Claudia

Daughter of Rome

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CHAPTER

1

My "Gift"

It wasn't easy having two mothers. Selene, who'd given me life, was small, dark, feminine as a fan. The other, her tall, tawny lion of a cousin, Agrippina, was granddaughter of the Divine Augustus.

My father was second in command under Agrippina's husband, Germanicus, commander in chief of the Rhine armies and rightful heir to the Empire. Growing up in one army camp after another, my sister, Marcella, and I were often in Agrippina's home, treated as her own. She favored her sons, but their time was given over to trainers who drilled them daily in the use of sword and spear, shield and ax. We girls remained clay for her to mold.

When I was ten, the ceaseless chatter of the older girls bored me. "Which officer is handsomest?" "What *stola* the most alluring?" Who cared! I was reading Sappho when Agrippina swept the scroll from my hand. Studying my face in the morning light, she admired my profile. "Your nose is pure patrician, but that hair!"

Agrippina grabbed a gold comb from the table, swept my hair this way and that. Then, as I sat rigid under her restraining hand, she began to cut. Slaves scurried to brush away the thick unruly curls fallen to the floor. "Ah, this is much better. Hold the mirror up higher," she instructed Marcella. "Let her see the back, the sides."

Agrippina was always full of ideas, so sure she knew best. I glanced at

Marcella, who nodded her approval. The wild hair had been tamed—thinned, pulled back, and bound by a fillet so that my curls cascaded like a waterfall.

Agrippina scrutinized me carefully. "You're really quite pretty—not a beauty like Marcella here, but who knows." She glanced again at my sister. "You're a rose—no doubt about it—but Claudia . . . let me think. Who *is* Claudia?" She reached into drawers, pulling out scarves and ribbons, selecting only to discard. At last, "Of course! Why didn't I see it sooner? You're our little seer, shy, ethereal—pure purple! This is your color; wear it always."

Wear it always! Agrippina was so imperious. Her enthusiasm overwhelmed me. It infuriated Mother. "Those were your baby curls!" she stormed angrily when I came home laden with purple tunics, flowers, scarves, and ribbons. And so it went between them, with me always in the middle.

Still, to this day, I favor purple and take pride in my profile.

People who felt entitled, even obligated, to impose their wills on me were everywhere. *Tata* and Mother, of course, but also Germanicus and Agrippina—I called them aunt and uncle. My sister, Marcella, two years older, expected to dominate me, as did our rich cousins, Julia and Druscilla, and their brothers, Drusus, Nero, and Caligula. Caligula missed no opportunity to tease and embarrass me. He liked to put his tongue in my ear and only laughed when I smacked him. Small wonder I coveted my own company.

Perhaps it was from these quiet times that the sight came. At an early age, I often knew of a visitor's approach before a slave announced the arrival. It happened so naturally that I wondered why others were surprised or even suspicious, imagining that I played a joke. Because the knowledge was trivial and rarely benefited me, I thought little of it.

My dreams were different. They began when we were stationed in Monokos, a small town on the southwest coast of Gaul. For a time it seemed that I could scarcely close my eyes without a vision of some sort overtaking me. They were fragmented dreams. I remembered little and understood less, yet awakened always with a chilling sense of impending danger. The frequency and intensity of these nighttime visions increased; I feared to sleep, forced myself to lie awake late into the night. Then, in my tenth year, I had a dream so vividly terrifying that I have never forgotten it or the events that followed.

I saw myself in a wooded wilderness, a fearful place, thick, dark, almost

black. Wet leaves scraped across my face as I breathed the damp smell of decay, shivering miserably in the cold. I struggled to free myself but could not; the dream held me prisoner in its thrall. All about me strange and fearful men chanted words I could not understand. As they crowded forward, surrounding me, I saw that they were dressed as legionnaires, but unlike the soldiers in our garrison, their faces were hardened by anger and bitterness. A huge, fearsome man with pockmarked skin came forward, a young wolf trotting companionably at his heels. This awful person urged the others to violence. Answering cries echoed through the dark forest. He grabbed a sword and lunged toward the wolf who sat trustingly at his feet. With one swift stroke, he impaled the unsuspecting creature. The wolf screamed horribly or was it I who shrieked? In the last awful seconds of the dream the wolf became my uncle. It was dear Germanicus who lay dying at my feet.

