

# Fire and Sacrifice

by Victoria Collins

## Chapter 1

### FIRE

#### Secunda

#### October 114 BC

Our time together began on the day of my first execution. We had longer together than it sounds, but not much. By the end of it, she would be written about for two thousand years. Never me. It was my job, I discovered, to be there for her. To light her way home.

She is Aemilia.

I am Secunda, or I was then, at the start. No one can see me anymore but imagine a face half mashed with scars from a fire, which go all the way to my knee. Don't look away, it's only your imagination. The other side? An ordinary face, I suppose. I never looked. Olive skin and mouse-brown hair I never knew what to do with. Imagine, too, a voice burned out to a smoky crackle.

Much of the time this was fine with me, when I was happy to not be noticed. It doesn't help, though, when you are screaming bloody murder.

I fought all the way to my execution, naturally. I screamed bloody murder. Because it was. I screeched and thrashed and roared as though I could wake the gods, and the sky would rip open to show the world that this thing should not be allowed.

But the sound was just an ugly coughing thing, and my thrashing only made people turn away.

I remember clearly how hot and heavy the ropes were on my wrists. I'd thrashed about so much when they were trying to tie me up that they resorted to winding almost the full length of rope round and round in a big knot. Events had flared quickly, no time to have irons forged. No trial required for a slave.

The master's Son Number One had the rope and wrenched me along like a dog. Son Number Two prodded me from behind, all the way from the villa through the streets and finally into the great Roman Forum, with all the rich men and Togas and temples to witness the master's great triumph over a slave girl.

I threw myself backwards, putting all my weight onto my elbows and forcing Number Two to hold me up while I kicked his brother hard in the back.

Number One swung and backhanded me. But the sky stayed quiet.

It was nothing new for people to turn away from me, but surely this was enough to move someone. Anyone.

It was my face, you see. You either turn from me or are mesmerised by me. It's alright. It is what it is. I fell into the kitchen fire as a child; I liked to think I carried the image of the flames in my skin.

The master kept me hidden away in his dark little kitchen so no one would have the displeasure of looking upon me. I'm told he chained me there when we had guests and I was too little to be trusted with full obedience. I don't remember. There's a shadow of it in me somewhere but I don't look.

For want of ability to make enough noise that people would look, I tried glaring at those who were close on the side of the street. I glared so hard I turned myself red and made myself cry with the effort of willing them to do something. I was red and wet like a skinned animal, bleeding insides on the outside for all the streets to see.

I screamed the word they would not say for me: 'No!' But the sound thinned to nothing, like smoke, and anyway, a master can kill his slave any day. It's law.

'I am *not* a slave!' It was not the truth. But I yelled it to the streets again and again because it was the truth of my being, and the truth I'd prefer to die with. I had screamed it all the way from the villa and I would scream it all the way to the cliff they meant to throw me off.

'Almost there,' Number One snarled and yanked again. I threw myself back and sideways, kicking so violently that I found myself rolled up in Number Two's arms, like an old carpet. He dumped me on the ground. Pig.

'I didn't do it!' I rasped, on my knees. But I did. But I didn't mean it and I didn't start it and I didn't deserve this. *He was going to take me on the table right there in front of you, you saw!* 'You are my brother!' Number One slapped me for that but it was the truth. It's the way of masters and slaves. I said it more to stab him with than to appeal to him. I think this 'brother' of mine even took my mother once, trying to prove himself. She came back to the kitchen green with disgust. She would not speak for days.

If I had been prettier they would have taken me and mother might have been spared.

I stayed on my knees, stalling as long as I could, but he yanked me forward so I had to pull my feet under me or fall on my face.

And then there she was.

Rushing at us, upon me before she could stop, a crush of whitest white linen like looking into the sun, all curves and drapes.

'Stop it!'

My executioners withered before her.

