# RANDY SINGER

*A NOVEL*

# THE ADVOCATE

*HE DEFIED AN EMPEROR & INSPIRED A FAITH*

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*HE DEFIED AN EMPEROR*

*AND INSPIRED A FAITH*

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# *Cast of Characters*

• *Historical figure*
* *Fictional character*
† *Based on a historical figure about whom little is known*
‡ *Based on a historical figure whose name is unknown*

* **Adrianna**—a Vestal Virgin selected as matron by Emperor Caligula in AD 38

• **Agrippa**—grandson of Herod the Great; appointed to rule over Judea and Samaria by Emperor Claudius

• **Agrippina the Younger**—sister of Caligula, fourth wife of Claudius, and mother of Nero

• **Annas**—former chief priest of Israel who wields influence at the trial of Christ

† **Andronicus**—a leader of the church in Rome

† **Apronius**—Roman senator tried for treason during the reign of Tiberius

• **Caiaphas**—chief priest of Israel during the trial of Christ

• **Caligula**—emperor of Rome from AD 37–41

* **Calpurnia**—a Vestal Virgin, matron of the house from AD 28–38

† **Cato**—Roman senator who serves as consul in AD 36

• **Chaerea**—a member of the Praetorian Guard assigned to protect Caligula

• **Claudius**—emperor of Rome from AD 41–54

* **Cobius**—Roman gladiator from the same school as Mansuetus

• **Cornelius**—Roman centurion in Caesarea

† **Crispinus**—Roman senator who makes his fortune as a *delator*, prosecuting other senators for treason

* **Flavia**—a Vestal Virgin selected by Emperor Tiberius
† **Junia**—a leader of the church in Rome
* **Lucian Aurelius**—a boyhood friend of Caligula who later becomes a member of the Praetorian Guard
• **Lateranus**—Roman aristocrat pardoned and restored to his position by Nero
* **Longinus**—Roman centurion with Pilate during the trial of Christ
• **Macro**—prefect of the Praetorian Guard from AD 31–38
* **Mansuetus, the gladiator**—one of Rome's great gladiators during the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula
* **Mansuetus, the son**—a promising young advocate named after the gladiator
• **Marcus Lepidus**—a leading Roman senator during the reign of Tiberius
* **Marcus Serbius**—loyal childhood friend of Theophilus
• **Nero**—emperor of Rome from AD 54–68
† **Onesimus**—a slave to Philemon of Colossae and companion of the apostle Paul
• **Paul of Tarsus**—an apostle and leader in the early church
• **Pilate**—prefect of the Roman province of Judea from AD 26–36
† **Procula**—wife of Pilate
‡ **Quintus**—Roman centurion in charge of the execution of Jesus
† **Rubria**—a Vestal Virgin selected by the Emperor Caligula in AD 38
• **Sejanus**—a prefect of the Praetorian Guard and de facto ruler of Rome after Tiberius withdraws to the island of Capri
• **Seneca the Younger**—Roman philosopher and statesman
* **Sergius**—Roman soldier assigned to guard Paul
† **Theophilus**—a renowned Roman advocate who serves as an assessore for Pilate in Judea and later represents Paul in front of Nero
• **Tiberius**—emperor of Rome from AD 14–37
• **Tigellinus**—prefect of the Praetorian Guard from AD 62–68 and friend of Nero

*PART I*

# THE STUDENT

## Chapter 1

### IN THE ELEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF TIBERIUS JULIUS CAESAR AUGUSTUS

I was fourteen years old when I learned what it meant to be crucified.

We hauled our own crossbeams, the twelve of us, students of Seneca the Younger, dragging them at least five miles down the cobblestones of the Appian Way. The day was hot and dry. Dust settled in our mouths and noses. I ground my teeth and felt the fine particles of dirt. I licked my dry lips, trying to moisten the thick white spit at the edge of my mouth. Sweat trickled down my face. Seneca marched ahead of us, carrying nothing but his waterskin, his sweat-soaked tunic sticking to his thick back. My own tunic was wet and grimy. My sandals squished with every step.

