

PROLOGUE

King Herod's guards force me up the narrow staircase to the top of the prison tower in Antonia Palace. In dazed disbelief, I look around the small chamber. A single, high window sheds a faint light on the furnishings, just a wooden stool, a small table, and a straw pallet on the floor. The walls are rain-streaked, and it smells of must.

Without a word, my husband's guards take their leave. Keys clink in the door lock. Boots clatter down the stone steps. Then, it is utterly silent. I am shivering. There is no hearth or brazier to warm me. I lie down on the pallet under a thin, ragged wool blanket. How did I, Mariamne, the last Maccabee Princess and the Queen of Judea, end up in this prison, my fate left to the whims of my husband, the mad king?

I am twenty-nine, not ready to die and leave my four children motherless in this brutal world. Their faces are crystal clear in my mind, as if they stood in front of me: Aristobulus, Alexander, Salampsio, and Cypros. My little ones need me. I long to be there to see them grow up, to give them the love they need, and to protect them, as best I can, from their father's brutality.

When I do leave this earth, whether soon or as an old woman, history may reduce me to a footnote, the wife of a despot king and the mother of his children. Yet like all women, there is so much more to my story than my husband and children. Roman leaders Antony and Augustus, and the Egyptian Pharaoh, Cleopatra, are the glimmering lights of the era, but I, too, will leave an indelible mark.