Though *Tata* and Mother rushed in to comfort me, I couldn't banish the ugly picture from my mind. "Someone wants to kill Uncle Germanicus," I gasped. "You have to save him."

"Tomorrow, love, we'll speak of it tomorrow," *Tata* promised, stroking me tenderly, but the morning's talk was brief. My parents agreed: a child's nightmare scarcely warranted bothering the commander in chief. Two days later when a messenger brought word of a threatened mutiny in Germania, I saw them exchange troubled glances.

My retreat in those days was a secluded corner of beach obscured by rocks. I went there alone, waded in tide pools where no one saw me but the tiny sea creatures I called my own. This is where Germanicus found me. Dropping down on a rock, eyes level with my own, he spoke. "I understand we have a seer in our midst."

I looked away. "*Tata* says it isn't important."

"I take your dream as very important and will heed its warning." His rough hand touched my shoulder. Germanicus's hazel eyes lit in a smile. He leaned closer, his tone conspiratorial as though talking to an important adult. "We're going to Germania—all of us. Agrippina is convinced that her presence will restore morale in that wretched corner of the Empire. Jove only knows, those poor devils have reason for mutiny. Some have grown children they've never seen . . ." His voice trailed off.

What was the matter? I searched the handsome face above me, clouded now, brows furrowed. Timidly, I slipped my hand in his.

Germanicus smiled. "No need for *you* to worry, little one. It will work out, you'll see for yourself. Agrippina needs a woman companion. I've asked Selene to accompany her. And, since my children are going, why not you and your sister?"

Mother was furious. In the privacy of our home, she called Agrippina reckless and absurd. "A woman seven months pregnant making such a journey!" she fumed to *Tata,* unaware that I watched from an alcove. Her face softened as her arms encircled him. "At least I'll be with you—not sitting at home, frantic with fear. It's the girls I worry about. How can we leave them behind when Agrippina makes a show of taking hers?"

I looked about the familiar room as though seeing it for the first time. The walls were a burnished crimson that *Tata* had admired in Pompeii. Mother had painters mix it as a surprise, testing and discarding many times before she was satisfied. Sculpted heads of ancestors watched discreetly from alcoves. Souvenirs from tours of duty added color and nostalgia. There were couches with colorful throws, wall hangings, and cushions in vibrant greens and purples. Mother had created a haven in the midst of an army camp. I didn't want to leave it.

On the first leg of the long journey, I rode in a horse-drawn cart with Mother, Agrippina, and the other girls, my chestnut mare Pegasus tied behind. We played word games to keep our minds busy, but Auntie's voice was louder than usual, reminding us again and again that everything was all right. Mother kept her voice soft, but her eyes flashed angrily at Agrippina. Eventually they abandoned the games, gave us scrolls to read, and whispered among themselves. What I heard was awful: "Mutiny inevitable." What was Germanicus to do?

Gaul's vineyards and pastures gave way to Germania's dense forests. Bushes scratched and scraped like groping fingers. Above us crows and ravens watched. Wild boar scuttled in the undergrowth. I heard wolves howling. Even

at noon the light was so dim I felt as though I'd fallen into an abyss. Watching my cousins Drusus and Nero riding with Germanicus, I saw their drawn faces turn often to their father, who nodded encouragement. Caligula rode ahead, brandishing his sword at shadows.

As the days passed, and the leaders guided us through overgrown trails, foot soldiers, two abreast, twisted like a slow sea serpent across an ocean floor. The forced enthusiasm of both Mother and Agrippina frightened me more than the forest. I insisted on riding Pegasus beside Drusus though wretched Caligula jeered at me.