I had started out carrying my crossbeam, hoisting it across my thin shoulders, but I soon gave up and dragged it like most of the other students. It weighed nearly as much as me. The rough wood chafed my back, so I switched it from one shoulder to the other as I pulled it along. The only one who wasn't dragging his beam was Lucian, two years older than the rest of us and built like a gladiator. He balanced his beam on his shoulders, yet even Lucian was starting to stoop from the load.

To make it seem real, Seneca had arranged for a Roman legionnaire to bring up the rear. He was a humorless man, stocky and unshaven with nasty breath and a spiteful attitude. This was his chance to bark orders at the sons of aristocrats as if we were common slaves. If we stopped, he gave us a hard shove and cursed us. He took big gulps of water, taunting us with how refreshing it was, then spit much of it on the ground.

"When my parents learn of this, they'll have Seneca's head," Lucian said under his breath.

I was sure Seneca wasn't worried. His job was to mold us into young men fit to be Roman senators or commanders or magistrates. This was nothing compared to the military training that many of my contemporaries would be facing in a few years. Still, we were the sons of senators and equestrians, so we cast annoyed glances at each other. *Who does this man think he is, humiliating us this way?*

Caligula had the lightest beam to carry. Naturally. He was my age but a few inches taller, with spindly legs and a long, thin neck. His head, topped off with curly red hair, seemed oversized for his body. Caligula had a mean streak, so I generally kept my distance. There was an unwritten rule that he was never to be crossed—not because we feared the spoiled young man himself, but because we feared his family.

His full name was Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus. He had been born on the battlefield in Gaul, the son of the great general Germanicus and his wife, Agrippina. It was the soldiers who had dubbed him Caligula, which meant "little sandals." He became a good luck charm of sorts for Germanicus's troops, and they would let him march into battle with them, staying near the rear of the lines. He was the great-nephew of the emperor and might one day be emperor himself if his mother managed to poison all the right relatives.

He was also a bully.

He had been taunting my friend Marcus earlier in the walk, taking his frustrations out on the smallest among us. Now he was just plain tired.

"This is outrageous," Caligula said more than once. Unlike Lucian, he said it loud enough for Seneca to hear. Yet our teacher ignored him and kept on walking. A few times Caligula stopped, and the legionnaire pushed him, though not as hard as he shoved the rest of us.

I kept my head down and focused on each step, counting to one hundred and then starting over again. I was in my usual spot at the front of the class, not far behind Seneca.

It was nearly noon when Seneca finally stopped by an open pasture on the side of the road near a small, cool stream. I dropped my beam on the ground and bent over, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

Seneca allowed us to get a drink and told us to sit on our crossbeams. He stood in the middle of our little band. The sun nearly blinded me as I looked up at him.

Seneca wiped the sweat from his eyes and began the day's lesson. The legionnaire stood next to him, arms folded across his chest, scowling.

"You have all heard of the Third Servile War," Seneca said, "when Spartacus led a two-year slave rebellion against Rome. The Senate didn't take the slave rebellion seriously until it became clear that Rome itself was under threat."

Some of my friends fidgeted on their beams, trying to get comfortable after the long walk. Not me. I could listen to Seneca all day. His curly hair, round baby face, and small blue eyes made him seem as harmless as a child. But he had a commanding voice, and I loved his wit and cynicism in the same way that I imagined Cicero's students had once loved him. Armies destroyed people, and gladiators entertained them, but orators like Cicero and Seneca inspired them. One day I would do the same.

"Marcus Licinius Crassus was the richest man in the Senate, perhaps the richest man in Roman history," Seneca continued. "He had more than five hundred slaves and was an expert in architecture. He knew how to control fires by destroying the burning buildings and curtailing the spread of flames to nearby homes. When fire struck Rome, Crassus and his men ran to the flames and offered an option to the surrounding property owners. They could sell to young Crassus on the spot at a discounted rate, or they could watch their houses

go up in flames. As soon as they shook hands on the deal, Crassus's slaves would extinguish the fire, and Crassus would reap his rewards."

"Brilliant," Caligula said.

Seneca shot him a look, but I knew Caligula didn't care.

