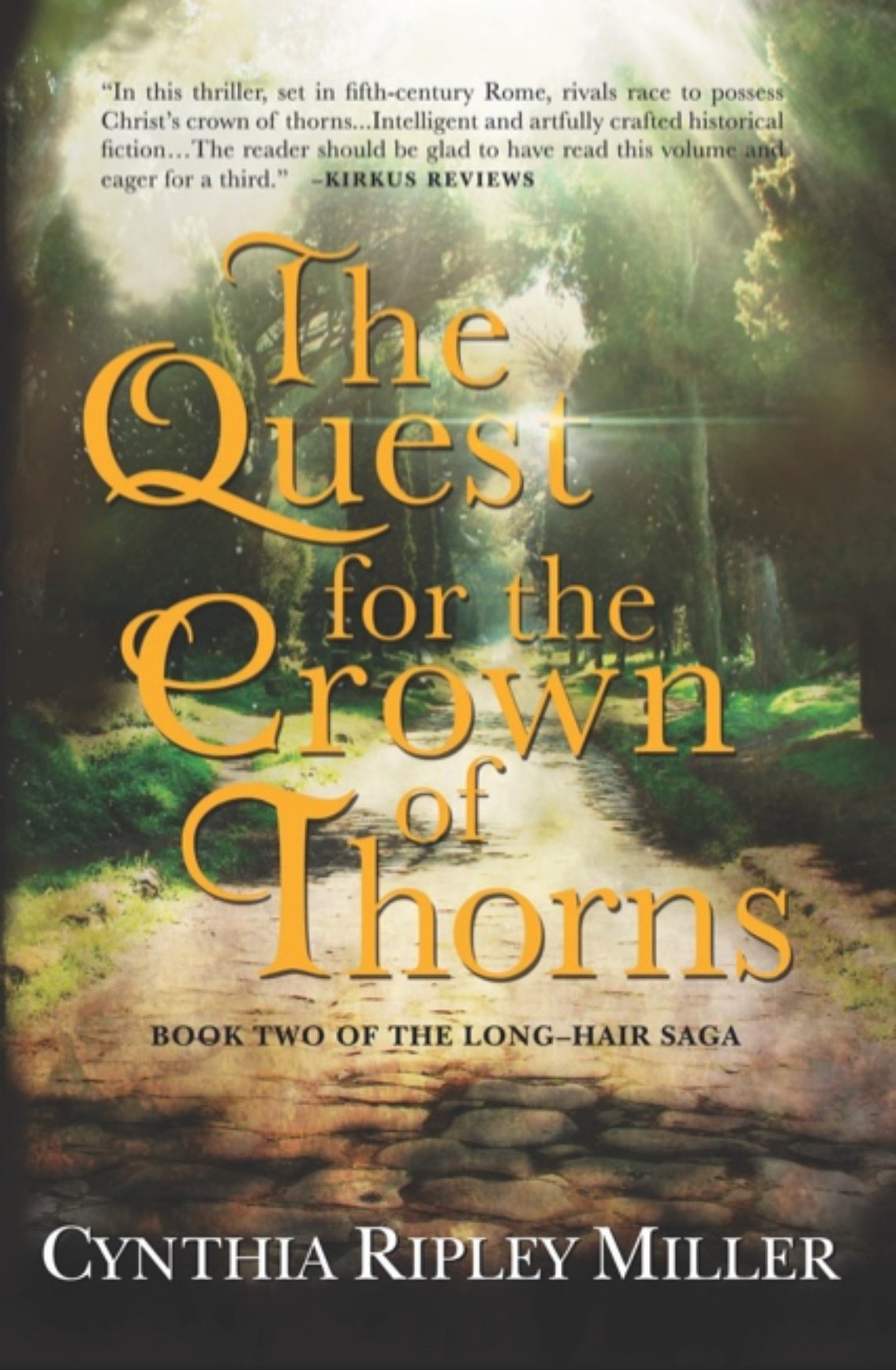


A Roman senator's daughter and her warrior husband must solve a gruesome murder, a mysterious riddle, and complete one of history's most challenging missions in The Quest for the Crown of Thorns: Book Two of the Long-Hair Saga

**The Quest for the Crown of Thorns:
Book Two of the Long-Hair Saga**
by Cynthia Ripley Miller

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10024.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.