The month's journey across Gaul into the Germanian forests seemed an eternity. At last we reached the outskirts of the mutinous legion's camp. Silently, a few bearded men emerged, eyes guarded. *Not an officer in sight*. Germanicus dismounted, his manner casual, almost jaunty. Motioning his troops back, he approached the men alone. *Tata*'s mouth was grim; his hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

The mutineers crowded forward, their voices an angry babble of complaints. A huge man wrapped in ragged fur grasped Uncle's hand as though to kiss it; instead he thrust Germanicus's fingers into his mouth to feel toothless gums. Others, their scarred bodies covered with rags, hobbled about, eyeing me like a food platter. I urged Pegasus forward as one grabbed for the reins. Then I saw a circle of pikes, atop each a decaying head. *The missing officers.* My stomach lurched. More mutinous soldiers moved in, blocking our exit. I clamped my jaws shut to still chattering teeth.

Germanicus issued an order: "Stand back and divide into units." The men merely pushed closer. I saw *Tata*'s fingers tighten on his sword and wondered if Pegasus felt my legs tremble. Drusus and Nero rode in closer to their father. My heart pounded. It was going to happen. *Tata* and Germanicus would be killed, and with them Drusus and Nero, who'd always seemed like big brothers, and Caligula who never had. Then those fierce, angry men would move on to me. We were all going to die.

Tata glanced questioningly at Germanicus. The commander shook his head, then turned, leaping easily onto a large rock. As he stood calmly surveying the scene, I thought him noble in his cuirass and greaves, the plume on his helmet fluttering in a light breeze. Speaking quietly so that the angry men had

to be still, he paid tribute to Emperor Augustus, who had recently died. He praised the victories of Tiberius, the new emperor, and spoke of the army's past glories. "You are Rome's emissaries to the world," he reminded them, "but what has happened to your famous military discipline?"

"I'll show you what happened." A grizzled one-eyed veteran strode forward, pulling off his leather cuirass. "This is what the Germans did to me." He displayed a scar on his belly. "And this is what your officers did." He turned to reveal a back lacerated with scars.

Angry cries echoed as the men railed against Tiberius. "It's Germanicus who should be emperor," the ringleaders shouted. "You're the rightful heir, we'll fight with you all the way to Rome." Many took up the cry, banging their shields and chanting. "Lead us to Rome! Together to Rome!" The angry soldiers pressed forward. I shuddered as I saw them roll their swords back and forth against their shields, the prelude to mutiny.

Germanicus pulled the sword from his belt and pointed it at himself. "Better death than treason to the emperor."

A tall burly man, his body laced with scars, pushed forward and removed his own sword. "Then use mine. It's sharper." As the angry crowd closed in around Germanicus, Agrippina pushed her way toward him. A burly soldier more than a head taller sought to bar her way, but she merely thrust her large belly at him, daring any to lift a hand. The front ranks stepped back. Scarred veterans who'd stood with weapons raised slowly lowered them.

As the soldiers cleared a path for her, Agrippina walked proudly to the rock where her husband stood. Father and I dismounted as the men quieted. Mother and Marcella climbed from the wagon and stood beside us. Her wide brown eyes even wider, Mother slipped her arm in *Tata*'s. Smiling confidently, she took my hand, calling over her shoulder for Marcella to hold my other hand. We were all trembling.

Every eye turned to Germanicus. He looked so brave, his voice ringing clear and true. "In the name of Emperor Tiberius, I grant immediate retirement for those who have served twenty years or more. Men with sixteen years' service will remain, but with no duties other than to defend against attack. Back pay will be paid twice over."

Soldiers boosted Agrippina up onto the rock. She stood by her husband,

the two making a handsome tableau on the great flat stone. "Germanicus, your leader and mine," she said, "is a man of his word. What he promises will come to pass. I know him and I speak the truth." She stood proudly, her face serene despite the silence that greeted her words. At last one man cried out: "Germanicus!" Others joined him, some tossed their helmets high in the air. Their cheers made me want to cry.

"We're lucky," *Tata* said later. "What if they'd demanded their pay now?"

Germanicus inspired the mutineers—Agrippina did too, even Mother admitted that. Hard as it was for me to understand, Caligula, too, was a favorite. He'd been born in an army camp, worn army boots, and drilled with troops when he was still a toddler. Caligula meant "little boots." Now hardly anyone remembered that his real name was Gaius.

