Publius Clodius Pulcher

A Novel of the Late Roman Republic

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Foreword

In *Forgotten Men of the Roman Republic*, I follow a man as far as the surviving evidence will take me. With Publius Clodius Pulcher I wanted to ask a question I could only partly answer that way. In 58 BC he did away with the charge Romans had paid for their public grain. What did that change mean to someone who earned her living selling wheat?

Cicero had plenty to say about Clodius. He had lost his home and gone into exile, and we can still read his side of their quarrel. I would like to have heard from a grain dealer on the Tiber that year. Even a few entries in her accounts, before and after the law took effect, would have been worth having.

That is why I wrote this book as a novel. Aia is my invention. The law she has to reckon with was real. From her warehouse she can see both the family carrying its grain home and the sacks she herself has yet to sell. It seemed to me a good place from which to look at Clodius.

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Prologue

An Old Woman Remembers

My hands once counted sacks of grain by the thousand. Now I need both of them to lift a cup. I can still tell good wheat by touch, though, and I remember what a measure of it cost before Publius Clodius Pulcher gave Rome its grain for nothing.

In my father's day the Forum was so loud with argument that a buyer had to lean across our table to make himself heard. Rome is quieter under one man. A senator can write what he pleases about Clodius now, with little fear that a woman from the river warehouses will answer him.

I knew Clodius. I sold grain for a living when he took the price off the public ration. I had good reason to wish him gone.

Then I saw a woman at the granary door with a sack in her arms and two children to feed. I remember what she said to her boy. I should like that to be set down too.

Chapter 1

My Father's Grain

My first memory of Rome is the smell. Not the flowers or the bread or the incense from the temples, though all of those lived in the air too. No, my first true memory is the smell of grain. Wheat, barley, and spelt, piled high in my father's horreum near the river. A warm, dusty smell, almost sweet, that clung to your hair and clothes and skin. To this day, when I catch even a trace of it, I am a girl of five again, sitting on a sack of Sicilian wheat while my father counts his grain stores.

My father was Gaius Rutilius. A grain dealer. Not a great one and not a rich one, but a steady one, which in Rome is worth more than either. He owned a warehouse along the Tiber docks south of the Forum Boarium, where the cattle market filled the morning air with sounds no child could ignore. The bellowing of oxen. The shouts of working men. The slap of fish on stone tables at the river stalls. And beneath it all, the slow brown water of the Tiber itself, carrying barges loaded with the grain sacks from Ostia, each one stamped or marked with the name of the shipper and the port of origin.

I learned to read those marks before I learned to read anything else. My father would hold me up and point. "That one is from Sicilia, Aia. Good hard wheat. And that one, see the mark? That is from Sardinia. Not as fine, but the price is better." He spoke to me as if I were his partner, not his child. Perhaps because I was all he had.

My mother died when I was three years old. She was carrying a second child, a boy my father had prayed for, and neither of them lived through the birth. I do not remember her, though my father kept a small painted likeness on the

wall of our home. A woman with dark eyes and a kind mouth. She did not have my coloring. I have red hair and pale skin that come from my father's people, the Rutilii.

The Rutilii were not old Romans. My grandfather had come south from Cisalpine Gaul, from the flat green country near the river Padus, two generations before I was born. He needed a Roman name to do trade in the city, and since people already called his family "the red ones" for their hair, he took the name Rutilius and made it his own. Rutilus. Red. It was not a noble name, but it was honest, and it served us well enough.

After my mother died, my father did what many men in his place would not. He kept me close. He did not send me to relatives in the north or leave me with his brother's wife and forget about me. My father brought me to the warehouse with him each morning before the sun was fully up, and I grew in the shadow of grain sacks the way other children grow in gardens.

This is not to say I had no woman's hand in my life. My father's brother Titus and his wife looked after me when the work was heavy or when my father had business at the docks, as that was no place for a small girl. Aunt, as I called her, though she was my uncle's wife, was a quiet woman who smelled of bread and olive oil. She taught me how to cook, to spin wool, and to keep a home. She and Uncle Titus had no children of their own, and I think she loved me as the daughter she never had. Their house was small, just four rooms above a fuller's shop on the Via Tusculana, but it was always clean, and there was always food.

Uncle Titus was nothing like my father. Where my father was quick and sharp with numbers, Uncle Titus was slow and careful about everything. He chewed his food slowly. He walked slowly and even spoke slowly, as if each word had to be weighed on a scale before it left his mouth. And he had worked the grain trade too, years ago, but his knees had gone bad. He spent most of his days sitting in his doorway

watching the street and offering judgments on the state of the Republic that no one had asked for.

"Rome is rotting, Aia," he would say to me when I was far too young to understand what he meant. "Too many people. Too many mouths. Too much wanting."

I did not know then that he was right.



By the time I was twelve, I could tell Sicilian wheat from African wheat by the feel of it between my fingers. I knew the price of a modius of barley in any season. I knew which ship captains were honest and which ones would short you a sack for every twenty if you did not watch them unload. My father had made me his second pair of eyes, and I was proud of it.