"In this thriller, set in fifth-century Rome, rivals race to possess Christ's crown of thorns...Intelligent and artfully crafted historical fiction...The reader should be glad to have read this volume and eager for a third." -KIRKUS REVIEWS

The Quest for the Crown of Thorns

BOOK TWO OF THE LONG-HAIR SAGA

CYNTHIA RIPLEY MILLER

Copyright © 2018 Cynthia Ripley Miller

ISBN: 978-1-63492-552-5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Cover jacket designed by Cathy Helms: www.avalongraphics.org

Stock elements copyright: www.dreamstime.com

Prologue

A Roman Execution

JERUSALEM: AD 33, *Golgotha* (Calvary)

Malchus would never forget Gethsemane: the garden, a brazen moon, burning torches, and olive trees. As he hurried through the streets, the wind howled past his memories of that night several days past. He had accompanied his master, the high priest, and a crowd of armed men to arrest the rebel, Jesus of Nazareth. He ran now. Rain pelted against the walls, plopping on mortared stones and the mud-hardened path. The overcast sky and eerie darkness lured Malchus home, but the affair on the hill commanded his direction because Jesus was there.

I must see him once more and thank him, he thought. Malchus felt honored and loved. The Teacher had lifted his severed ear from the grassy dirt and returned it to its place. The burly, hotheaded follower of Jesus, the one called Peter, had dropped his sword in shame. Jesus had admonished his brash disciple and had healed Malchus, a mere slave.

His limbs aching and his breath labored, Malchus ran harder against the wind. He left the walled street and reached the bottom of the hill. “Teacher—wait for me!” he pleaded. Three crosses towered against the grey sky. The middle cross on the higher ground held Jesus. A sudden flash of lightning cracked the sky and a woman screamed. Several Roman soldiers cursed, slamming a ladder against the Nazarene’s limp chest. With a tool in hand, one ascended toward the nail embedded in the dead rebel’s wrist. Malchus clutched his rippling cloak and pushed up the hill. A man and several women huddled beside the Teacher’s cross. They held one another like children abandoned in the biting rain, their tears mingling with nature’s sorrowful outpouring.

The soldiers, quick to finish, roughly lowered Jesus after freeing his bloody hands and feet. A centurion shouted them on, grumbling about his need for hot wine and shelter from the rain. Malchus, standing beside the women, lunged forward and reached for the

Teacher's legs. A Roman soldier sanctioned his help with a nod and together they rested Jesus on the ground. His head fell back and the crown of thorns slid slightly from his lacerated brow. Malchus reverently removed the prickly circlet and gripped the thorns in anguish.

Malchus looked down at the crown in his hands and marveled. The blood from his pierced fingers blended with the blood from the Teacher's brow. The soldiers covered the body and Malchus stepped back as two men approached, one called Joseph, the other Nicodemus. They lifted and carried the Teacher down the mount of Golgotha, the place of skulls.

"What do you gawk at? This execution is over," one of the soldiers shouted at Malchus.

Another soldier forced to hoist one of the crucified thieves over his shoulder bellowed, "This weather defies even the dead. Be gone!"

As the wind circled the crosses, Malchus watched the Teacher's followers leave the hill for the narrow street before them. He gazed at the thorns still in his hand, took a breath and left the hill. Tears filled his eyes as he stumbled over grass and stone. He vowed to forever protect and honor the Teacher's crown.



I

“What does it serve a man . . .?”

ITALIA: Rome, September 24, AD 454

The evening light fled past the shadows and found its way to the underworld. Gaudentius dropped to a knee and touched the cold sarcophagus. Behind him, he heard the soft tread of his mother’s feet on the tiles of the chapel and her slight sigh.

“Come away, my son,” she said. “Keeping vigil over your father’s tomb will not bring him back to our world. Let us return to the house. I have something to show you.”

Gaudentius and his mother boarded the carriage at the edge of the cemetery. He rode beside her in silence. He respected her quiet way, but his pulse raced. What would she reveal to him? After a few miles, the vehicle lumbered to a stop. Two torches burned in the early, grey evening and flanked the entrance of their villa.

A servant opened the coach door. “Lady Pelagia. Master,” he greeted and bowed toward them.

Gaudentius watched his mother’s lithe form as she crossed the threshold. Her ebony curls, streaked with grey and gathered up in gold ribbon, glowed in the torchlight. He too had inherited her family’s jet black hair and hazel eyes over his father’s light brown coloring. A trait his mother noted with pride to her friends.