Within the week, rumors that German forces were moving closer rallied the men. It was decided that we women should be sent some forty miles away to the small village of Cologne. Our two families were quartered in what had once been an inn—much too small for so many of us. I hated our cramped, dusty quarters. I hated not knowing what was happening at the front. I missed the sea. Any possible view of the Rhine was obscured by thick pines that surrounded us on all sides, cutting off the sun's weak winter rays. Snow, at first pure magic, inevitably meant slush and clinging frost. I was miserable.

Day by day, I watched Agrippina grow larger. Everyone agreed she was carrying a boy. The prospect cheered her, helping to fight off the bone-chilling cold that no fire could hold at bay. Information about the military operation, now hundreds of miles to the northeast, was sporadic and unreliable. Finally it stopped entirely. Where was the army? What was happening?

Late one night, a shriek like an animal in mortal agony awakened me. When I rose, the stone floor felt like ice. I pulled on my new wolf-skin robe, grateful for its warmth, and followed the awful sounds down the hall to Agrippina's room. As I stood uncertainly, shivering from fear as well as cold, the door flew open and Mother emerged.

"Oh! What a start you gave me!" she gasped, nearly dropping the basin

she carried. "Go back to bed, dear one. It's just the baby coming. To listen to her, one would think nobody had ever had a baby before. This *is* her sixth."

Unable to imagine Agrippina ever suffering silently, I said nothing. The midwife, plump like a partridge, moved so fast past us down the hall that her two attendants were hard put to keep up. They trailed breathless, one carrying a basin, the other a tray of ointments. "It won't be long now," Mother assured me. "Go back to sleep."

The door closed. I turned obediently, but couldn't bring myself to leave the dark mystery inside. Agrippina's cries ceased after what seemed an eternity. Had the baby been born? The scent of hot oil and quince mixed with strong, minty pennyroyal assailed me as I quietly opened the door. Mother and the others, faces white and drawn, leaned over the couch where Agrippina lay.

"I don't understand," Mother whispered. "She's full-bodied as Venus herself. Such women are born to bear children."

The midwife shook her head. "She might look like Venus, but best pray to Diana. It's in *her* hands."

My breath caught. Was Agrippina's condition so desperate that only a goddess could save her? The midwife looked up, startled. "Go, child, this is no place for you."

"What's the matter?"

"A breech birth." Her voice softened.

Suddenly Agrippina awakened, arching upward, a mass of tangled, tawny hair, eyes wild in a glistening face. "This boy—this boy—is killing—me!" she panted.

"No!" I heard my own voice as from a distance. "You are *not* going to die." Without realizing it, I'd crossed the room and now stood at Agrippina's side. A picture was forming before my eyes, blurry as though glimpsed through water. I paused as the image sharpened. "I see you with a baby . . . it's a girl."

Mother leaned over Agrippina. "Did you hear that? Take courage from her words." She and the midwife lifted Agrippina, slumped between them. The vision had disappeared. Suddenly, Agrippina's body contorted. She lifted her head, hair matted, eyes like a terrified animal. "Diana!" she shrieked. "My goddess, help me!"

The smell of blood, fetid yet sweet, filled the room, as the midwife held up something dark and shriveled. Slapping the baby's buttocks, she was rewarded by an outraged cry. "Look, *Domina,* look. The child spoke truth. You have a fine daughter."

But Agrippina lay as though dead. Mother was sobbing now, quietly. I touched her hand. "Don't worry, Auntie will be all right. I know it."

"I'll never have a child," I informed Mother the next morning.

Smiling, she smoothed back an unruly lock of my hair. "I hope that's not the sight speaking. I shouldn't want you to miss the happiest moment in a woman's life."

"Happy! You mean horrible. Why would anyone do it?"

She laughed. "You'd not be here if I hadn't."

When she spoke again, her voice was thoughtful. "Childbirth's a test, the measure of a woman's bravery and endurance, as war is a man's. No woman knows when she lies down to bear a child whether she'll survive."

I looked up at Mother's brown velvet eyes; Agrippina's screams still echoed in my head.

"Having children is our duty to the family and to the Empire," she reminded me. "Now, why don't you visit Agrippina? Perhaps she'll allow you to hold her newest princess."

The edge was back in Mother's voice. I guessed that Agrippina was her haughty self again.