"At the height of his wealth, Crassus was worth more than 200 million *sestertii*. And because he had built his fortune on the backs of slaves, he had a great incentive to quash Spartacus's rebellion. Since Rome's best generals were fighting in foreign lands, Crassus raised his own army to march against Spartacus and the rebel slaves. The first several battles did not go well for Crassus. At the first sign of trouble, his men abandoned their weapons and fled. To improve morale, Crassus revived the ancient practice of decimation. Lucian, what does that mean?"

"I am sorry, Master Seneca. What does what mean?"

Seneca let a few beats of silence show his displeasure. "*Decimation*. What is the origin of that word?"

Lucian frowned. "I do not know."

"Anyone?" Seneca asked.

I knew the answer, but I had learned long ago that it was sometimes better to hold my tongue. I kept my eyes down while Seneca surveyed the group.

"*Decimate* comes from the root word *decimare*, which means to take or destroy one-tenth," Seneca explained. He moved closer to us, and the sun behind him seemed to make him glow. "So Crassus divided his Roman legions into groups of ten and had them draw lots. The one to whom the lot fell would be stripped of his armor and beaten to death by the other nine. The fighting spirit of his troops increased dramatically. Crassus had demonstrated that he was more dangerous to them than their enemies."

Seneca now had everyone's attention. In my mind, I imagined the twelve of us drawing lots and the loser being beaten to death by the others. I didn't think I could bring myself to do it.

"Eventually, Crassus's men cornered Spartacus and his army.

Spartacus wanted to engage Crassus in battle, slaughtering his way toward the general's position. But the overwhelming numbers were too much for the slaves. Spartacus died in battle before he reached Crassus. Six thousand slaves were captured."

I had been taught for as long as I could remember to despise Spartacus and the bloody revolt he had started. The uprising was an affront to every Roman citizen. But there was always a part of me that cheered for the slaves—my natural desire to root for the disadvantaged. I secretly wished that Spartacus had been able to run the gauntlet and engage Crassus one-on-one, the way real men fight.

"Crassus wanted to make sure no slave in the empire would ever revolt again," Seneca said. "And so he perfected the art of crucifixion."

He paused for effect, and we all knew something unusual was coming. It was why our parents paid handsomely for us to attend this school. Seneca was famous for his memorable stunts.

"Even though you're not old enough to attend the games and see the live executions there, I'm sure many of you have seen criminals hanging on crosses outside the walls of the city. Still, I thought it might be interesting for Gallus to tell you how it's done."

The legionnaire named Gallus stepped forward, directly in front of where I was sitting. *Why is it always me?* I stared at the black hair on his legs, the worn sandals, the calloused feet.

"Stand up!" he said gruffly.

I stood, looking him squarely in the eye.

He picked up my crossbeam and placed it in the middle of the group. He pulled a hammer from his belt and a long, sharp spike from his sack.

"Lie down on the beam," he said. "Arms stretched out on the wood."

I looked at Seneca, who nodded slightly.

"Need any help?" Caligula asked the legionnaire.

"You want to take his place?" Gallus shot back.

"Not really."

"Then shut up."

I lay down on the beam, arms stretched wide, keeping an eye on Gallus. The legionnaire knelt beside me, hammer in one hand, spike in the other. "We use six-inch spikes," he said, pressing the point against my left wrist.

"Come here and hold this," he said to another student. It was Marcus, my skinny friend. Because he had struggled carrying his beam, he had been berated by Gallus most of the morning.

Marcus got up and held the spike over my wrist, his hand trembling.

"Nervous?" Gallus asked him.

"Yes, sir."

"You've got nothing to worry about. It's your friend here who should be worried."

Gallus snorted a laugh, but I wasn't concerned. I knew Seneca would only let this go so far. Maybe the soldier would draw a little blood, but Seneca would never let him drive a spike through my wrist.

"We've found," Gallus said, eyeing the other boys, "that when we sever the nerve that runs up your wrist, it causes unbearable pain. Plus, when we put the spike here, it's lodged between two bones, so it won't just rip out of the arm."

"The pain is so severe," Seneca said helpfully, "that a new word was invented to describe it. Our word *excruciatus* literally means 'out of the cross.'"

