like more than that."

Her smile grew wider. "You weren't the only one that kept a secret last night. Yes, my dowry is five hundred thousand but my father has been banking on what I own to draw more flies to his insignificant offering. The largest jewelry collection in all of Seleucia, houses in the resorts of Baeie and Surrentum, a villa in Seleucia, enough Syrian cameo glass to feed a banquet, scrolls enough to fill a large library, and as your father mentioned, I am the last of the line that made him invite me in the first place. I inherited a great deal of property when my uncle died heirless. It was after my mother, and then brothers died only a few years ago that I became rich, ten farms across the empire. It would have been divided among us all, with the main share going to my brothers. Only a farm in Etruria was to have been mine as part of my dowry. I am sure that the message was sent for me to come back as soon as my father realized all that was now mine."

"Do you think my father knew of this property?"

Livia harrumphed. "Do you think my father would leave those facts out when tempting a Censor? Whatever I bring with me, I'm sure it is still far less than what the others would have brought to a marriage?"

"You'd be wrong." Claudius muttered.

Livia looked up at his words as she pressed her seal into the wax tablet and handed it to him. "I have a thorough education including not only the history of my family, but also of Rome's history. You have heard my relations include Cato renowned for his condemning of excess luxury. When my father is not leaving bruises I need to cover, I rarely wear jewels and elaborate silks even though I do own a great deal of them. I have studied the Gracchi. . ."

"A few shouldn't own all the land while many crowd together in Rome. You gave it to the farmers, didn't you?"

Livia smiled. "Do you disapprove?"

"I would rather say I am impressed you would give it all away."

Her eyes were getting heavy, but he still saw the sparkle in those sea green eyes. "Not all of it. I still have the villas and I kept four of the farms, the most profitable ones, but yes, I gave six of them to the farmers. I couldn't get rid of my entire source of income and I am still a wealthy woman just not to excess."

"Who decided what was to excess?"

"Not my father. It was carried out before I left. He doesn't even know of this little change of ownership that makes me worth less."

"Never."

She smiled shyly. "You'll have to bring Chrysogonus to see me or he won't be satisfied."

"Very well."

"He'll bring what I have with him. You may want it sent to the villa. I was expecting to marry after all. It would make it a bit of a tight walk around here."

"I'll go send Lucius while you get some sleep."

"You don't have to do any of this. You have the choice now to pick anyone with a lot less problems than me."

“Life was getting boring anyway. I have a feeling if nothing else, you’ll keep it interesting.” Claudius watched her eyes close slowly with a faint smile on her mouth. Once she was able to admit she was hurting, she wasn’t able to fight sleep any longer. He picked her up and carried her to the bed before he went to start spreading a little scandal.

* * * *

The night was advanced when there was a knock at the door. Claudius opened his eyes not realizing he had fallen asleep waiting for their return. He couldn’t rest easy until he knew it was taken care of. The lamps were low when he let in Lucius and Chrysogonus. The latter was not what he expected given his name meant golden one. He was a small, older man who looked quite sickly, but he moved with surprising speed so it was obviously deceptive. He could have been a handsome man if his lip wasn’t cleft in two.

“Where is she?” he demanded. As she had predicted, he wasn’t going to be happy until he had seen her in the flesh.

“In the bedroom sleeping.”

“Show me. I want to know this isn’t some trick of Annius.” He was a man used to getting his own way but that wasn’t why Claudius opened the door. The blanket had fallen away leaving her back uncovered. Chrysogonus gasped.

“You didn’t know she was like that?”

“I . . . I . . . She didn’t tell me. Her maid only told me of bandaging her up after she had left. If she was up and moving, I assumed it wasn’t that bad. He has never put her in a sick bed so people wouldn’t talk.” Lucius stood behind them, but because of his height, he could see over both of their heads.

“I’ll go get my wife. She has skill with wounds.” He didn’t wait for a reply walking off before Chrysogonus could find his tongue.

“She had to patch you up enough times it must have saved you a fortune.” Claudius said after him. Lucius only smiled as he slipped out the door. “Her things were deposited at the villa?”

“Yes, but if you were borrowing the villa, couldn’t you have moved her there as well. She was brought up to better surroundings than these.”

“It is his villa and there is less chance of my father finding me here. One of the slaves might have seen who I left with.” Chrysogonus looked over at Claudius before he noticed that his mistress had been the one to speak. She had fastened her clothes around her and was coming into the main room.

“But this place.” He spoke with great disdain as he looked around.

“This place is no worse than many I stayed at with my uncle when we left on trips and you stayed at home in luxury. Keep a civil tongue in your head for he is the man I have agreed to marry.”

Chrysogonus choked on his own saliva. “What?” He finally got out. “Do you know whose blood she possesses? You’re not fit to be her slave.”

“How are you feeling?” Claudius asked ignoring the protesting as he handed her a glass of wine. Sea green eyes looked up at him with perhaps more than he could have hoped from a woman he had met only the day before.

“Better. Do you wish to introduce yourself before my procurator has a fit and we have to see to his funeral?”

Claudius smiled knowing with a comment like that she truly was feeling better. "I am Praetor Claudius Quintus Gallus at one time Lieutenant to Trajanus in his conquest of Dacia. I am only son to Censor Gaius Quintus Gallus who is one of the richest men in Rome as well as one of the more influential in the Senate. And if it influences you at all: no, my father's position did not get me out of the danger of fighting. I was in the thick of it. While I may not have quite the impressive lineage that your mistress does, I would think I am still a good match for her as husband."

"But the old man . . ."

"Will not be a problem." Livia announced emphatically.

"Yes, Madam. I brought some clothes though if you had told me where you were staying I would have chosen some that were a bit more appropriate for your surroundings."

"We can go to the market and get some or you can bring me others tomorrow. It is not a problem. Why don't you go back to the villa, Chrysogonus? Get some sleep without worrying what my father will do to me. I'll be all right here. Perhaps busy yourself with getting my things arranged in the villa if that is all right with Claudius." The slaves' eyes jerked to him waiting for an answer as if he would deny her the right to rule her new home.