Once inside the house, Gaudentius followed his mother into the library. The room’s tall brazier flamed near his father’s napping couch. A lamp glowed on the desk. His mother unfastened her cloak and taking his, she dropped them on a chair. She locked the door, then hurried to his father’s armoire. Made from a rich maple and inlaid with square panels of fine African citrus, the cabinet swallowed the room. She swung the doors open, knelt beside the bottom shelf and removed some scrolls. With a swift hand, she slid her palm across the wood toward the far left corner. Her fingers pressed lightly and a small, hinged door popped up. She reached into the recess and pulled out a glass tube, rose to her feet and walked to the lamp.

Gaudentius followed and observed in awe as she placed the glass cylinder on the desk. A gnarled stem of rotted wood rested inside the case. He picked up the vial and gazed at it. Before his mother could protest, he opened and plucked the artifact from its container. “So black and its prick still sharp! Where is this twisted stem with its thorns from?” Gaudentius questioned.

She lightly touched his tunic’s sleeve. “My son leave it, lest you destroy what I believe to be a holy relic—taken from the thorny Crown of Christ. Return the stem to its vial and replace the cork. Gaze at its beauty and magnificence under the protection of the glass.”

Gaudentius obeyed, then placed the vial on the desk. Even more intrigued, he asked, “How did father acquire this?”

“How did your father accomplish anything? His wit, his friends, and money. Aetius was a great man and general.”

“Is, Mother. He lives in my heart.”

“In mine as well, but now is not the time for sentiment. You’re a man now and must lead. Emperor Valentinian and his wretched advisor, Petronius Maximus, have left Ravenna and returned to Rome. I’m sure Maximus has heard of your father’s most treasured possessions. His greed is limitless and his envy extreme. He covets all that those greater than he possess. Your father suspected treachery from him and that foul eunuch, Heraclius. The emperor should be careful of whom he trusts.”

“Can you be so sure Maximus instigated father’s death? The emperor and his chamberlain Heraclius are his killers.”

“I would wager my life on Maximus’ involvement.”

“Then, what shall we do?”

“There is only one man that I trust other than your father—Senator Felix. He will help us. This sacred Stem of Thorns must find its way to the Patriarch Anatolius in Constantinople. There it can be validated and exalted as the remnant of our Lord’s earthly and painful crown. Your father believed in its authenticity, as do I.”

“Why have you kept it, Mother? Why wasn’t it given to Pope Leo in Rome?”

“Your father had a weakness for beautiful things, especially those he considered sacred. Among his many artifacts and priceless scrolls, he believed this small sprig once tormented the head of Christ. It was more than a relic for him, it was a miracle that he felt graced his

life. He trusted no one else to keep it safe, not even the pope, in case the emperor demanded they be given to him.”

“How can Senator Felix help?”

“The Thorns cannot stay in Rome and must never fall into Valentinian’s hands. He murdered your father. Besides, the Vandals threaten war and Valentinian is slowly losing his grip on the empire. He might sell the relic for his own gain.” Pelagia sighed and took his hand. Her deep brown eyes shone. “My faith urges that the Thorns find a refuge where they can be safely viewed and venerated. I believe Emperor Marcian and the patriarch would honor and protect them. Felix knows Marcian well. Remember, his daughter, Arria was married to Marcian’s son, Lucius Valerius, killed in battle in Germania.”

“This may work,” Gaudentius said, letting go of his mother’s hand and placing the vial in his palm. “Transporting this treasure to Constantinople will prove difficult. But once arrived, Marcian and the patriarch will enshrine and protect the holy relic. What our Lord possessed in pain will now bring the people joy.”

His mother caressed his cheek. “Gaudentius, my heart breaks that your father will not know you past your seventeenth year. He would be proud of your generosity. Come, let us leave for Tuscia. I’ve sent word to Felix that our visit is more than merely friendly.”



VILLA SOLIS: The estate of Senator Quintus Arrius Felix

In his fifty-fourth year, Senator Felix felt the pain of age. Not only did he suffer the straining aches and soreness running through his legs and back, but in his chest, tightness gripped his heart like a clenched hand. He swept his linen handkerchief across his brow and gazed skyward. Tuscia was unusually hot for September, and the breeze carried the heat like a slave bearing his master’s belongings.

“Antonius! Antonius!” Senator Felix bellowed.