'Stop it!' She was beautiful, and crumpling with distress as though she herself were bound. Something in her knew this thing. Something in her hated this as much as I did, for whatever reasons of her own.

She smelled of smoke.

'Priestess –' Number One called to her.

'Unbind her!' she said in a panicked voice.

None of us knew what to do.

Then came the voice of Dalmaticus, as I came to know him. I remember that moment clearly because it tore her attention away from me.

Dalmaticus had a voice like rock fall, that made you want to run even when he wasn't raising it. 'Ever killed anything but kittens before, junior?'

Lucius Caecilius Metellus Dalmaticus. The Pontifex Maximus, head priest of all Rome. Head magistrate. Former consul. Military honours. Sandy face, square like a battle shield. Crushed nose. Leaning against a doorframe beside the road, talking to Number One.

The wool robes seemed too soft for him. In my head he was in armour, and that scar on his cheek surely puckered over a metal chip left by an enemy's sword. We were all sharper in Dalmaticus's presence.

'Careful this one doesn't grab you on her way down, take you with her.' He crossed his arms casually and nodded at me. 'She's got fight.'

The sons turned white. 'This slave is condemned to death at the Tarpeian Rock for crimes against the House of Peducaeus, your eminence. Sir. Pontifex Maximus.'

'This woman is touched by Vesta,' the priestess snapped.

'Aemilia,' Dalmaticus warned.

Aemilia. Priestess. I managed to think properly about her whites and realised she was a priestess of Vesta, the sacred fire. Looking at me. And I am wet and red and feral and I cannot bring myself to protest any more in her presence, she is too clean. To look directly at her was to look at a candle flame, so luminescent it's impossible to focus on. She was older than I expected of a priestess, fine lines in the corners of her eyes, but she held the grace of ancient wisdom. I tried to breathe nicer. Oh please! Please, please!

'Look at her scars.' (The priestess to Dalmaticus.)

'Aemilia.' (Dalmaticus again.)

Aemilia inhaled sharply: a decision. Quick as fire she stepped in and laid her palm on my cheek. She touched me! She wiped dry my eye, looking at me as though I were her own child, or her child self, and I was in that moment reduced to a lost child with big hot eyes.

And then she was gone.

She withdrew her hand, closed herself, raised her chin, cupped her hands together, cocked an eyebrow at Dalmaticus: job done.

Dalmaticus sagged.

As she stepped back she pulled with her my insides and a torrent of hot child's tears hit my cheeks. Because she was gone. Because she was there. Because no one ever touched me. Because touch, for me as a child, was the hot sting of my mother's hands tending my weeping burns. For the earliest winter of my memory I slept on the stone step, facedown in the frost for the relief of the cool on my sores. Scabby infections kept me in pain for years. I spent the rest of my days away from sight in the kitchen, grateful for the scars that spared me the touches of men.

But Aemilia is a priestess of the sacred fire. That day my skin met hers like a flame leaping joyfully from one branch to another, having found a kindred spirit with which to dance.

I was lost to her then. Then and forever.

I felt a tug on my ropes. Dalmaticus was cutting them off.

'What's happening?' Number One's voice was shrill. He hopped ridiculously on the spot, barely suppressing the urge to stamp his feet.

'The touch of a Vestal will pardon any condemned prisoner. It is law,' Aemilia said. Then to me: 'You are free of this fate.'

'She can't!'

'She did,' said Dalmaticus.

'This is a slave of Sextus Peducaeus. Pardoned or not, she has embarrassed the House of Peducaeus, and she still belongs to me.' Son Number One turned on me and growled. 'I *will* have your punishment.'

'Then the House of Vestals buys her freedom,' Aemilia shot back.

*Oh gods, Vesta, please.*

I shot a look at Dalmaticus. 'Of course, if this girl is touched by Vesta, surely Peducaeus would be *proud* to make her a gift to the temple,' he said with a threat in his voice.

The ropes dropped and Dalmaticus gave me a secret nod toward the street: run.