Gallus went on to explain the details of the process. How the feet would be impaled. How the prisoner would literally suffocate, his body sagging under its own weight as he lost the strength to push up against the nails in order to draw breath. "We usually let 'em hang for about three days. They typically die on the second day, and then the birds have a snack on day three. Any questions?"

There were none.

Gallus swung his hammer. I closed my eyes and cringed. He

stopped it a few inches from the spike and laughed. He allowed me to get up and return on wobbly knees to my original spot as he described all the configurations he and his fellow soldiers had used to crucify prisoners.

"Okay," Seneca finally said, "I think they've got the picture."

Gallus stepped back, and Seneca continued the lesson. "Crassus still holds the record," Seneca said. "He put six thousand men on crosses, every one of the slaves he had captured, and lined the Appian Way with them—from here all the way back to Rome."

The teacher paused and let the enormity of that sink in. We had been walking for miles. At one time this entire distance had been lined with dying men.

"Crassus and his men rode through the gauntlet of the crucified, while the slaves cried out for mercy, begging to be thrust through with a spear. Cheering crowds greeted Crassus in Rome, where he was crowned with a laurel wreath and hailed as a *triumphator*. He sacrificed a white bull at the temple of Jupiter, and the entire city celebrated for days. It was said that three days after the slaves' bodies were discarded, you could still smell the stench."

Seneca looked over our heads, down the Appian Way, as if he could imagine the scene. "And so I have a question for you," he said, his voice lower. "Should Romans crucify people? Is this the type of conduct befitting the most advanced civilization the world has ever known?"

I was looking at Seneca, but I noticed Gallus out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to stiffen at the very suggestion that his cherished method of execution might be open to question.

I hoped Seneca wouldn't call on me. Everything inside me said that crucifixion was not worthy of the glory of Rome. How could we inflict such torture on our enemies? What separated us from the barbarians when we committed such acts? And what about the innocent men condemned to die for something they didn't do? Our system of justice wasn't perfect.

But I didn't want to seem weak in front of my classmates. Seneca's little display, complete with Gallus as a prop, was designed to show us how horrible it was to die this way. Yet we were Romans. We weren't supposed to flinch in the face of death, no matter how horrible. One sign of manhood was being able to stomach this kind of gore, even relish it.

"I'll answer that," Caligula said, standing.

"Very well, Gaius," Seneca replied. He never used his pupil's nickname.

"Have there been any slave revolts since the triumph of Crassus over Spartacus?" Caligula asked. The question, of course, was a rhetorical one, a method of argumentation that Seneca had taught us.

"I was born on a battlefield," Caligula continued. "I have seen wars. Men die. Their heads are cut off and their guts are ripped out. Only the strong survive. There is nothing pretty about it and nothing philosophical to debate."

That last comment was a dig at Seneca, and I wondered what he would do about it. As usual, our teacher didn't flinch.

"The only criticism I have of Crassus," Caligula continued, "is that he wasted a lot of good wood on a bunch of slaves."

He stood there for a moment, proud of his wit. He smirked and sat down.

Seneca scanned the young faces before him. "Does anybody disagree?" he asked.

I knew I should stay seated. Nothing would be gained from picking a fight with Caligula. Lucian would undoubtedly come to Caligula's defense—if not now, then later, when Seneca wasn't looking. Others would join them because they were intimidated by them. The only student who might agree with me would be little Marcus, and having him on my side was sometimes more trouble than it was worth.

But I couldn't be silent, could I? If I held my tongue now, what would I do when the stakes really mattered?

I stood, certain that Caligula was rolling his eyes. "I disagree," I said as forcefully as possible.

"For some reason, Theophilus," Seneca said, "I am not the least bit surprised."

## Chapter 2

I faced Seneca, trying to block the other boys out of my peripheral vision. I knew I should be careful because Caligula was petulant and didn't like to be made the fool. But when I had an audience, I couldn't resist showing off a little.

I stood to my full height and spoke using my orator's voice, as Seneca had taught me.

"'Let us not listen to those who think we ought to be angry with our enemies and who believe this to be great and manly,'" I said. "'Nothing is so praiseworthy, nothing so clearly shows a great and noble soul, as clemency and readiness to forgive.'"