“Maa . . . ster,” an older slave came running toward the senator’s chair in the garden. “How . . . may I serve you?” he panted.

“I need a slave who is nearby when I call. Bring me some water!” Felix answered gruffly. Secretly, he harbored a soft spot for Antonius. The man had labored for twenty years in his household, but Felix kept

his affection distant. He'd been taught as a child, crossing the line between slave and master would only cause trouble. He had grown to agree. In Roman society, it was important that the populace maintain the class status and balance.

Much to his concern, his only daughter, Arria, did not believe the same. She held a close friendship with her manservant, Samuel; moreover, on a political mission to the Assembly of Warriors in Gaul—tribes pledged as Roman allies against Attila—she had forgotten her status as a senator's daughter. She had diplomatically and bravely represented Rome at the Assembly and even as a secret courier into Attila's camp. But to his regret, she had lost her way when she committed her love and life to the barbarian Garic the Frank. A slave warrior held captive by Attila, Garic had escaped with Arria from the Hun camp. Caught in the whirlwind of flight and duty, they managed to survive the battle against Attila at Catalaunum. Now, the pair could not be parted.

Senator Felix sighed and rubbed his temples. Garic was a barbarian and not a citizen of Rome. He had wished more for his daughter. Hadn't he arranged Arria's betrothal to Tribune Titus Drusus, the rising star and commander of the expedition to the assembly in Gaul, before she left on her mission? But who could foresee that Drusus would force Arria to marry him while stationed at Cambria, the fort near the assembly? Drusus had threatened to have him, a senator, murdered along with Arria's handmaiden and the handmaiden's son if she refused. Later, at the Battle of Catalaunum, Garic had saved Arria not only from the Huns, but Drusus as well. To their relief, a wounded Drusus had disappeared from the Catalaunum battlefield and was presumed dead.

Felix shifted uncomfortably in his seat. During Arria's short visit home to Tuscia following the battle, she had wept, revealing Drusus' true character. Yet she had survived the pain of losing her first husband in battle, had fortunately evaded the marriage to a deceitful second husband, and now seemed to find happiness with, of all people, a Frank.

He snapped his fingers at Antonius who quickened his step with pitcher and cup. To know one's place is what made the juggernaut of the Roman world move and function. But these days, his beliefs seemed vulnerable. The world he once knew was teetering in slow motion. A gradual decline that might end in a fall. Was Rome dying?

The barbarians kept pushing their borders. Even now, many lived among the Romans. Felix drank the wine poured for him and gazed at the rose bushes lining the veranda. Now, with the Master of the Soldiers, Flavius Aetius, murdered, who could protect Rome? His killer—the petulant fool and jealous ruler, Emperor Valentinian? Aetius had borne the empire on his shoulders, and Valentinian resented the general’s success, Felix brooded. This tear in the Roman fabric only made the Western Empire weaker.

“Does my lord require anything else?” Antonius questioned.

“I must write some letters. Bring a plate of freshly cut pears and parchment.” Just yesterday, the news brought to him by Gaudentius and his mother, Pelagia, proved shocking, especially at this time. The city ached with discontent. *Is this another complication*, he wondered, pondering the existence of the Thorns, *or could it be a portent of hope?* He rose from his chair and plodded toward his study. Would he live to see Rome’s demise or possibly its rebirth—the safe delivery of the Thorns to Constantinople? The answer depended on his health, the Lord, and his daughter, Arria. He would write her today. After all she had endured, she now had more strength, courage and wisdom than many he knew. Only she could undertake the mission of the relic.



NORTHERN GAUL: *Wilder Honig*, Wild Honey Farm
The final days of September

“Arria, wake up!”

“Go away! Let me sleep!”

“Wake up! The bees have finally capped the hives. The heat has prolonged their work, and we must harvest the honey. Time is short. In five days, we leave for the market in Gaul.”

“Bees will always be busy, my lord.”

“Not if the queen bee deems it otherwise, my queen.” Garlic slapped Arria’s bottom, pulled her onto her back and straddled her sleepy limbs.

Arria’s eyelids fluttered and she groaned, burying her head beneath her pillow. “Go away!” her muffled tone floated through the goose feathers.

“What will it take to wake you?” Garic whispered into the crevice of her exposed ear.

Arria’s head slipped from under the fabric and her eyelids raised. “This early dawn, quite a lot,” she whispered.

“I have a lot to offer this morning. I’m feeling very robust.”

