

OF LOVE
and
TREASON

"Ogle brings ancient Rome to life. . . . Fascinating from the first page to the last."

FRANCINE RIVERS
New York Times
bestselling author

a novel

JAMIE OGLE

Praise for Jamie Ogle

“*Of Love and Treason* is a terrific read, rich in historical detail. With vividly drawn settings and complex characters, Jamie Ogle brings ancient Rome to life in this immersive and heart-wrenching story about early Christians who sacrificed everything for their faith. Fascinating from the first page to the last.”

FRANCINE RIVERS, *New York Times* bestselling author

“What a triumph! *Of Love and Treason* is for anyone who’s ever wondered why bad things happen to good people. It offers no clichés or easy answers. . . . A tender love story and boost to faith!”

MESU ANDREWS, author of *In Feast or Famine*

“Ogle’s novel, based upon the life of St. Valentine, is a beautiful examination of love in its many forms. While wholly transporting the reader into the streets of ancient Rome, the questions posed within its pages hold tremendous consequence for the world today: is God trustworthy? And, if so, just how far does that trust go? Filled with equal parts heartbreak and hope, this is one debut novel not to be missed.”

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT, author of *Come Down Somewhere* and *The Girl from the Papers*

“A moving, memorable debut, *Of Love and Treason* overflows with heart and hope, courage and conviction. Fans of Francine Rivers’s Mark of the Lion series will welcome this well-researched, timeless novel set in third-century Rome.”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award-winning author of *The Rose and the Thistle*

“*Of Love and Treason* is a feast for the soul. My heart filled to overflowing as I savored this story, and I came away completely satisfied. Jamie Ogle has breathed pulsing, throbbing life into third-century Rome in this profoundly moving episode in the saga of the early church. Fans of Amanda Barratt’s novels and Francine Rivers’s Mark of the Lion series will rejoice over this astounding debut. It’s one of the best novels I’ve read all year.”

JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award–winning author of *The Metropolitan Affair*

“A fresh, evocative look at a character everyone has heard of, but few truly know. *Of Love and Treason* is the perfect blend of historical research and depth of character—a beautifully wrought tale. I could not tear my eyes from the page once I’d started, and I’ve never read anything quite like it. I come away with a completely new view of an ordinary holiday, and the man behind it. New author Jamie Ogle is a brilliant storyteller with original, heartfelt stories to tell! I cannot wait for more of her novels.”

JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, author of *The Lost Melody*

“Jamie Ogle’s vivid novel takes us to the gritty streets of Rome in AD 270 and paints a picture of the price early believers paid for their faith in Christ. The unforgettable characters in *Of Love and Treason* touched my heart and made me thankful for the religious freedom we enjoy. I will never view that freedom—or St. Valentine’s Day—in the same way again.”

LYNN AUSTIN, bestselling author of *Long Way Home*

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City of Rome
Ides of Februarius, AD 270

When they drag him to the center of the ring of sand, the stands rumble with jeers and shouts and the restless hum of fifty thousand Romans eager to be entertained with blood. They do not recognize him at first—the man they spoke of with reverence and excitement. The man who went head-to-head against the emperor and will now lose his. He does not look like the hero they imagined, this shortish, gap-toothed scribe.

But someone recognizes him and shouts his name. The stands fall eerily silent. The sun is high. Beneath his feet the sand is hot. The waiting makes his knees shake. He will die, and they will make it painful. He isn't afraid to die. Yet he carries an ember of hope in his chest that he will be saved like the three in the fiery furnace. A miracle that would cause all in the stands to believe in the One God. He scans the arena, taking in the blur of the tens of thousands here to watch him die.

In the rustling stillness, a cry rings out. A single word. Then another voice joins the first.

And another. And another, until the stands roar in unison.

“Vita! Vita! Vita!”

Life! Life! Life!

I

CITY OF ROME

SEPTEMBER, AD 269

The merchant promised a miracle if Iris wore the pendant.