A few of my classmates groaned at my eloquence. No matter; Seneca had taught me not to be distracted by a hostile audience.

"Those are the words of Cicero, and those are also words of truth and reason," I said proudly. "Roman virtues should include not only justice and courage but forgiveness and mercy."

"Spoken like someone who has never seen a battle, never seen a friend decapitated by a barbarian," Seneca countered. He paced a little, gauging the expressions of the students. "Cicero, not coincidentally, had never seen the battlefield either. So doesn't young Gaius have a point? Rome did not conquer the world with etiquette and Senate resolutions. We extended our civilization, including our cherished adherence to Roman law, by brutal force."

Seneca locked his eyes on me. “How can one claim to honor the law yet not support the forms of punishment that ensure others will follow it?” He pointed behind me to the Appian Way. “Roads like that do not appear from thin air. They are built. Built by slaves, as was your father’s estate, Theophilus. There can be no advance without civilization, no civilization without order, and no order without punishment.”

I didn’t know if Seneca actually felt this way or if he was just challenging my thinking. He was always hard on students like me, ones who thought we could hold our own. In my opinion, he let students like Caligula off too easy, simply because they weren’t willing to try.

I wanted to note that Seneca had never been in battle either. He probably wouldn’t have lasted one day on a forced march. He had the soft body of a philosopher, though his mind was tempered steel.

“Germanicus Julius Caesar was one of the greatest generals Rome has ever seen,” I said. This was Caligula’s father, a revered warrior who had died from poisoning when Caligula was only seven, and I noticed Caligula stir. He scowled and leaned forward as if I had crossed some sacred line just by mentioning his father’s name.

“Germanicus became consul because of his triumph in Germania. Yet when he traveled to Alexandria, he saw the starvation of the people there, and he opened the granaries so they could eat. They worshiped him like a pharaoh, and if he had stayed, they might have made him a god. But Caesar was angry because Rome would now see less of the corn supply.”

“Is this just a history lesson,” Seneca asked, “or do you have a point?”

“My point is this: It is the kindness of Germanicus rather than the brutality of Crassus that best represents the heart of Rome. Germanicus would not have crucified those slaves. You can fight barbarians without becoming one.”

I stood facing Seneca with my chest thrust out, proud of my little speech. Even though there was an unwritten rule that we didn’t talk

about the suspicious circumstances of Germanicus's death, I thought mentioning his name in this context would be acceptable. My argument was especially clever because his own son Caligula had been the one who had argued so peevishly that crucifying the slaves was right. Maybe even Caligula would think twice about it now.

All might have been well if Seneca had just allowed it to end there. But the man never let us savor a moment of oratorical triumph. When we felt the most pride, he would cut our legs out from under us and make us feel small again.

"You have chosen an interesting example, Theophilus. But I must ask: Was what Germanicus did legal? Should he have even been in Alexandria? Or have you premised your argument on a violation of the very laws you would have us honor?"

We all knew the answers to those questions, yet I did not want to say them aloud. The orphaned son of Germanicus was sitting less than twelve feet away.

But what was the truth? That's what Seneca had drilled into me in the past two years of training. If we got confused, he said, it was probably because we were considering extraneous issues that were clouding our judgment. His advice was to find the truth and cling to it. He gave us one question to ask, one question to guide our answers to life's most difficult issues.

*What is true?*

"It was not legal, Master Seneca. Alexandria was important to Germanicus because of his ancestry as a descendant of Mark Antony. But Caesar Augustus's laws forbade the entry of any member of the ruling class into Alexandria."

"Was Germanicus a criminal, then?"

I didn't hesitate. "He was."

It was the truth. But sometimes the truth has unintended consequences.

# *Author's Note*

I have never felt more indebted on a book than this one. Five years is a long time to work on a project, and I've required more than the usual help along the way.

My team at Tyndale has been beyond patient. We delayed the release of this book a few times, even completing a contemporary legal thriller while I continued to work on this one in the background. I am so grateful for Karen Watson, Jeremy Taylor, Jan Stob, and the rest of the team who believed in this book and helped make it exponentially better than the raw manuscript I first submitted. In addition to that, a team of advance readers and transcribers, including Mary Hartman, Robin Pawling, Mike Garnier, Jana Hadder, Alisa Bozich, and my wife, Rhonda, (the ever-fastidious teacher of grammar) weighed in with helpful thoughts and feedback.