“You are?” she drawled and ran her hands up his chest and around his neck.

“I am. Let me show you.” Lightly his kiss teased her parted lips, then held back. Garic gazed at her.

She grinned. “Why do you hold back from me, my lord? Do I not please you?”

“At times, when you lie here in our bed, I watch the way your chestnut hair falls off your shoulder—when you’re next to me, and I marvel that this is all true. That my humble farm possesses you—that I possess you. Can a man be so fortunate?”

“I’m the one who’s fortunate,” Arria replied and slid closer. “Heaven is living here at Wild Honey and loving you.”

“Then let me love you to your feet and to the honey that awaits harvesting in my fields.” Easily, Garic pulled her to him, lifted her from the bed and pressed her body with his against the cloth covered timber wall. The power from his biceps held Arria from the ground. She wrapped her legs around him. Slowly, he entered her, aroused and firm. Like a kitten woken from sleep, Arria stretched her fingers over his golden armlets and dug her nails into his taut skin. Ripples of ecstasy coursed through her, and she gasped, catching her breath as Garic rocked a steady rhythm while his one hand fondled her breast and his tongue slid over hers hot and slow.

Garic’s ardor always peaked Arria to a sweet madness. Joined with him, she felt whole and natural. Clinging to Garic, Arria buried her face in his long blond hair. Garic smelled like honey, and her senses swept her away to the time when she first loved him in the Hun camp, despite the threat of discovery by Attila’s guards. This first, perfect moment had convinced them that their destinies were locked not only in their embrace but also in their hearts. Arria cried out and pulled on Garic’s hair. She buried his lips with an exploding kiss, her satisfaction complete.

Clenching Arria’s buttocks, Garic swept his tongue across her flushed lips and probed deeper, then rubbed his stubbled beard across her cheek and groaned his satisfaction into her ear. His heart

pounding, he caught his breath, then whispered, "I love you, Arria. Never leave me."

"I love you, too," Arria whispered back, "but . . . I must leave."

Alarmed, Garic raised his head and lowered her to her feet. "Why?"

"Because the honey is calling," Arria laughed, and slid her hands up his chest, "and we musn't delay. But I am starving and must eat first." Pushing away from him she rushed to the bed, slipped her shift over her head and ran from the room.

Leaning against the wall, Garic closed his eyes and sighed, content. God, he loved her.



ROME: The home of the former concubine Marcella, mid-October

A dark brooding settled itself on Marcella's brow. She'd been awake for hours. Severus, her love, was dead and not all her tears or rage would ever bring him back. But revenge could soften her pain and provide the strength she needed to seduce her ex-master, Drusus, to her plan.

Dawn's rose light glided through the bedchamber's arched window and across the marble floor. Marcella grabbed a hand mirror from the bedside table. Her long black hair waved across the flurried pillows propped against an elaborately carved oak headboard.

When was it that sleep left her? It was no longer her friend and like everyone else in her life, it had drifted from her grasp, leaving her with fatigue and a hollow emptiness. Her only value was her beauty. These days, she clung to the comeliness that stared back from her mirror, nothing else. Nature, unlike the gods, at least had been generous when it graced her with a beauty men found hard to resist.

She dropped the mirror onto the bed, closed her eyes and plotted. Her next move involved seeking an ally who could be trusted. Her mother, the witch and Egyptian high priestess, Daliza, seemed a reasonable choice. Her reappearance after all these years was an interesting turn in events. Why not stimulate a faded bond?

How long had it been since Severus lay dead on the battlefield at Catalaunum, killed by Garic's spear? The years since the battle with Attila had blurred, like her mother's absence. The barbarian coward,

Garic, had exacted his envious revenge on the one man who truly loved Marcella not for how well she pleased or served, but for herself. Severus, the Roman tribune and cavalry soldier, had ridden into her life, only to leave it impaled against the belly of his slain horse. Together, soldier and steed rose to the ancient fields of Elysium, the heaven of noble warriors. Marcella envisioned this. She was no Christian. Their heaven was for the poor and wretched and not the proud. Severus, she believed, passed through the golden gates to sit among men gone before him who bore the honor of champions. Daliza would never know him, but only of him.