"You are the matron of the house. It is yours to command, Livia." Chrysogonus looked at her for a long time after he got Claudius's answer before he nodded slowly and walked to the door.

"There should be a litter at the corner you can get to take you. I know it is unfinished. My father wished to allow my wife to choose the decorations. You just have to ask Lapidacus for anything you need to decorate the house. Your mistress need not spend a coin on that work or anything you might need for your own keep."

"Chrysogonus." The small man turned around at his mistress's call. "We're going to get him back for what he's done to both of us. That is why I stay here." They watched the grin form on his lips half in the shadows just before he disappeared.

"Dare I ask what your father did to him?"

"His lip is not natural; it was my father's outrage for spilling his wine. That is only the noticeable one. He was the one that finagled the permission to take me to my uncle. He was escaping him as much as he was saving me." Lucius didn't even knock he just walked in with his wife. They were a contrast in the most obvious way. He was tall and stocky while she was short and petite.

"Damiane will have her right as rain in no time."

"She won't be the first prostitute I've patched up." She said it before she saw the woman sitting at the table. They heard her gasp when she walked in far enough to see her patient. There was no doubt the woman before her was one of the highest class of Rome, fine linen, jewels, and the finest skin she had ever seen before. "Oh Venus, I'm sorry. Lucius didn't say who it was before. He just said someone had been beaten."

"I can assure you even patricians are not immune to the practice." Livia offered to give the woman a hand out of her self-dug hole. "Would you prefer the bedroom to work?" Damiane nodded cautiously as a cry broke the dulled sounds of night.

"Go, Lucius, we don't want the entire street to hate us in the morning."

"With all this racket, they probably already do." Lucius left and it wasn't long before the cries stopped. Claudius was left alone and started supper he had forgotten about with her asleep. He tried to block out the cries now and then that he knew didn't belong to a small child across the lane. Livia finally emerged wearing one of his tunics and sat down at the table digging with

relish into the food lying there. Damiane looked from one to the other for a moment. She'd never really looked at him until then. Claudius never acted better than any of the rest of her husband's Army pals and it was true Lucius always came back with the same amount of money as he had when he left when they went out drinking.

"Who are you, Claudius?"

He looked up at her with a grin.

"Your husband never told you about me I take it? I suppose you're wondering what bum like me is doing with such a lady."

"The thought crossed my mind."

Claudius settled back in his chair. "Where did Lucius get the money to pay the rent when you were lying there near death and he stayed home to nurse you and had no income?" Her movements became very slow and deliberate as she turned her gaze back to him. His grin was pure deviltry.

"You mean you're Praetor Gallus."

"Then he did tell you."

"But not that you were he? He just made sure you were invited to dinner when I was well enough, which hasn't been so long ago. That's all I knew."

"Lucius is one of the few that knows my full name and position and it is not the only time I have given him money when I knew he needed it to get by."

"But why would you even think of living here when you could have so much?"

"I found I have true friends from serving in the army among those that live around here. I have this apartment so that I may entertain them in a manner they are comfortable with. There are other properties that fit my position."

She was nodding faintly, hardly even thinking about it. "And who is Livia then?"

"She is the woman I am going to marry."

Damiane smiled briefly. "I'll be getting back. Lucius may keep him quiet for a time, but it's food he wants. I expect to be invited to the wedding." Claudius saw her out.

Damiane whispered as they stood outside the door, "The bastard who did that to her, he knew just what he was doing! I'd swear it wasn't in anger. It had to have been on purpose to be that precise, not a blow that would be seen outside her clothing. Men like that should be thrown to the lions." She spun on her heel cursing men as she walked across the street and Claudius locked the door.

The night closed in around them once more as they ate. Livia sat upright once she was satisfied. "Would you believe this is the first time I've ever been alone in a room with a man without my servants or family?" Claudius looked up to see that she was blushing faintly at admitting such a fact.

"Why would you tell me such a thing?"

Her grin grew out of the blush and he wasn't sure that she was all that embarrassed and instead it was just an act. "Well, I had friends tell me that if such a thing ever happened, the poor girl would be tortured and ravaged on the spot and her honor and that of her family would be destroyed forever."

"But that's not what you were told?" He asked playing a hunch that she was playing with him.

"Oh, no." Livia grinned anew and his heart jumped to his throat. She sat there in one of his own tunics, the jewels, silks, and makeup gone and she still made his stomach flutter at the thought. "My aunt only had boys and so I was the only one to receive such tutelage from her. It

was her hope that if I learned all I could, it would give my husband no reason to resort to a brothel or mistress. She was a firm believer in having a full-married life even if her own husband was arranged for her. She told me that if I ever found myself alone with a strange man, it was a fine opportunity.”

“And did it work?”

“I never saw my uncle without a smile on his face.”

Claudius laughed. “Your uncle could have just as easily ended up a cuckold.”

“Well she had told me the only time I would be alone with a man would be on my wedding night. She was a firm believer in not bringing scandal to husband or father.”

“And yet you proposed scandal just last night.”

Her smile didn’t fade. “I don’t always listen to my elders. You should have figured that out by now. I’m only surprised you haven’t taken advantage of my current scandalous feelings. There is a look in your eyes that shouts things officials shouldn’t do.”

He reached over and pulled free the ribbon that held her hair. Dark brown silk fell past her shoulders. “I’m sure I’ll overcome my upbringing that always said never to take advantage of a Senator’s daughter, keep those actions to the lower sorts of women.”

Livia’s laugh was pure golden sunshine even in the dead of night. “Go back and get some more sleep. Tomorrow we go see Trajanus.”

Livia kissed his forehead before she headed to the bedroom. “It’s a good thing you were brought up well then. The way I feel, I have no energy to fight you off. Tomorrow I may slap you again for all I know.” She called over her shoulder as she disappeared behind the door. Claudius only smiled knowing she would surely keep life interesting. He wasn’t too worried about being slapped again though as he cleaned up. He was wondering more about what else her aunt had taught her.