I have newfound respect for authors of historical fiction. Learning how to speak, write, live, and think like a first-century Roman has not been easy. To the extent this book feels authentic, I owe enormous debts to the sources and people who helped me understand what the world was like when the Son of Man chose to invade history.

The seed for this book was sown when I read *Paul on Trial*, a nonfiction book by a friend and fellow lawyer named John Mauck. In it, John argues that the books of Luke and Acts are written like legal

briefs that were intended as evidence in Paul's trial in front of Nero. I took that premise and ran with it, developing the fictional story of Theophilus, the intended recipient of those two books of Scripture.

I am a former history teacher, and the historical details are both fascinating and important to me. Unfortunately, space does not allow me to sift the real from the fictitious here. Suffice it to say that I attempted to remain true to the historical accounts to the extent possible. I have put a full list of my sources, along with detailed notes about what is real and what is fictional, on my website. However, a few of the more prominent sources bear special mention.

This period in history came alive through two main sources. The first was a wonderful tour guide I had in Rome named Cinzia Cutrone. She was a first-class historian who patiently answered every question, never injecting her own opinions but always taking me back to the original sources.

The second is an author named Ann Wroe, who wrote a magnificent nonfiction book titled *Pontius Pilate*. Her vibrant writing made the events surrounding the trial of Christ leap off the page and helped me see the first-century world through a Roman's eyes. In particular, scenes in my book where Theophilus visits Nicodemus and where Procula, the wife of Pilate, is healed in the temple of Aesculapius were inspired by Ann Wroe's descriptions of that temple and by her vivid imagining of a possible meeting between Pilate and Nicodemus. She also did an excellent job describing the details of Pilate's life, the politics that confronted him, and the quotes from Roman philosophers like Cicero and Seneca that would have helped him process the trial of Jesus, all of which impacted my story. I believe I used no fewer than five historical quotes that I first discovered in Wroe's book, including a quote from Seneca that played a large part in the life of my fictional Theophilus and is the concluding quote for his story.

On the life and times of Nero, a book of the same name by Edward Champlin was most helpful. His insightful writing helped me understand the events during Nero's reign and see the ruler as

an actor trapped in an emperor's body as opposed to just a one-dimensional persecutor of the early Christians.

In the same way, three sources brought to life the epic fire that destroyed most of Rome. *The Flames of Rome* by Paul Maier, *The Great Fire of Rome* by Stephen Dando-Collins, and *The Apostle* by Sholem Asch all contain gripping accounts of what that tragedy was like. These accounts formed the basis of my own description. Also, the novel *Imperium* by Robert Harris did a wonderful job describing what life was like for an advocate in ancient Rome—in particular for Marcus Cicero, a hero of my book's protagonist. I relied on several of Mr. Harris's insights when I wrote about the training of Theophilus and when I described the role of an advocate in the Roman legal system. For example, the life of Theophilus at the School of Molon and the description of the Asiatic School instructors as "dancing masters" were based on Mr. Harris's book. In a similar way, I am indebted to Jeffrey Barr for his insightful analysis of the episode where Jesus was asked about paying taxes, an analysis I relied on in this book.

I tried to stay true to the original historical sources, and you can be the judge of whether I succeeded. I started with the writings of Luke and the other New Testament books including, of course, the letters of Paul. I also found great value in the ancient historians—Tacitus, Josephus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio—and in the writings of Seneca, who waxed eloquent on a great variety of topics.

I'll end my thanks with the man who has guided my writing career for most of the past decade—my former agent, Lee Hough. I'm pretty sure there was nobody more excited about this book than Lee. After a long and courageous battle with brain cancer, he passed away just before the manuscript was submitted. Nevertheless, this book has his fingerprints all over it. They are prints of encouragement and persistence and faith.

And as good as Lee was as an agent—which was pretty darn special—he was even better as a friend. I miss him a lot. And I hope this book will make him proud.