

THE EMISSARIES ♦ BOOK TWO

The
SISTERS
of
CORINTH

ANGELA
HUNT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hunt, Angela Elwell, author.

Title: The Sisters of Corinth / Angela Hunt.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024. | Series: The Emissaries ; book 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2023051315 | ISBN 9780764241574 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764243226 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493446636 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3558.U46747 S57 2024 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20231102

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023051315>

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Cover by Peter Gloege, LOOK Design Studio

Cover images from Adobe Stock, Shutterstock, and iStock

Author is represented by Browne & Miller Literary Associates.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

In Paul’s letters to the churches he founded, we can see his love and concern in the way he praises, encourages, and admonishes the Gentile converts. But although the Scriptures paint an overall picture of the age in which these people lived, the modern reader may find it difficult to fully appreciate the pressures facing the fledgling believers.

THE EMISSARIES series features the stories of men and women who came to faith through Paul’s missionary efforts in cities of the Roman Empire. Our own society—which grows ever more saturated with anti-biblical worldviews—is not so different from that of ancient Corinth. May we be challenged by the first-century believers’ vision, courage, and commitment to Messiah Yeshua.

Since reading involves “hearing” words in our heads, you might find it helpful to know the pronunciation of several words and names used in this story. The early church was the *ecclesia* (pronounced ek-la-SEE-ah), and *Achaia* (Ah-KI-ah) was the province in which Corinth was located.

Ancient Corinth hosted the Isthmian games, forerunner of the modern Olympics. The games featured several events, but the most anticipated was the relay race. Competitors, each carrying a torch, positioned themselves at the starting line, while other groups of runners waited at fixed points in the distance.

When the signal was given, the first group ran, holding their lighted torches aloft. As a runner reached his teammate at the next position, he would hand over his torch. And so the race continued until the final team member crossed the finish line.

With that relay in mind, the Greeks coined the phrase “*Let those who have the light pass it on.*”

May we do the same.

One

MARIANA

AD 60

When Salama stepped into my bedchamber, her face twisted with distress, I dropped the scroll I had been reading. “D-Domina,” my handmaid stuttered. “I know you want to read without interruption, but your mother commanded me to fetch you.”

Irritation wrestled with curiosity as I picked up the scroll and furled it. “Do you know why?”

“Unexpected guests have arrived.”

“Friends of my mother’s?”

“I do not recognize them, Domina. But the woman mentioned you by name.”

My curiosity flickered. Few of my mother’s friends had time for me, and none of them would seek me out.

“Our visitors are women?”

Salama shook her head. “A man and a woman. Their tunics are faded, they have the tanned skin of fieldworkers, and they do not look like they live in Corinth.”

My irritation vanished. I knew only a few people from outside Corinth, and all of them were dear to me.

I stood, shook the wrinkles out of my tunic, and checked my reflection in the looking brass. I had not dressed for visitors but did not want to disrespect this couple by appearing unkempt in their presence. “Should you rearrange my hair?”

“You look beautiful, Domina. And these guests do not seem overly concerned with appearances.” A blush darkened Salama’s cheek. “I apologize; I do not mean to insult your—”

“Do not worry. I have many friends who are not overly concerned with appearances.” I smiled to put my handmaid at ease and moved toward the door. “Are they outside?”

“Yes, Domina.”

I left my chamber and strode toward the garden. Once I stepped through the doorway, I heard the mingled tones of a man and woman in conversation with my mother. My pulse quickened when I recognized their voices, and a peek around the rose arbor confirmed my hunch: “Aquila and Priscilla! How wonderful to see you!”

“Mariana!” They stood, opening their arms, and I hugged each of them, holding Priscilla for an extra-long moment. “When we said farewell,” I whispered in her ear, “I did not think I would ever see you again.”

“Adonai had other plans.” Priscilla stepped back and pinned me in a quick scrutiny. “You have grown into an attractive young lady! How old are you now? Fourteen?”

“Fifteen,” I answered, not knowing whether I should be pleased by her interest or embarrassed by my unmarried status.

Priscilla smiled and gestured to an empty space on a garden bench. “Please join us. We were telling your mother about Paulos.”

A flush of pleasure warmed my cheeks. Paulos had changed my life, mine *and* Mother’s, by introducing us to Yeshua of Nazareth. But we had not seen the fiery emissary in months.

I sat next to Mother. “Is Paulos well? Is he still being held in Caesarea?”

Priscilla looked to her husband, who tugged on his silvered beard before speaking. “He has been sent to Rome. He has been there several months, but we have received letters, so we know he is well. Luke is with him, also Epaphras and a few others. They see to his needs while he is confined.”

“He is still in prison?”

Aquilla nodded. “But he is grateful for a good situation. He is kept in an apartment, under guard, but he is free to write.”

“And his health?” Mother asked. “He develops a severe cough in these months of cold weather.”

“Luke takes good care of him,” Aquilla assured her. “And we are on our way to visit them.”

A crease wrinkled Mother’s brow. “Are you concerned about going back to Rome? It has not been so long since the Jews were expelled.”

Aquilla snorted softly. “Claudius is dead, and thus far Nero appears to be tolerant of those who hold different religious beliefs. Still, Paulos has warned us not to attract attention when we begin our work. We will no longer preach in synagogues. Instead, we will hold meetings in our home.”

“So we will be shopping for a large domicile,” Priscilla said, dimpling as she squeezed her husband’s arm. “We do

not care if the building has fallen into ruin, so long as it can hold dozens of people. Our budget is limited, but we believe the Lord will lead us to the right house.”