** *Chapter 3* **

The purple curtain enclosing the Emperor's chambers was pulled back showing the man busy at his desk. He looked up at the intrusion, only one of many already that morning. The Emperor was a man of strong features, chiseled and rugged. His clothes were modest for the position he held, but it was known he could dress lavishly to impress when the situation called for it. In some ways, he was still the soldier he had been most of his life before he had been adopted and Caesar added to his name. He had been the best hope for Rome when Emperor Marcus Cocceius Nerva had looked around for an heir to adopt. To his credit, he was already one of the most popular emperors to have held the post.

"Ah, Claudius, my friend. I have a posting idea for you that I think you'll appreciate."

"Actually I am here on another matter, one a bit more personal."

Trajanus pushed aside his scrolls and stood. "Come let's go for a walk in the garden. I have been sitting here long enough. I think my hand is about to fall asleep." He walked closer and it was only then he saw Livia. She had hung back without Claudius knowing it. "So this is Livia Pollia?"

Claudius started smiling. Livia's color was back to normal. She no longer looked pale and drawn. She had outdone herself for an audience before the emperor. The dark green silk stola made her eyes look like they were jewels themselves and she had adorned herself in matching malachite and gold. He looked back at her with a smile. "My father has already been here this morning with that comment."

"Yes and she agreed to marry you last night, I heard as well. Lucky man."

"He told you that her father doesn't know?"

"That's about all he told me. He figured you'd be here and that you would prefer me to hear it from you. Mostly he wanted to discuss getting a man thrown out of Rome."

Livia sat by the fountain and trailed her fingers in the water.

"Her father." Claudius murmured.

Trajanus's eyebrows rose incredulously. "Some would say that would greatly diminish her value as a wife."

Livia looked up. She may have seemed to look as if she was off in her own world, but one look at her eyes, and he knew it was only an illusion. "One of the first families selected to the senate when we were still a republic, Cato, Titus Livius, Aeneas, the king of Latium. Those are through my mother's line. My father being kicked out won't change that. My father's father was just an upstart like you and yet he was a Senator and a tribune, among other posts." Trajanus smiled since he wasn't even a Roman by birth. Instead he was from Spain. Livia continued, "If I were a man, I possess a fortune enough in my own right that I could qualify for senate several times over."

"And Claudius found a way to get you and all that without paying through the nose for it."

Claudius felt her tense beside him and watched her jaw tighten.

"May I be excused?"

"Yes, of course, I'll have lunch laid out for us when you return."

She bowed her head gracefully in acknowledgement laying aside her feelings.

"Are you all right?" Claudius asked quietly as she passed him. Her eyes raised and he

thought he saw tears in them threatening to spill down her face.

"Tell him if need be I do not wish to discuss it again." Her look softened. "I am fine." She walked off and both he and the Emperor watched silently as she left. It was after all a view worthy of an Emperor. An official rushed over with an urgent matter for him seeing him not speaking for a moment and he turned aside.

After a few words, Trajanus looked back. "How expensive is this favor going to be?"

"Only including a message with the regular dispatches that go out to Seleucia where her uncle is living. He has raised her there since she was five and she would prefer him to negotiate this though for that matter there is no negotiating to do." Trajanus nodded and went back to his briefing. After a moment, he called a slave and ordered their lunch before he joined Claudius again.

"You have found a beautiful woman there, friend?"

"I have found a strong woman as well."

"The way you look at each other -- is this actually a love match?"

"We met two days ago."

"And you made a decision this quickly?"

"You saw her. Wouldn't you have snapped her up before another had the chance?"

Trajanus laughed.

"Yes, I would have and of course the property doesn't hurt either."

"She actually told me of that afterwards. I suppose since it was decided on her merits alone and not because of her property. It might be called a love match after all."

"So what is it you haven't told me about this, a father in Rome or an uncle in the far reaches of the empire? It will be months before the ceremony can take place with this plan of yours." Claudius started telling Marcus Alpius Trajanus Caesar the emperor of the entire Roman Empire of Livia Pollia and her father. It was the first time he had ever seen the man turn pale. It didn't last long as Claudius watched the red seep up from his tunic, that color he had seen before and it wasn't a good mood to be on the wrong side of.

"My father will see him crucified in Senate," he finished.

"I'll see him thrown to the gladiators who will crucify him."

"Livia wishes to ruin him first. Yes, you could have him dead now or you could have him humiliated for a long time to come before he is sent away. She watched him kill her mother. She's had to endure him starting the same treatment with her, as well as selling her to the highest bidder for the property you so eloquently pointed out I got without paying through the nose for."

"I suppose I can't blame her for walking out. How was I to know my joke was a little too close to the truth? So what is your plan?"

"Send the message to her uncle so he can get here first of all and we can get married when he has arrived, but in the mean time we might as well throw a little wood on the fire. Give my father a bit more to throw against her father's case. After what scandal she's had to hide what's a little more to live with."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Don't let me get thrown out of office for what you hear about me or us, and perhaps an imperial banquet would be a good place to have him staked out to receive the bad news? You give enough of those it would only be a few more invitations to send out."

"And when you walked in, I thought this was going to be an expensive favor." They were laughing when Livia was spotted across the garden and she was called back. As she walked towards them, Trajanus appraised his friend.

“I think, Claudius, that both of you kid yourselves that this is a match only to unite properly and lineage. I’ve seen looks like that before friend. You are dead gone and I don’t blame you, but she surprises me. Senator’s daughters aren’t usually so free with looks I’ve only seen on the face of my mistress.”

“Then I suppose I shall save a fortune having wife and mistress rolled into one.”

Trajanus’ rugged face broke into laughter that didn’t subside even as Livia reached them. “I nearly forgot, with Claudius bringing up other things, I was going to tell you that after your father told me of where your bride was raised, that there is an opening in the Macedonia province for a praetor. It could be headed from Seleucia, if you wished. I thought that perhaps she might appreciate getting to live in her home again, at least for a time. What do you say shall I put your name down on the list for the elections?”

He didn’t even seem to consider that a posting in Rome would have been a more advantageous one to his career. “What do you say, Livia?”