Our days followed the same path. We rose before dawn and walked together through streets that were still mostly dark, save for the bakers already at their ovens and the slaves carrying water from the public fountains. Rome in the early morning was a different city than Rome at midday. Quieter. Cooler. You could hear your feet on the stones. The insulae, those tall, cramped buildings where most of the city lived stacked on top of one another, were still and shuttered. Only the dogs were awake, nosing through the rubbish that piled in every alley.

The warehouse sat in a row of similar buildings along the river, each one belonging to a different merchant. Ours was not the largest, but my father kept it well. The walls were thick to hold out the damp air, and the floors were raised on wooden platforms to keep the grain off the wet ground. Rats were the constant enemy. My father kept two cats for that purpose, and I named them both, as children will. One was a fat orange tom I called Rex, which means king, because he walked as if he owned the place. The other was a gray female I called Umbra, which means shadow, because you never saw her until she had already caught her prey.

It was a simple life. My father dealt mostly with other traders, with bakers who needed flour, and with the agents of wealthy families who kept stores for their large households. Twice a year, when the big grain fleets arrived from Sicilia and Africa, the docks became a madhouse of shouting men and creaking ropes and the deep groan of wooden hulls against the stone quays. Those were long days. My father would be at the docks from dawn until well after dark, and I would be beside him with a wax tablet, marking tallies as the sacks came off the barges.

I loved those days. The air was thick with dust, salt, and sweat. Sailors with dark skin and strange tongues hauled cargo while overseers barked orders in rough Latin. You could hear a dozen languages at the Tiber docks and smell as many lands. Spices from the east, pine tar from the ship timbers, and the sharp bite of garum, our fish sauce we pour on everything. All being loaded onto carts for the markets.

My father would sometimes pause in his work and put his hand on my shoulder. “Watch, Aia,” he would say. “This is how Rome eats. Every sack that comes off that barge is a family that will not go hungry tonight. Remember that. We are not just traders. We are the people who feed this city.”

I believed him. I still do.



I was thirteen the first time I saw the boy, on a morning when the grain boats were unloading.

We were near the Forum Boarium, where the cattle market spills toward the river. My father had gone to speak with a shipper about a late cargo, and I was sitting on a stone ledge with my tablet, watching the crowd. Rome is never short of things to watch. Beggars and priests and soldiers and slaves, all moving in a river of their own, each one bound for somewhere I could only guess at.

Then I heard the sound of men clearing a path. Not soldiers. Something else. A group of attendants, well dressed,

pushing people aside with that particular Roman rudeness that comes from knowing you are better than everyone around you. And in the middle of them, a boy.

He was perhaps seven or eight years old. Dark hair, dark eyes, a face that even then was too pretty for a boy. He wore a fine tunic with a purple border, the mark of a freeborn child of rank. He walked as I imagined a young god would walk, as if the stones beneath his feet should be grateful for the honor of his soles. And he did not look at the people who were being shoved out of his path. They were not worth his notice.

I stared. I could not help it. Children know when they are looking at something from a world that is not their own. This boy was from a place as far from my father's warehouse as the moon is from the Tiber.

My father returned and saw me staring. He followed my eyes to the boy and his attendants, and something changed in him. Not anger. Not envy. Something more like the feeling a man has when a storm cloud is on the horizon.

"You see that boy, Aia?"

"Yes, Pater."

"That is the youngest son of Appius Claudius Pulcher. The little boy's name is Publius Claudius Pulcher. Do you know that name?"

I shook my head no.

My father sat down beside me on the ledge. He spoke quietly, the way he did when he wanted me to listen and remember.

"The Claudii are one of the oldest families in Rome. They have held the elected consulship more times than you have fingers to count. They built the road our grain wagons travel on, the Via Appia, and built the aqueduct that brings water to this city, the Aqua Appia. Their name is on monuments across Rome. When that boy walks down the street and people are pushed aside, it is because his family believes they own this city. And in a way, Aia, they do."

I looked again at the boy, but he and his attendants had already turned a corner and vanished into the crowd. The space they had cleared filled up again at once, as though they had never been there at all.

"Will I ever meet him?" I asked. I do not know why I asked that. Children say foolish things.

My father smiled, but it was not a happy smile. "People like us do not meet people like him, Aia. We work for our place in Rome. People like the Claudii were born owning it."

He stood and brushed the dust from his tunic. "Come. We have grain to count."

I followed him back to the warehouse, but I looked over my shoulder once more toward the corner where the boy had gone. The street was full of the usual crowd again. Loud, common, busy with the work of living. No trace of him remained.

I never thought of that boy again for years. I had no reason to. My world was grain and ledgers and the river. His world was marble and power and a name that stretched back to the founding of the Republic.

But Rome is a strange city. It has a way of pushing lives together that have no business touching. And the gods, who have never lacked for cruelty or humor, seem to enjoy the mischief of it.

I would see that boy again. And when I did, he would no longer be a boy. He would be the most dangerous man in Rome.