“It restores what has been lost.” His voice dropped, thick with secrecy, as if afraid he’d be overrun by every careless citizen looking for misplaced purses and apartment keys. “I watched it grow a full head of hair on a bald man and add two inches of height to a stooped old woman. I am certain the pendant will work for you.”

Iris fingered the thumb-sized piece of stone strung on a chain. It was heavy in her hand and the temptation to purchase it equally weighty. This day marked seven years of blindness. Some called it a curse of the gods. Iris called it unfair.

She bit her lip. She had to decide before the Markets of Trajan closed and her father came looking for her. “You’re certain it will work?”

“*Absolutely*, my lovely one.” He smelled of sweat and onions.

This merchant was new. Iris had bumped into his makeshift booth by accident as she left the bakery after her morning shift. He occupied most of the wide aisle between Yanni’s Silk Slippers, which were no longer made of silk, and the Fine Falernian Wine Shop, which now sold cheap watery *posca*—but with class.

As if sensing her hesitation, the merchant continued. “These stones are special. Dug from enchanted mines high in the Alps where

few dare to tread. Only priests who have undergone extensive purification rituals can enter the mines, and fewer make it out alive. This stone is enchanted, kissed by gods and blessed by priests. It will give you what you seek, if you are true of heart and belief.” Fingernails scratched against stubble. “It’s a small price to pay for your sight.”

Iris still hesitated. Past experience shouted that it would not work. But what if it did? What if this stone was what she’d needed all along? She’d long endured the whispers of neighbors and passersby, all murmuring about the poor jailor’s daughter and speculating about what heinous sin she’d committed against the gods to be cursed with blindness.

She’d always wonder unless she tried.

“All right.” She handed the pendant back to the merchant, shifted her walking stick to the crook of her elbow, and took out her purse. “I’ll take it.”

“A wise choice.”

A strange male voice spoke at Iris’s ear. “I wouldn’t buy it if I were you.”

She jumped and clutched her purse to her chest.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” He gave her arm a light tap. “Don’t buy the necklace.”

She lifted her chin and shifted away from him, fighting irritation over yet another well-intentioned stranger who thought she couldn’t make her own decisions.

Still . . . she sighed. “Why not?”

“It’s a chip of marble strung on a brass chain. He’s a swindler.”

“Hey!” the merchant snarled. “*This* is an enchanted stone. It restores what has been lost. I’ll take you to the magistrate on charges of slander.”

“*Asterius?*” The stranger’s voice brightened. “I know him well—tell him Val said hello.”

“How do you know it won’t work?” Iris pressed. Did she dare let a possibly enchanted necklace slip through her fingers at the dissuasion of a stranger? Of course, it wasn’t as if she knew the merchant any better.

She caught a faint whiff of sandalwood as the stranger leaned closer to whisper, his breath blowing her *palla* against her cheek.

“He’s missing a tooth.”

Iris couldn’t stifle the laugh in time.

“Get away from my booth before I call over the guard.” The merchant’s voice rose in elevation as if he’d straightened to his full height. “This is a respectable business.”

Ah. There it was. A slight whistling of air between his teeth.

Heart sinking at yet another disappointment, Iris stepped away from the stall, sliding her walking stick along the cobbles. The stranger’s footsteps moved in tandem with hers. She looped her purse strings around her wrist and clutched it in her fist. Stopping in the cool shade of another shop front, Iris inhaled the musty sweetness of pears and melons thick in the air. Her stomach growled.

“Here.” The man’s voice moved low as he bent and scratched at the street before plopping a warm rock into her hand. “Now *this* is an enchanted piece of cobble. It reveals the name of whoever touches it—but it may also carry the plague, so be careful.”

Iris smiled as the man continued in a mock salesman tone. “This *particular* pebble has traveled from the ground at your feet all the way to where it now sits in your hand. And that, miss, is a pretty impressive feat for a rock, don’t you think?”

She laughed and closed her fingers around the stone with a conceding nod. “Very.”

He had a nice voice, mild and cheery, with a hint of firmness. From the sound of it, he was near her height and her age—which, at one and twenty, was seven years past the normal marrying age. She was ancient. He was young.