“One with a walled garden,” Aquilla added. “To avoid prying eyes. As long as we do not disturb the peace, we should not attract undesirable attention.”

Mother glanced toward the house, then lowered her voice. “Mariana and I know all about not attracting attention. Narkis and his daughter . . . they do not worship Adonai. We have had to be *discreet* about our faith.”

Priscilla’s narrow face furrowed with concern. “I am so sorry,” she whispered. “Does your husband—does he feel threatened by your beliefs?”

“No.” Mother managed a tremulous smile. “As you said, Mariana and I take care not to disturb the peace of the household. Narkis is a good man, and he knows we worship Adonai. He does *not* know we no longer worship the Roman gods. He would not tolerate such dissension.”

She leaned forward, clearly intent on changing the subject. “Tell us about this new emperor. I have asked Narkis about him, but I do not think he knows as much as he would have me believe. Is Nero a good man? Can he be trusted to let us worship in peace, or will he expel believers as Claudius did the Jews?”

Aquilla cleared his throat. “According to what I have heard, Nero has done many good things. He put an end to secret trials and gave the Senate more independence. He has given slaves permission to bring legal complaints against unjust masters. He has even pardoned men who plotted against him. But . . .”

Mother lifted a brow. “What else have you heard?”

Aquilla blew out a breath. “Whatever good Nero may have done in public pales in the light of what he is reported to have done in private. He believes himself to be a skilled actor, musician, and charioteer, but he is not, so he forces people to offer false praise. He has taken a lover, committing adultery against his wife. But the worst thing he has done is murder his mother.”

A chill spidered up my spine. “His mother,” Aquilla continued, his voice low and gruff, “spoke against the emperor’s new mistress, and he refused to tolerate her interference. They say he arranged for her to sail across the Bay of Naples after a feast, but then sabotaged the boat. When the vessel broke apart during the journey, his mother managed to swim to shore.”

“A brave woman!” I said, grinning.

Aquilla gave me a rueful smile. “Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story. When Nero heard his mother had escaped, he sent one of his officers to her home. When she realized death had come for her, she confronted the soldier, pressed the tip of his sword against her belly, and commanded the guard to pierce her in that spot because the fruit of her womb had engineered her demise.”

My stomach dropped. Though I had not held any regard for the emperor’s mother before hearing Aquilla’s report, I could not help admiring her. If only I could meet death with such courage. If only I could face my stepfather with such bravery.

Mother reached out and took our guests’ hands, but a deep line remained between her brows. “In going to Rome, you may be walking into a pit of vipers, so I will pray for

you. Every morning and night, I will lift your names to the Father and ask Him to bless you and Paulos.”

The conversation had taken a turn toward adult matters, yet I loved Paulos and wanted him to remain alive and well. “Please tell Paulos we miss him,” I added, my cheeks burning.

“We will tell him,” Priscilla said, smiling at me, “and knowing how you love to read, Mariana, we have brought you a copy of one of his letters.” She nodded at Aquilla, who pulled a rolled set of papyri from a leather bag. “It is a copy of his letter to the believers in Rome. Have you read it?”

I smiled in pleased surprise. “No, but I would love to.”

Aquilla placed the pages in my hand. “I am sure you have already read his letters to the believers here.”

“Many times,” Mother said, a note of resignation in her voice. “I am not proud that Paulos had to scold us, but since it is important that people learn from our mistakes, we have hired copyists to reproduce his letters for the ecclesia throughout Achaia. We ask all new converts to read them.”

“Paulos loves and misses you.” Priscilla’s dark eyes filled with tears. “When we were with him in Ephesus, he could not speak of you Corinthians without weeping. Despite the trouble you went through, he has not stopped praying for all of you.”

“I hope the troubles are well behind us.” Mother straightened her spine. “And where are my manners? Have you eaten? I will have the servants bring food and honey water, and you must agree to stay with us tonight. You are welcome to rest in our home, knowing you are among friends.”

Priscilla gave Mother a smile of pure relief. “Thank you, dear Hester. You may never know how much we appreciate your hospitality. The journey to Rome will take many days,

and I daresay none of our accommodations will be as pleasant as this house.”

“Most evenings”—Aquilla grinned—“we spread our blankets and sleep beneath the stars. I have learned to appreciate dead leaves; they can be fashioned into a remarkably soft mattress.”

Mother caught the attention of a house slave stationed near the doorway. “Prepare one of the bedrooms for our guests, then bring food to the *triclinium*.” She glanced at Aquilla. “Do you have animals outside? A conveyance of some sort?”

“Only a donkey,” he said. “Loaded with provisions.”

“I will make certain your beast is properly tended,” Mother said, ringing for the *ianitor*. The doorkeeper appeared almost instantly. “Albus, direct the stable hands to unload and care for the donkey outside. He will need food, water, and a place in our stable for the night.” Albus bowed and hurried away as Mother turned to our guests. “I will give you time to relax, then I will join you for some refreshments.”

We stood, but the light tap of sandals on the tile distracted us. I turned and saw Prima, my stepsister, peering around the arbor. “Oh!” She lifted a questioning brow, then looked at Mother. “Friends of yours?”

“And mine.” I forced a smile. “Prima, let me introduce Aquilla and Priscilla, formerly of Ephesus, now on their way to Rome. They will be our guests tonight.”

“Lovely.” Prima showed her teeth in an expression that bore little resemblance to a smile. “Has Father approved?”

“He will,” Mother said, stiffening slightly. “He is a hospitable man.”

“Then we will welcome you for one night.” Prima nodded. “I hope you rest well.”