Trajanus took the kiss that Claudius got as a yes, a very definite yes considering how long it lasted, and decided they definitely kidded themselves that it was arranged.

** *Chapter 4* **

Claudius never dressed his true station in life after that outside when he had to work and dinners at friends who were sworn to secrecy. To everyone else in Rome, Livia was living with the worst sort of Roman scum. It was suggested that perhaps his talents were wasted in public office as he truly had talent at acting. All his friends in the Aventine seemed to take great pleasure in telling the worst they could make up about him. It didn't seem to matter that none of it matched up in any way at all. In fact, it even made his reputation all the worse. As the days passed, there were recitals of poetry and literature, gladiator fights at the coliseum, horse races at the Circus Maximus, visits to the Libraries at the glorious new forum that Trajanus had built only recently finished, plays at the theatres of Marcellus and Pompey, and dinners at friend's houses. No one seemed to find it odd that such a man could afford such entertainment or, for that matter, could read when they saw him in the library. He truly had everyone who did not know him personally convinced that he was nothing more than a dirt-poor scoundrel with a shady past if not a villainous one. He had no family to soften the impression. His friends seemed to despise him and yet they stuck by him even as they spread more filth about him.

To make matters worse, Livia planned a party for all of Claudius' army friends despite the small room they had to gather in. Trajanus even showed up in the midst of the festivities to everyone's great surprise. But then Livia hadn't told anyone that she had invited him. Still he was the head of the army the men all were veterans' of. She was a consummate hostess even when she was pawed several times. Claudius seemed to turn at just the right time to see it happen every time. Livia only winked at him when she caught him glaring. It was late when the rooms cleared out finally and they collapsed on the bed together. It had been two weeks since she had come to the apartment and though they shared the bed, they had yet to create any real scandal. There would be time for scandal later once the signs of her father's beatings had faded from mind as well as flesh.

** *Chapter 5* **

Bright sunlight was falling in on Claudius when he woke, opening his eyes to find Livia curled there in his arms. As odd as it may have sounded, he sometimes forgot just how beautiful she was. Lying there burnished golden in the sun, he couldn't know how he ever forgot. It practically took his breath away. He moved slightly and her eyes opened. They glittered in the sunshine that drenched her in light.

"How long have you been awake?"

Livia stretched against him in pure torture. "Not long. I didn't want to wake you."

"What time is it?"

"Midmorning I would guess and time for a bath. After last night, I feel like I'm covered with grime from head to toe. Not taking a bath until my back healed was torture."

"My friends did their part to leave their dirty hand prints on you. I'm not surprised you want to wash." Claudius watched her mouth curl into a lazy grin. "You handled it better than I thought a Senator's daughter would."

"You handled it worse than I thought you would. You looked jealous enough to have cut off their hands."

"I was thinking another part of their body."

Livia turned in his arms so she was facing him. His breath caught in his chest. "Even if it was Trajanus's body you'd have to disfigure?"

"Really? I didn't see that one."

She couldn't stop the chuckle. "Just before he passed out and the Praetorian Guard carried him home. Does it matter? You're the one I'm in bed with."

"Waking up next to you certainly does make the morning brighter after such a night."

She put a finger to his lips when he leaned closer trying to kiss her. "That house of yours has its own bath doesn't it?"

"You know it does."

"I want a bath."

Claudius got out of bed smirking and put out a hand to help her up not caring to point out there was a bath only a few streets over that was much closer. "Then let's go."

They left without a care in the world. Livia linked her arm in his as they walked, forgoing a litter. They took a circuitous route and passed all the temples on the Via Sacra before they reached the villa. They would whisper in each other's ear now and again and they would laugh as if they had known each other for ages. When they reached the villa, they were fed as the bath was heated. Livia bathed alone when the slaves came to Claudius with items that needed his attention. He hadn't been there often with all the playing they were doing. Claudius gathered his things when Lapidacus told him it was free.

Claudius stopped by the door when he heard the words. "Is it true what Chrysogonus says? That you are getting married? I should say for sure this time." He peered around the doorway to find Livia getting a massage.

"Yes, I am."

"All those men your father stuck you with, why are you wanting to go through with it at all?"

"Because, Portia, this one I love."

“Chrysogonus said you agreed to it the day after you met him.”

“I knew what I wanted when I saw it in front of me.”

Claudius slipped by the door with a grin and headed to the bath. It surprised him that the slaves spoke so freely with her, but then with her being little more than a prisoner, it was only natural that they became closer than usual. When he thought about it with what he knew of Livia, they were probably actually close long before that. She didn't seem to be one that cared much for one's station in life. A slave would be lucky to be bought by someone like her. She probably even set most of them free when they were of age to do so. He wondered if Chrysogonus stayed with her even if he was free. He seemed the sort to do that.

* * * *

Since it wasn't finished, and Claudius hadn't actually lived there yet, the villa was deserted when he emerged from the baths. Lapidacus had left him with a clean tunic though. All the furniture that had graced it during the banquet actually belonged to his father. It had been moved in just for the occasion. The few of his own things were there, but he hadn't been in the city for long to accumulate much, and serving in the army wasn't the way to make the most money. The only slaves that inhabited the place were Lapidacus and then Livia's, and as Claudius walked back to his room he didn't hear even a murmur from those in the house. Not that it was hard to hide with all the rooms within its walls. He couldn't seem to find anyone, but then he caught a whiff of a seductive scent and followed his nose. The heavenly scent led him to his own bedroom, or at least it would be his bedroom when he moved in. It had been empty the last time he saw it. Obviously when they brought all of Livia's things, it had included furniture because the room now held an ivory-footed marriage bed of satinwood. It sat on the unfinished floor. His father had thought that his new wife, yet to be picked then, would appreciate getting to decorate to her taste. All around the room were objects of art of the highest quality while the bed itself was covered in sheets of pure silk.

“Where is everyone?” he asked when he heard a noise from the alcove.

“I gave them the day off.” Livia answered, but he still couldn't see her.

“It's not like they have been doing anything the last few weeks after all.”