“I’m Valentine. But my friends call me Valens or Val.”

A fisherman passed them, carrying a pungent basket of old fish and fresh flies. Under the awning beside them, two women haggled over the price of pears. Farther off a man yelled something about a thief.

Iris tilted her head. The fringe of her *palla*, pulled unfashionably low over her eyes, tickled her nose. “I am Quinta Magia, after my *pater*, of course. But everyone calls me Iris.”

“Iris.” He repeated her name slowly.

She liked the way it sounded, rolling from the back of his mouth to the front, sliding over his teeth like gentle waves.

His voice smiled as he added, “See? The stone *does* work.”

Iris smiled in return as the familiar longing swept over her. She rubbed her thumb over a sharp edge on the pebble. “Wouldn’t it be nice if miracles like that actually happened?”

“They do.”

“I mean real ones.”

“They *do* happen.” His voice was firm, insistent.

She shook her head. “It’s fine. I’m used to being blind—I think it bothers other people more than me.” She flipped a carefree hand, lifted a shoulder, and tried a wobbly grin. “Still, you can’t blame a girl for trying. It’d be nice to see the hairs in my food before I eat them.”

He laughed. “Minotaur’s Table?”

“Ah, you’ve eaten there too?” She shook her head in mock sympathy. The proprietor—and food—of Minotaur’s Table were both well-known for being extremely hairy.

“A mistake never to be repeated.”

Iris grinned even as the scent of meat pies from the questionable café drifted toward them. “Still.” She lifted her chin and inhaled. “They’re rather tempting.”

“*Resist.*” He chuckled, then added in a dismayed mutter, “I’m going to be late.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’ll pray for you to see again.”

A creaking of wicker announced the passing of a weaver loaded down with a stack of baskets.

“Don’t bother.” She tried to keep her tone light. “It’s about time I accept that the gods don’t care.”

“Mine does.”

Her mouth went tight as the man’s motives became clear. “Of course yours does. And at what price?” She held up a finger. “Wait, no, let me guess—there’s a special deal for today only.” Iris turned

away, toward the exit of the market complex that would leave her only a few streets from home. “Thank you, but I said I was fine.”

He kept pace with her as her walking stick alternately skimmed and caught over the uneven cobblestones. Iris’s shoulders tensed. Just like a salesman not to take the hint he was unwanted.

“There’s no price.”

“There’s always a price.” Her voice flattened. “Everything costs something. No gods listen for free.” She wished she could move faster through the winding shopping complex. Why did Paulina’s Bakery have to be all the way on the far end?

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Valentine’s sandals scraped the cobblestones in time with hers. “The ability to pray to my God came at a great cost. Far too great a cost for any one person to pay.” He sounded so cryptic, so certain.

Warnings pulsed through her mind. Saved from one swindler by another.

“Posca!” the bartender shouted from the doorway of the Fine Falernian Wine Shop. “Served with class and no attitude!”

“We can pray now if you like.” Valentine’s tone was casual.

“*Here? Now?*” Her mind shuffled through the pantheon of gods, unable to think of one that didn’t require incense. “What kind of god—?” She stopped as understanding dawned. Oh no. “You’re a—a *Christian?*”

She whispered the word, too offensive to say aloud, and took a step back, mind running circles around the stories she’d heard about them. *They kidnap children, drink blood, sprout horns at night.* Untrue, of course—she was fairly certain.

He sucked in a quick breath as if to answer but didn’t get a chance.

“Iris? Iris! *There* you are. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Titus.

From the sound of it, her oldest and only friend hailed from the other end of the street.

She lifted a hand in acknowledgment.

“It was nice to meet you, Iris.” Valentine’s words came in a sudden

rush. The sort that accompanied the appearance of a Praetorian Guard. “And I *will* pray for you.”

She forced a smile. “Thank you.”

Valentine’s retreating footsteps were replaced by the clack of Titus’s military-issued hobnailed boots as he crossed the street toward her.

“Who was that?”

She dumped the pebble into her purse. “Nobody.” Why the hesitation to reveal his name?