A ray of light warmed her skin. She opened her eyes. Marcella's plan was taking shape, and patience was her compass. Marcella stretched her arms and pulled the blanket to her chin. She smiled. It felt good to be a free woman. Hours before the battle at Catalaunum, her former master, Drusus, had gifted her to General Aetius. The general immediately gave her to the Roman tribune, Severus, as a reward for his service. Severus, wanting to marry her, had freed her, but he had perished. Even in grief, she questioned her freedom. Marcella turned her gaze toward the window and pursed her lips; her thoughts ran rampant.

After Attila's retreat from Gaul, she enlisted the help of her old benefactor, former Praetorian Prefect and consul of Rome, Senator Petronius Maximus. He ensured her freedom from Aetius, and Drusus, missing and believed killed in the battle. Only she and a few had seen Garic's arrow hit Drusus in the back as he disappeared over a hill. In just one afternoon, in one bloody hour, Garic took Severus and Drusus from her. Marcella's jaw tightened.

Now, three years later and to everyone's surprise, Drusus had reappeared in Rome, a ghost resurrected from the battlefield. Word spread that Drusus, racked by fever and paralysis from his arrow wound, was found and cared for by a Visigoth maiden. His wife, Arria, believing Drusus dead, had married Garic. Would Drusus seek revenge against Garic?

Marcella toyed with her hair and enjoyed a quiet chuckle. Whispers abounded. Drusus held ambitions as an advisor to Maximus, and one day, for a senate seat. She gazed across the room at the parchment on her desk. Through Maximus, she had secured Drusus' interest once again. He desired her assistance in finding a relic, a sprig of thorns, belonging to the martyr Christus. Marcella grinned. She

would say yes to Drusus, but mustn't seem too eager. Let him work at getting her help. After all, what would she gain from her efforts in this intrigue? She had a goal of her own.

How they all figured in her plot against Garic remained to be seen. It would unfold like the wings of an avenging angel. The barbarian Frank and her hated half-sister, Arria, would feel her wrath.

Of course the widower, Senator Felix, was another matter. In time, he would regret the years lost to them as father and daughter. Her abandoned mother now would redeem her dignity and return to take her place at Felix's side. It would be as it should have been. Marcella, Daliza and Felix. Daughter, wife and husband. A family. No slavery for an unwanted child, no sorrow for a deserted priestess, and no regret for a callous young soldier. All of the horrid past would be gone, washed away forever, and all for only the price of a well-laid plan of revenge. How perfectly simple.



ROME: An apartment

"I hate that wretched woman. Never has anyone frustrated me as much as Marcella!" Drusus spat. He slammed the missive in his hand on the desk before him.

Petronius Maximus shifted in his chair. He and Drusus sat in the study of a small but lavish apartment, his loan to Drusus until he could get his properties reinstated and affairs in order.

"Calm yourself," Maximus cajoled and scrutinized Drusus' reddened brow and high cheek bones. Claudius Drusus was quite the man. Men were wary of him, but the women adored him. His perfect nose and well-shaped lips enhanced by black curls that wreathed his forehead added a handsomeness to his muscular frame.

It's unfortunate, Maximus thought, that the arrow wound Drusus had suffered, although healed, kept him from raising his right arm over his head. "Marcella isn't that difficult. Shrewd or not, she's still a woman and a damn beguiling one I must add, but she can be handled with the right . . . shall we say—touch." He smirked and gazed at his jewel covered fingers. "She'll come around. Flattery and your tender stroke are all she needs, my dear Drusus. Now that her mother has arrived, she has a counselor. However, I believe your

history together as master and slave—and something more, or so I’ve heard—should be enough to at least warrant her open ear, if not her legs. Are we clear?” Maximus leveled a stern gaze at the sulking Drusus, then smiled blandly and polished his ruby ring with the hem of his toga.

Drusus spun the hapless scroll around on his desk. “As always, my lord, your insight is of great value. I’ll arrange a meeting with her even though her indifference in the matter of the Thorns has left me cold.”

“Heat up then; summon her again. I’ll see to it that she understands the gravity of this matter and your alliance. I must have the relic! Valentinian’s power is ebbing. He murdered Aetius, Rome’s beloved general. The power of these Thorns will raise me higher in the eyes of the Roman people. If only I had known sooner it was in Aetius’ possession. The wily bastard could have ruled Rome, but his weakness was his love for the empire. Rome is not just a state. It’s a trinket for the smartest to own and govern. Use the powers of persuasion you’re known for Drusus; work hard to enlist Marcella’s aid. We must discover what Gaudentius and his crafty mother have done with the blessed stem.” Maximus rose from his seat and made for the door, but turned. “Oh, and Drusus, it’s been brought to my attention by one of my spies that it rests in a glass vial wrapped in crimson silk.”