“They have been busy getting the house ready to live in, a rather difficult task with your father leaving it unfinished and you having nothing to help with the process as far as furniture.” She was silent when she walked out for she had no shoes on. He turned suddenly knowing she was there even if she hadn't made a sound. She wore a stola made of a Greek silk fabric that was transparent despite being interwoven with gold thread. She had no tunic on under it. He couldn't help but notice every curve the fabric did nothing to hide. Her back, he noticed, was healed. Only the faintest yellow patches showed where the bruises had been and the cuts, while red, were soon to disappear into almost nothing.

“Is this where I stopped you not so long ago?”

He could feel the goose bumps growing under his fingers as they kissed. “You're going to catch your death in cloth like that. I don't think it was quite meant for Roman winters.”

“And just how should I warm up do you think? I'm sure a soldier with a lot of cold nights on campaign must have learned how to keep warm.”

Claudius smiled brightly. “I have a few ideas.” Livia didn't blush or even look shy when he undid the clasps of the gold brooches that held the stola in place and the flimsy material slipped to the floor.

Livia grinned devilishly. "Just like that? I thought I'd have to seduce you a bit more."

"You seduced me the first time we met, Livia, just by not talking of money and property. Even if you hadn't been the most beautiful woman I have met. You talked of life, not only intangible things you read and didn't understand. If your aunt taught you that, then she did teach you something." He picked her up and carried her to the bed across the room.

When his ear was near her mouth, she whispered softly. "Your friends only pawed me at my suggestion. They were quite willing to go and spread it around that you let me be treated like a common whore and didn't lift a finger to stop it. It seemed time to spread a little scandal."

Claudius laughed. "I am glad to hear that they aren't all complete back stabbers, but isn't that what we're doing now?"

Her face was dead serious when she turned his face to her. She kissed him softly. "No"

"Then what is it?" he asked as he laid her on the bed.

"This is between you and me. No one else has to know that I've come to love you already, Claudius Quintus Gallus."

"Just you, me, and Portia."

"You heard that did you?" She was smiling again and all other thoughts left his head.

* * * *

Several days later they stopped at the markets along the way of their walk through the city letting everyone see the scandal and Claudius got to watch a professional at work when she saw an Etruscan vase she just had to have. Claudius wandered just looking at all the wares while she bargained like a fishmonger's wife.

"Whore!" The cry turned everyone's attention directly to the angered party. Claudius pushed his way back over when he saw that the man was shouting at Livia. She was standing up slowly at the accusation, but the anger in her eyes was tangible.

"When were you going to tell me that what you're dying of was going to kill me? I'm not the only one there's gossip about."

He was silenced for only a moment. "I am not going to have children not of my blood, raised as my own with my fortune to inherit. You're just a whore! When I'm done with you, no man will want you."

"If you're to have any heirs, I'd let whatever woman you can bribe into your bed have her affairs. It's the only way she'll get with child."

"How dare you speak to me that way! Your father hasn't raised you at all. You're nothing but a common street whore!"

"Well at least we agree that my father hasn't raised me. But as for the rest, you know nothing about me or my actions."

"I know your sleeping with some bastard who I'm not even sure could be considered a plebian with some hovel in the worst part of town. Consider this marriage off." His face was so red he looked as if his heart would burst. Livia straightened to her full height, she was after all a tall woman, and she towered over her once affianced husband. He was truly an old man, small, and hunched, as thin as a reed as if he couldn't keep weight on him at all. His hair was thin and white.

Livia was smiling and his redness only increased at being treated in such a way. "This marriage was off weeks ago. Perhaps my father never told you he hasn't seen me in weeks. He has no control over whom I wed now as I have made my own choice. He has no control over the

property I would have brought with me. I have taken myself off the market to be sold no different from this vase. If you were wishing a Senatorial alliance to help sway the laws toward your business dealings, you should have checked into his finances not mine. He has no money to remain a Senator and he has no supporters to make up for his lack of money.” She thrust the vase back at the seller and started to walk away. One person didn’t move aside when she neared and she looked up to find that it was Claudius. She pulled him close and kissed him. It may have looked like spite against the old man to everyone standing there. However, as the one receiving it directly, Claudius was in a position to know there was no anger in it at all. He didn’t ask, but he would have sworn it was thanks for being unlike all the rest who were willing to buy her. She was smiling when she let him go and he watched the old man storm off. Her eyes never left his. She cared nothing about old man. The seller she had been haggling with tapped her on the shoulder.

“For the price you ask, it’s yours.”

“Why would you do that? You know now I have more than enough to pay what you asked in the first place.”

“True, but sometimes I like to see my wares enjoyed by someone who will truly appreciate it instead of some bored matron out to spend more of her husband’s money and doesn’t care what on. I have only one question. Who taught you to bargain like that?”

“Ever heard of a man called Marius Livius Pollius?”

“Of course, who hasn’t? He’s sold to almost everyone here over the years and his father before him.”

“He is my uncle. He raised me.”

The seller’s eyes widened with a calculated glint. “Is he going to bring anymore goods soon? He always has the best stock. Have him come and see me.”

Livia looked at Claudius out of the corner of her eye. “I imagine he won’t waste the trip here to see me married and not bring goods to sell.”

“He approves of you wedding a plebian? I know Marius has a fortune few can rival.”

Claudius still held her around the waist as Livia leaned close to the seller without breaking his grasp. “He only plays at being nobody just to see that match broken up.” She whispered softly.

The seller only laughed.

** *Chapter 6* **

Claudius sat at his desk at work about two months later when a lawyer he had dealt with often came in.

“What brings you here today, Cassius?”

“A new case that I wanted to discuss with you first.” Claudius pushed aside his scrolls and sent his assistant to get him some lunch. “You don’t mind, do you? I have someone coming that will take all afternoon. I won’t get another chance to eat otherwise.”

“Not at all. I know you’re a busy man.”

“So what is it we need to discuss?” Cassius’ client came to the door to join them. Claudius looked up to find the old man standing there.

“Annius Livius Pollius.” The old man was not one for small talk, but he didn’t seem to recognize Claudius as the same man he had seen with Livia. “I paid the bastard part of the agreed amount we had negotiated for me to wed his daughter. Now that the wedding is off, he refuses to give the sum back. Not only that, I find out he has done the same with several others in the last year. I want my money back.”