Titus’s pointed silence told her he didn’t believe it. Raised by Iris’s father, Quintus, after the death of his own, Titus Didius Liberare had always felt like an older brother to her, though she’d never been quite certain the feeling was equally returned.

“He said his name was Valentine.”

Titus’s voice strained as if he craned his neck to look for the stranger in the crowded market. “Was this *Valentine* bothering you?”

“He kept me from buying a worthless rock.” She sighed and resumed the trek toward the exit.

“So I don’t have to hunt him down and kill him?”

She smiled at his teasing and shook her head. “Not this time.”

The air hung still and heavy, and the day’s heat radiated from the stone street and building walls. At the street entrance, Titus took her arm and held her back.

“Let this litter go by first.”

“What are you doing here? It’s a rare day you leave your precious office.”

Titus’s voice went quiet. “I thought . . . it being *today*, that I—”

“Would buy me some honey-roasted almonds?” Iris cut him off, hating the undercurrents of pity and remorse in his tone. She didn’t want another reminder of the accident. “If you insist. I accept your gracious offer.”

Titus chuckled and shelled out a few coins to the almond roaster, then set a warm palm-leaf bag of almonds in her hand.

They angled away from the market, sharing the treat as the streets narrowed with every turn, cooling as they dropped into shadow. A breeze, warmed by the heat from the brick buildings, carried a

pulsing stench from gutters clogged with sewage, rotting vegetables, and bones.

“Puddle.” Titus pulled and pushed her around obstacles in the street. “Broken stool . . . Mind the steps.” His voice changed, growing deeper and more serious. “Did you find anything in the market today?”

Her thoughts went to the pebble in her purse, but she shook her head.

“Pity.”

She knew he meant it. Titus had been with her that horrible day, seven years ago. Iris reached beneath the fringe of her palla and ran her fingers over the scarred flesh rippling out of the hairline over her left temple. The blemish skipped over her eye, ending in a jagged nick on her cheekbone. She dropped her hand. She had long known she would never see again. For all they’d tried, there was no fixing it. And yet she couldn’t help the longing that swelled inside. To be able to see the sky awash with the colors of citrus fruit, see her father’s eyes crinkle when he smiled, see if Titus had grown into his ears.

They turned onto Cedar Street, her nose assaulted by the smell of dirty laundry and vats of urine collected from passersby and used as bleach. Nearly home.

“Have you seen my pater?”

“I’ll see him when I get to the prison. He has someone I need to talk to.” Titus didn’t elaborate. Didn’t have to. Titus only went to the prison when they needed him to extract answers from prisoners. And whenever that happened, her father came home late.

“Christians again?”

“Not this time—broken pot.” He tugged her out of the way.

“I met one today.”

“A broken pot?”

She dug an elbow into his side. “A Christian.”

“Is he the one who told you not to buy the rock? You should have let me arrest him.” Titus bent his head close to hers. “Did he have horns?”

“I didn’t see any.”

Titus groaned. “I keep telling you to be more observant!”

Iris smiled at his good-natured teasing but continued in a serious tone. “He said he would pray for me, so I could see again.”

“And did he?” Titus’s voice was strained, as if he held his breath.

“No.” She tugged her palla further down on her forehead. “I think you scared him off.”

“Probably for the best.”

Titus opened the door to the courtyard of the five-story *insula*, stepping aside to let her precede him. The walk from the market to the insula was not long, but the stairs leading to the fourth-floor apartment were hazardous. And before those, there was the first-floor laundry to navigate. The laundress, Silvia, bawled at her slaves for scorching bed linens.

“That woman has the arms of a legionnaire,” Titus whispered. “Watch out for the urine vat.”

“You wouldn’t want to trip into that again, would you?” Iris giggled, remembering.

“Telling you that story is my biggest regret in life.”

“But your tunic was never whiter.”

He inhaled and effectively changed the subject. “Someone’s cooking sea bass.”

The courtyard was shaded, the sun having long passed overhead, but the cracked paving stones still radiated heat. Quick footsteps slapped across the courtyard.