“My lord, Maximus, I guarantee it will be yours.”

“If it lands in my possession, then riches and a place in my inner circle shall be yours. Does that please you, my elegant friend?”

“More than you can imagine, my *true* Emperor.”

Maximus raised a hand in polite protest. “The golden leaves do not rest on my head.”

“I believe they will one day, and may I add, as it should be.”

“We shall work very well together, Drusus.”

“I’m in total agreement, my lord.”



GAUL: *Wilder Honig*, Wild Honey Farm - mid-October

Garic came upon Arria at the stream that ran through Wild Honey and into the heart of Belgica Secunda, the northernmost province in Gaul.

Recently returned with Garlic from the harvest market, Arria had gone to wash her hair and her linen shifts. As always the sight of her pleased him. Arria's hands dipped gracefully into the water that rushed between her fingers. Her loosely bound hair cascaded over sun-bronzed shoulders.

Unaware that Garlic watched her, Arria lifted her skirt high above her hips, gathering the folds and knotted the end to keep the gown in place. The sun strong and the afternoon unusually warm for the fall season, she inched her way into the clear pool and kicked childlike at its surface. Picking up several stones, she skipped them across the surface. Then to Garlic's delight, Arria threw off her shift, tossed it on the bank and glided into the sparkling stream. The brisk water made her cry out. Garlic slipped off his breeches and crept in behind her.

Arria dove under the water and rose with her chestnut strands covering her eyes. When Garlic slid his hands over her shapely backside, she screamed and turned, frantically parting her hair. Upon seeing Garlic, she scolded, "You devil! Wipe that impish grin from your face! The fear you gave me."

Eyeing her full, round breasts, Garlic teased, "My lady should not bathe alone. Anything might happen."

Arria slapped his chest. "Surely, with the likes of you around!" she snipped. To his pride, with roaming hands, she brazenly admired his chest and chiseled muscles, strong from years of fighting with sword and axe and the strenuous labor a farm required. Arria brushed her fingers over the scar below Garlic's rib that bore testimony to his brush with death at Catalaunum. "Now that you're finished playing your games, help me wash my hair," she spouted.

"Am I your manservant or your husband?"

"If it pleases you, a husband who perceives an opportunity to serve his adoring wife."

"And this would be that time?"

"You may find it a *very* rewarding experience," Arria tempted, circling her arms around his neck.

Garlic chuckled, "Come then vixen, and I will lather your hair with my honey soap."

Arria smiled and knelt in the water while Garlic grabbed the cup and honey bar resting on a patch of clover near the water's edge. He poured the cool water over Arria's head and laughed when she gasped. He handed her the cup and pulled her tresses gently toward

him. He rubbed the grease and bee nectar bar over her glistening waves. “The soap’s sweet smell complements your pet name, *Mellitula*.”

“I hope I’ll always be your *little honey*. *Mellitula* is my dearest name, more than *Arria* because you chose it for me. I would be the honey that flows through your blood.”

“You are, and I’m your protector. You know this, don’t you?” *Garic* asked.

“I call you *Krieger*, warrior, because I know you’ll always fight for me.”

Garic kissed the top of *Arria*’s head, his hands still kneading her soapy strands.

“Lovers often share special names,” *Arria* added. “I’m happy we have ours.”

Arria relaxed under the firm massage of *Garic*’s fingers. She was unaware that something weighed on him. Taking back the cup, he dipped it into the water and said, “A message arrived just after you left.”

Arria turned, forcing the water he poured over her hair to traverse across her hairline and run down her cheek. Wiping her face, she arched her eyebrow. “A message from whom?”

“Your father.”

“Did you read it?”

“It’s your letter.”

“I’m eager for news from home. We should return,” she said.

They walked to the shore. *Garic* grabbed a linen towel from the basket perched on a nearby rock. He tenderly wrapped it around *Arria*’s glistening form and toweled her moist strands, sun-cast and richly brown. *Garic* swept *Arria* up into his arms and kissed her to hide his worry. Her laughter resonated across the shiny, translucent water. *Garic* stepped onto the bank and walked toward his home, their home, for the last three years. *Arria*’s head nestled serenely against his shoulder. *Now is not the time for worry*, he thought, *only happiness. We’ll keep trying for a child.*



Arria and *Garic* sat before the firepit in his farmhouse. Orange-red flames licked at the wild hare stuffed with parsnips, roasting on the

iron spit. Above them, copper hooks dangled from round oak beams. Some held bundles of drying herbs or smoked deer shanks. Twilight's golden rays streamed past an open shutter across the wooden floor; a tranquil breeze rode the light and danced with the aroma drifting through the room.