“Why did you bring this to me personally? All you had to do was bring the case before me during normal hours when I was ruling and it would be seen to.”

“Do you forget he is a Senator, worthless though he is doing the job, a praetor as you are? We came to see what could be done about it. He throws it in my client’s face that he can see nothing is ever done. He is using his office as praetor and his friends’ offices to get out of his troubles.” Claudius sat back in his chair as his lunch was brought in. He turned aside to answer a question the slave asked him and they heard the old man gasp.

“You . . . You . . .”

“What is it, Gneaus?” Cassius asked.

“Cassius, go see the Censor’s office and file your client’s claim. He can do more for your client than I can. Gneaus can wait here for your return.” Cassius looked oddly at both of them. Then he slowly pushed his chair back and left.

“How could you sit there while you decided the fate of my case while you are the reason that it is being heard in the first place?” The old man accused when the room was empty.

“First of all, I didn’t decide on your case. I had you take it to the Censor. He is preparing a case on Annus already. He would welcome more to see to his demise. My father can do more than I can right now. Second, I am not the reason you have a case.”

“She’s the one that ran off with you.”

“It was not done to hurt you.”

“Just what do you call her words to me in the market? Those have hurt me.”

“I believe your words started with whore. Does she not have the right to defend herself?” Claudius, saying nothing more, stood and went over to the balcony off his office and let Gneaus think. It was winter and getting rid of the chill was difficult in a stone and marble building, but the wind warmed him quickly. Claudius relaxed a bit as he regained feeling in his toes. The old man followed him out into the warm breeze that blew past after he realized that Claudius was not coming back in. “She has agreed to marry me. I find her word worth more than her father’s. You are the seventh man he had engaged her to in six months.” Claudius spoke quietly to stop anyone from overhearing. The old man turned red as he had when they saw him in the market.

Claudius was ready to call the slave to fetch a doctor if need be. But Claudius watched his mouth open and could almost hear the screams that would follow even before they emerged, but then his mouth closed slowly as other thoughts entered his mind. For a long time the old man said nothing.

“Why didn’t she just come to me and tell me she wished to marry you instead?” He finally asked.

“I believe she met you only once and even then her father was there selling her away again. It is not the best start for going to someone and telling them they wish to marry another.” Again, his mouth opened to say something and then it closed slowly.

“No, I suppose not especially with her father and me going out all the time. In my defense though I wish to have you tell her that I never joined her father at the brothels. He went there after we would have dinner and while I might be dying, it is nothing that she can catch from me. Not all rumors are true. I can accept her wishing to marry a man closer to her age. She is young and beautiful. It should be her right. I still want my money back though. I have the right to get that back. That is not her fault.”

“No, it isn’t. As I told Cassius, the best thing to do is to take it to my father. Get the others you have heard of to go to him as well. It will suit the case against him just fine.”

The old man smiled devilishly. “Now what are these rumors I hear about the two of you? You could have undone my arrangement with her father as he has undone the others.”

“Livia wished to see her father not receive a coin for her marriage. Her argument as to the reasons won both me and my father to her side. There is enough evidence to get him convicted of some very serious crimes, but we felt like throwing a little current scandal into his funeral fire.”

“Then she isn’t pregnant like I heard?” Claudius buried his grin in a cup of wine, the old man’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Then it is true.”

“She’ll be beautiful even with her belly up to her chin.” The old man laughed heartily, all forgiven. His frail looks belied a hearty spirit.

“And you won’t get into any trouble playing at all this? You’re supposed to be the one that upholds the laws.”

“It is my father who prepares the case against him. Nothing I have done figures into any of that. Trajanus knows of it all. He, too, was turned to her side at hearing her story.”

“What story is this that sways such powerful men?” Claudius drank a bit more wine. “You don’t want to tell me?” The old man assessed.

“Not particularly.”

“Won’t I hear of it anyway when he has his trial? No one will hear a thing from me. I am no gossip. Perhaps that is why she heard such things about me. I never corrected them. I suppose Annius wished that when I had died, he would gain a fortune. In a way, that does say something for Livia, doesn’t it? She could have easily married me, soon become a widow, and still married you with even more money to her name. The point being she wouldn’t have had to wait long. I know my time is short.”

“Then why marry at all?”

“I never really thought about it until Annius came to me making it sound like such a good idea. I suppose the fear of the old got even to me, that no one would remember me when I am gone. My wife of forty years died, and then I had a mistress for some years. She died as well several years ago. I never was able to have children by either of them. I was all alone in the world. If I had known she was so against it, I would have never even considered it.”

“She wasn’t against marriage with you particularly. She has told me that if there had been only one she was engaged to, she would have gone through with it and been as happy as most wives in Rome. But seven was too many for her and she started fighting back.”

“With all your trouble over this matter, I hope this is a match made for love.” He watched Claudius smile knowing he was with someone else just then. It was all the answer he needed. Claudius, however, was oddly silent for a good long time. Then his voice, quiet again, began to speak of the woman he had just visited in his head.

“Her father beat her mother to death when she was five. He beat her again as soon as she got back under his roof when it was misrepresented that the man she was to marry was still alive. She was probably hiding bruises when she met you just that once to keep her from doing anything to ruin his plans. The rumors she heard of may have just been gossip and had no truth to them, but she was correct in telling you that he has no money left. She has wealth in her own right from her mother's family. She has tried to leave but he is a Senator she cannot leave without permission, giving her back to be beaten again. He beat her the very day that she ran away and has been hiding with me ever since. She had left the night before without trying to entice my father into picking her as my wife. He beat her for that, not knowing that she had caught my eye, not knowing that on accident I had seen the bruises he had given her. Not knowing that while she was with me on a harmless evening out, my father would give me the choice of who I wanted to marry, not knowing that I didn’t even think of picking another when I had the choice and that we would plot to see him fall, to the lions if need be?”