Weeks passed without news of the army. Then a messenger finally arrived. A slender boy in his teens, he told us how Germanicus had subdued the savage Germans. I listened, bursting with pride and excitement. Forging on, Germanicus's troops had reached the Teutoburg Forest where six years earlier one tenth of the Roman army had been slaughtered. "When we went to bury our dead, we saw skeletons everywhere." The boy shuddered. "Their heads were pegged to tree trunks. We didn't know if the bones belonged to friend or stranger, but what did it matter? They were all our brothers."

I opened the door a few days later to another breathless courier. Bloodshot eyes fearful, he described a situation grown desperate. Arminius, the general

responsible for the carnage, lurked in a treacherous swamp near the battle site. Germanicus was determined to find him.

Soon the rumors began. Wounded men stumbled to our gate. The army had been cut off, surrounded. Fleeing deserters shouted that German forces were on their way to invade Gaul. Soon it would be Rome itself. All around us, panic-stricken villagers insisted that the Rhine Bridge be destroyed. Agrippina, dragging herself from bed, put a stop to that. "In the absence of my husband, *I* am the commander," she announced. "The bridge will stand."

The wounded, returning on foot, using sticks for crutches, would soon have need of it. Agrippina improvised a field hospital, using her own money and soliciting everyone, from noble to peasant, to help. I eagerly fetched bandages and water, washed wounds and held water to the lips of feverish men. Then the visions started. Though I had no medical knowledge or even aptitude, it seemed that I could tell by looking at the wounded who would survive and who would not.

Late on my second day at the hospital, I sat beside a soldier not much older than myself. His wound seemed slight, a relief after so many gory ones. I smiled as I offered him water. His lips moved in an answering smile as he reached for the cup. Then slowly his round face changed before my eyes into a skull. Horrified, I staggered to my feet.

"What's the matter?" he asked, taking the water, looking at me curiously, normal again. Muttering an excuse, I hurried outside. Forcing myself to believe I'd imagined it, I continued with my rounds. The next day I learned that the boy had died in the night.

It happened again. Then again. Despite the increasing proficiency of Agrippina's hastily assembled staff, the men whose skulls I saw invariably died. When this happened to a merry young soldier of whom I'd grown fond, I fled the hospital sobbing.

Climbing onto a large crag overlooking the river's dark waters, I struggled to compose myself. It was here that Agrippina found me. I looked away, not knowing what to say. Auntie, with her regal self-assurance, would never understand the dread I felt each day, the sense of helplessness at being suddenly possessed by this unwelcome knowledge. I nodded politely and rose.

"Don't go," she said, touching my hand lightly. "I see that you are trou-

bled. It has to do with the sight, doesn't it? You have the gift."

"Yes," I whispered. "This is no 'gift,' it's a curse."

"Poor child." Agrippina shook her head sadly. "From what I hear, the sight chooses *you*. It can never be removed."

"What good is knowing something terrible if I can't change it?"

"Such knowledge could bring you power," she suggested.

"No! I don't want to know bad things," I said, fighting tears that stung my eyes.

"Then pray," she suggested. "Ask that you not be shown more than you can bear. Ask for courage to face your destiny."

"Thank you for understanding. Mother and Marcella don't like to talk about the sight. It makes them nervous."

"*I* am rarely nervous," Agrippina's imperious tone was back. "I think it best we return to the hospital. They need us there."

I sighed, thinking of all those sweet young men, their frightened souls preparing for flight. "There are so many coming now. I'm afraid for the rest, for my father and—Germanicus."

"Your sight tells you nothing?"

I shook my head. "It never does when I ask."

"Then I will." She smiled confidently. "A courier arrived only a short while ago. I was about to post the news when I saw you steal away. The tide of battle has turned. Germanicus lured the Germans from the swamp. He will soon return with his army, victorious. I will welcome them at the bridge."

"My father—my father is safe?"

She smiled broadly, assuring me.

A frisson ran through my body as she spoke of victory, but there was something more . . . "You're certain Uncle Germanicus is safe?"

"Quite certain," she replied, rising to her feet. "You will see him soon."

Agrippina was right. *Tata* returned and Germanicus was hailed a conquering hero, yet the memory of the young wolf remained, his face frozen in surprise and anguish.