“My dear, have you seen Priscilla?” Dorma’s voice wavered with age and worry. The insula’s oldest tenant shuffled about, clunking garden pots on the flagstones.

“Who’s *Priscilla*?” Titus murmured in Iris’s ear. “Anyone I should know?”

Iris answered under her breath. “Yes. The two of you would get along famously. Priscilla is Dorma’s chicken.”

Titus chuckled. “I do love a good roasted chicken.”

She sent an elbow to his gut, hoping Dorma hadn’t heard. One did not joke that way about Priscilla. Iris raised her voice. “I think I heard her on the third-floor landing when I left this morning.”

Dorma’s voice went weak with dread. “The *third* floor?” She

shoved past in a shocking burst of speed, sending Iris stumbling against Titus.

“Falco said he’d eat her if he caught her in his bed again.” The old woman shrieked, “*Priscillaaaaa!*”

Titus steadied Iris and slid his hands from her sides, releasing a deep breath. “I’d better go.”

She grabbed his arm in both hands, her fingers unable to meet around the bulk of it. “You’re not going to stay for the chicken hunt? It’s great fun.”

“Not unless the winner gets that sea bass.” He inhaled again and brushed the palla off her head affectionately. “I’ll see you.”

She nodded and climbed the stairs carefully, thankful no one was moving or throwing out a husband today. The three flights of stairs were free of debris.

Iris let herself into the one-room apartment, sparsely furnished with an unused cooking brazier, a rickety table, and three stools. Her loom crowded the far wall, and curtains divided the other half of the room into two sleeping areas, one for Iris and the other for her father. When Titus and his widowed mother had lived with them, they’d slept on pallets in the main room. Titus’s mother had only stayed a few months before marrying a carter and moving to Ostia, leaving Titus to be trained up in the Praetorian Guard.

Leaving her walking stick by the door, she went out to the balcony, checking the dryness of the herbs and potted geranium. They needed water. Titus was right: someone was cooking sea bass. She closed her eyes and inhaled. Sea bass with lemon and rosemary. Her stomach rumbled despite the roasted almonds. She’d make do with plain bread and olives again.

Iris opened her eyes. The shadow of a bird skittered across the wooden planks at her feet.

Her hair stood on end. She stared, mind reeling.

She could *see*.

Her pulse pounded. She watched her fingers come up to touch the soft skin around her eyes, confirming that they were indeed open. She saw her chest rising and falling too fast, her round toes wrapped in plain

leather sandals. She was afraid to blink. Afraid the fuzzy gray shapes and light would disappear. Her eyes burned and watered. Iris reached up again, this time to hold her eyelids open. She couldn't help it.

When she blinked, it was gone. Like a lamp pinched out in the night. That faint glimpse of blinding light and shadow plunged once more into deep fog and swirling darkness.

She blinked again, emotion swelling her throat.

Nothing.

She shuddered, knees going doughy. Sitting down hard, her back against the wall, she struggled to grasp what had just happened. It *had* been real . . . hadn't it? Perhaps it was only a memory of something she'd seen before . . . But no, there was no dream or memory in it, just simple sight.

Simple and glorious, and gone.

She sat on the balcony shaking and frozen in place, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry. On the other side of the wall bracing her was the *lararium*—their niche of household gods so crammed with deities there wasn't room for another. Had they smiled upon her at last? She pushed herself to her feet and stumbled inside, dropping to her knees before the shrine. Her hands shook as she poured wine into a small bowl to offer as a libation.

But who had done it? Panacea? Hygeia? Aesculapius?

A tiny thought prickled her mind, and she shoved it away. No. Impossible.

The thought came again, stronger. Her insides quivered. *No*. Valentine had not actually prayed for her. She had not made offerings of any kind. Valentine's god had no reason to do anything for her. She did not know his god, and his god surely did not know her.

She replayed the images over and over in her mind while hope and despair wrestled in her heart. Where had it come from? Why hadn't it stayed? Would she ever get it back?

"Thank you."

Her whispered words bounced off the wall, floating away like the curling smoke of incense. Would they reach the ears of the god who had returned her hope?