The old man looked over at Claudius, his eyes wide. “I am glad she found you. I am too old to see her avenged, but by the Gods, you have my help.”

“Then go see my father.”

“And you go home tonight and enjoy yourself.”

“I always do.” The old man laughed as he took his leave of Claudius. His lawyer just looked at him oddly, as they met once more.

** *Chapter 7* **

Senator Gaius Quintus Gallus and his son sat on Emperor Trajanus's right hand, while Senator Annius Livius Pollius sat on the Emperor's wife's left. Before them, an entire banquet was laid out of the costliest foods in the Empire. The finest wines available flowed into every cup. Dancers floated before them in an array of colors that rivaled a rainbow. It was the first time that Annius had been invited to the Imperial palace for dinner. He was feeling quite satisfied with himself even if his daughter had disappeared into the bowels of Rome's slums. He grimaced when he recalled the words the old man had screamed at him. Until then it was the first he had heard of his daughter's whereabouts, he had assumed she had left first thing for her uncle. That had been close to five months before though, and no mention of her had grated his ears again. No matter he had quickly arranged a marriage for himself with a very rich widow who was more than happy to gain a senator for a husband and her fortune would keep him in the Senate for a good long time. He should have thought of his own marriage earlier instead of all the trouble with his daughter. The widow was pleased as could be to be sitting at his side so close to the emperor.

"So I hear you have yet to be married or even engaged, Claudius." Annius commented on at last. No one had said anything on the matter letting him be drawn into his own demise.

"It isn't from lack of your trying to force your daughter in his direction. What stopped you from sending messages every week? I was beginning to have enough to keep the house warm for the winter." Trajanus laughed at Gaius's dig; even his own fiancée Cornelia stifled a laugh. She was a rather homely woman not like his first wife at all but he didn't notice much with all the jewels she wore. She wore so much makeup he wasn't even really sure what she looked like underneath it all and her hair was dyed blonde it was rumored to hide the grey.

"Yes, Annius, when am I going to meet my new daughter?"

"I told you she left the city. She returned to her uncle. I don't know when she will return." Annius felt a shadow fall over him.

"I doubt, brother, that she left the gates as you say. She would have sent word that she was returning to her home. The last message I got from her was that she was to wed."

Annius looked up at a tall handsome man. Marius was the opposite of his brother in all ways. At least he was now. In their earlier days, they had resembled each other a great deal. Tall, lean, tanned, a graduate of the law school, Marius could have been the center of Roman life had he wanted a sedate life in the city. He much preferred the life he had chosen for himself, one of adventure and obviously better living. They were only ten months apart. It was wholly lifestyle had caused Annius to age so drastically. Annius was almost white haired, his frame tending to sag over with fat that he had gained as he reveled in the money he had first had more and more of. He was pasty and pale with spending too much time drinking and nights in the brothels. Livia took after Marius in many ways more than his own children all told. Like Marius's own wife, Saphronia, she was educated, not minding that she flouted convention many times. Like him, she loved adventure, travel, and the thrill of the hunt for some new items whether worth one sesterces or five thousand. Next to Marius stood his wife, Saphronia. She was a handsome woman even if she neared fifty and she was dressed to rival the empress herself. They could afford it, after all. If Gaius was one of the richest men in Rome, he paled next to Marius who was one of the richest in the Empire.

“That is why we traveled so far in the first place. She said she was to marry and we wanted to be here for it. Isn’t that true? Who, by the Gods’, house is it that I’m paying to have decorated then if not hers? Half the artisans in Rome are working on it. Those were my orders. I wasn’t going to have the girl marrying with only the tawdry amount you could offer to the match.”

“Are you saying that she was already arranged to wed when you were throwing her at us, Annius? She had to have sent the message when you brought her to our banquet for your brother to be here this quickly.” Claudius asked calmly with the most innocent of expressions.

Annus sat up in his chaise so abruptly that he spilt his wine all over his tunic. “What is going on here? I am not on trial for anything.”

“We have sent messages to your home which have gone unanswered. Perhaps if you answered your summons, you would have heard the charges,” Gaius threw at him.

“For what? I have done nothing wrong. It is my daughter who ran off and made a whore of herself, not me.”

“Then you do know where she is?” Marius asked with an eyebrow cocked.

“I heard she’s even pregnant.” The Emperor’s wife added, wanting to get in on the fun.

“I never raised your daughter to act in such a way, Annus. We are from finer stock than that.” Saphronia growled throatily. She was quite worked up over the matter.

“Oh, Jupiter.” Annus cried out. “Woman, truth be told, I was glad my brother took you far away from me, I didn’t have to listen to that infernal harping about your blood lines being better than ours.”

“It wasn’t your bloodlines I objected to, Annus dear, since they’re the same as my husband and I quite love your daughter as my own even if she has your blood. It is you I object to, brother.”

“None of this petty fighting. Truthfully, where is Livia?” Trajanus asked.

“I don’t know and frankly I don’t care.” Annus hissed. “Just what am I supposedly on trial for? That I do care about.”

“As I said, perhaps if you had answered your summons you, would have heard of such things. Being a Senator actually involves showing up. You would have heard of it at the Curia.” Gaius sneered as Trajanus offered Marius and Saphronia a seat across the square they all occupied.

“What am I on trial for?” Annus repeated his face turning red.

“Trial for? You’ve been convicted and it’s for morals. It is the year of the censorship after all. I have the right to pry into anyone’s affairs, to see who has been abusing his post.”

“You have nothing specific then. It’s all a bunch of rumors someone dragged up to discredit me.”

“I don’t convict with no proof. Murder is a heinous enough crime for me to take the time to see to it.”

His outrage looked quite real. “Just whom am I supposed to have killed?”

“Your wife.”

Annus laughed deep from his prodigious belly. The sound of it filled the large room. “You’re talking about slave gossip from near to fifteen years ago. Are you that desperate for someone to make the rest of you look better?”

“Oh, we have better proof than a slave’s gossip on the matter.”