Wild Honey was Garic's comfort. He felt joined to the land and the home he helped build. Since Arria's arrival, Garic had added a bedroom for their privacy. Garic's younger brother, Tagus, now married, lived on land gifted to him by his wife's father. His older brother, Faramund, although courting a neighbor's daughter, was still unwed and slept in the loft across from the hearth.

Garic handed the parchment to Arria.

She stared at the letter with apprehension.

"Why do you worry so, Mellitula? It's been three years and still no word that Drusus lives." Garic knew Arria's fear. Drusus might yet live; his body was never found. "He died on the battlefield. This is why I accepted your god and the bishop agreed to marry us. It's probably news from a lonely father who loves his daughter and longs for her return."

"I suppose you're right," Arria replied. "In the eyes of the law, I was a widow. And no matter what, we'll be together. If Drusus were to appear, I would never return to him." Arria smiled lovingly at Garic and reached for his hands. "Have you forgotten the Roman marriage vow we spoke the first night we lay together?"

"It burns here." Garic touched his heart. "No man can steal what is branded in my soul."

Arria gazed into the fire. "Why do I sense the fates may demand we fight for this truth? I want to believe that Drusus is dead," she said in a firm tone. "But, if Drusus lives, we'll go to Rome and battle for my freedom."

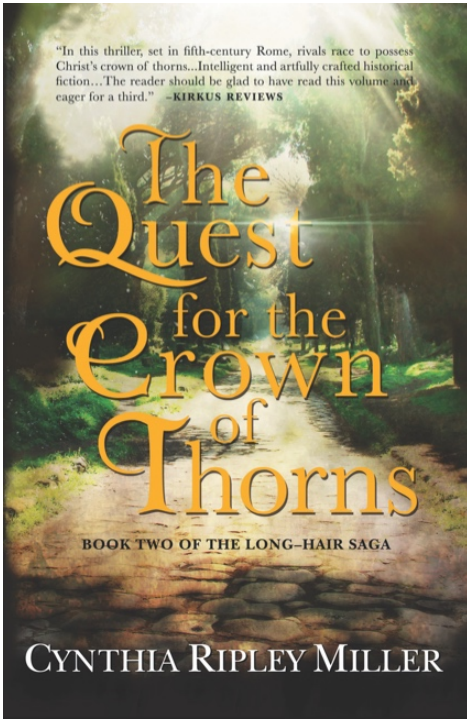
Garic cupped Arria's face and kissed her. "Then so be it. We'll fight—and win!" Their marriage in the month of Julius had brought Garic more joy than he ever imagined. To please his wife and inspired by her belief in the god Christus, he had taken her belief as well. The water that consecrated his head and the sharing of the bread were symbols of his conversion and his new happiness. They had been blessed and the marriage document signed.

However, the possibility that, one day, Drusus might return and threaten their world was Garic's fear as well. It lurked silently in the

background of their daily life. Garic understood if Drusus appeared and reclaimed Arria, she must prove she was wed against her will. The Roman laws held strict penalties for wives who sought divorces from husbands for reasons other than abuse and coercion. Her status as a senator's daughter might uphold her case in a Roman court, but it was known far and wide that the Eastern Roman Empire looked more favorably upon women unhappily wed than its counterpart the West.

What if Drusus were alive and wanted revenge? He could accuse Arria of adultery and have her lawfully banished from Rome and Tuscia and her beloved estate and aging father. In the very worst case, she could even be condemned to death. This latter notion was too frightening for him to bear. Garic kissed Arria's fingers. "Read the letter, Arria. It's a loving father's friendly tidings."





A Roman senator's daughter and her warrior husband must solve a gruesome murder, a mysterious riddle, and complete one of history's most challenging missions in The Quest for the Crown of Thorns: Book Two of the Long-Hair Saga

**The Quest for the Crown of Thorns:
Book Two of the Long-Hair Saga**
by Cynthia Ripley Miller

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10024.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.