“Just what would that be?” Annus sneered and then a pair of hand’s slipped onto Marius’s shoulders. He knew who it was even before he looked. One finger held his wife’s ring,

the one her father had given her on the day she wed. He raised his eyes slowly fearing that she truly was there. When he first saw her, he could have sworn it was his dead wife, but then he realized it was Livia. He hadn't realized how much she took after her until then. Even if the rest was made up lies from old slaves, she could still get him in trouble for more recent transgressions. Livia stood there dressed in a deep red stola clearly showing the growing child that gossip spoke of while her body was decorated with dozens of rubies. They had been a gift from Claudius on the day they were engaged formally. Marius had been in town near to a week already.

"What would you know about all this? You were a babe when she died."

"I was five. I was old enough to remember her putting me under the bed when she heard you coming, screaming and drunk. I was old enough to remember seeing you slamming her head against the floor after you had beat her so much she couldn't stand any longer. I was old enough to remember her watching me the whole time she lay there as if it would keep me strong not to make a noise. I was old enough to remember you kicking her as she lay there probably already dead. I was old enough to remember you slipping in her blood when you left to clean up and leave the house to throw the guilt off you. I was old enough to remember Chrysogonus getting me from there when he came and found her dead and heard me crying trying to keep quiet so you didn't do the same thing to me. I was old enough to remember him coming to you the next day and asking since my mother was dead, if he could take me to my aunt so a woman could raise me. I was old enough to remember you throwing me away as if I was nothing. A daughter needs a dowry, sons however bring one into the family. No one can make me forget that you were doing the same to me, that you had done to my mother the very day I disappeared."

He didn't look to see Cornelia turning pale and then almost ashen as she listened.

"And who would believe you? The bastard you've been living with. Who would listen to his word over mine?"

"I would have to say I would." Cornelia answered and Annius spun so fast on his chaise he almost fell. "That is not a story one makes up. Your own wife and daughter. I would be next, too, wouldn't I? The wedding is off." She got up and left the room without even so much as a goodbye to the emperor. Annius flew toward Livia. Claudius' hand shot out catching his throat as the guard next to Trajanus caught him and stopped him from fighting any more. His face turned red as he glared at her with death in his eyes.

"I believe that ends your chances at coming up with the money to qualify for senate any longer." Trajanus added.

"You did all this just so you could marry some man not fit to wash your feet? This was just to spite me." Claudius had yet to let go of his throat so it came out more of a croak.

"You act as if all you did to her wasn't done out of spite." Claudius replied squeezing just a little harder.

Annus narrowed his eyes in anger again. "All of it was just a joke to you then?"

"All of this was to see you fall. Do you realize that your signet ring left its mark in one of her bruises? Even if she had never said a word, anyone who saw it would know what you had done to the woman I will marry."

"Then she is just a whore if you saw it the day after you met."

"Then I was the one that found her bleeding when we were just going to the theatre."

Annus opened his mouth to speak, but then it closed for a moment. "What do you mean she is to marry you?"

"She's given freely what you tried to sell to save yourself. That is the wedding your

brother is here to witness. The one we sent an imperial messenger to convey word of, slipping through the siege of the gates that you threw up against her leaving.”

“She can’t wed without my permission.”

Trajanus’s commanding voice spoke up. “I think you will find that the man who has raised her for fifteen years was given the guardianship of her for the purpose of seeing to the legal side of the arrangement. Your permission has been waived. They wed tomorrow, with me in attendance. I think that would stop you trying to do anything to appeal the matter.” With that, Claudius let go abruptly. The guard wasn’t expecting it and Annius fell to the floor in a heap. No one spoke as he hacked, getting his breath back. Annius slowly stood, then with a swiftness that surprised everyone considering his size, he ran out of the room.

“A highly amusing entertainment we had tonight, but somehow I doubt it will catch on and become all the rage. The Senators would soon protest,” Trajanus announced. He took a long drink of his wine as everyone laughed.

** *Chapter 8* **

The wedding took place the next day as planned with Livia's aunt and uncle in attendance, as noticeably as her father was not. The mansion shone for the wedding. The guests arrived in the foyer over a masterpiece of mosaic depicting the wedding of Ariadne and Dionysus and that was just the start. The walls had been painted with colorful murals and Frescos in deep rich colors. The baths had been filled with scenes of Poseidon, Oceanus, and Tethys surrounded with sea creatures in wonderful shades of turquoise, green, and blue. The central courtyard was now livened with a wonderful mosaic floor depicting the centaur Nessos carrying off Hercules' wife, Deianira, and an elaborate fountain bubbling in its center. The dining room was filled with the lovers' Parthenope and Metiochos, every room held exquisite floors of mosaic. The masterpieces may have been the figures depicted all dealing with a theme of lovers or marriages owing to the nature of the gift, but around the edges of all the wonders of the house now held borders that took just as much artistry to accomplish. It was a house that showed off to perfection all the works of art and furniture that Livia was bringing with her to the marriage as all the additions were all in subdued and harmonious colors. Everyone marveled at it all, seeing as the value of the house had just been doubled. No one would ever claim that Livia could be embarrassed with what she brought to the union.

Livia stood there in her marriage veil and shoes of flame yellow when a messenger came to announce that her father was dead. In her shock the stalks of wheat symbolic of fertility, not that it was needed, fell from her hand. He was found in a part of town no Senator would ever be found in, not even if they were Claudius, with a knife in his back. In that part of town, no one recognized him when he had been found in the night. Finally, a prostitute recognized him. There wasn't even a tear on Livia's face to show she cared that he died. Livia set all of his slaves free, the few he had left. They, along with the property, had been sold off over time until there was literally almost nothing left, but the house he lived in. Once the claims against him for taking money for engagements that never resulted in marriage were paid, there was nothing left. In fact, Livia paid some of it out of her own pocket. She didn't want their animosity in regards to something she had no control over, especially with a husband who soon would be running for Praetor of Macedonia. It never hurt to have all the friends you could. It was rumored as they celebrated the union that Annius had gone to hire someone to dispose of his daughter who had caused him so much scandal, more that she had cost him so much money. Others rumored that Claudius had him killed out of principle, but then that was only what the slaves said and who listened to them.

** *THE END... * **