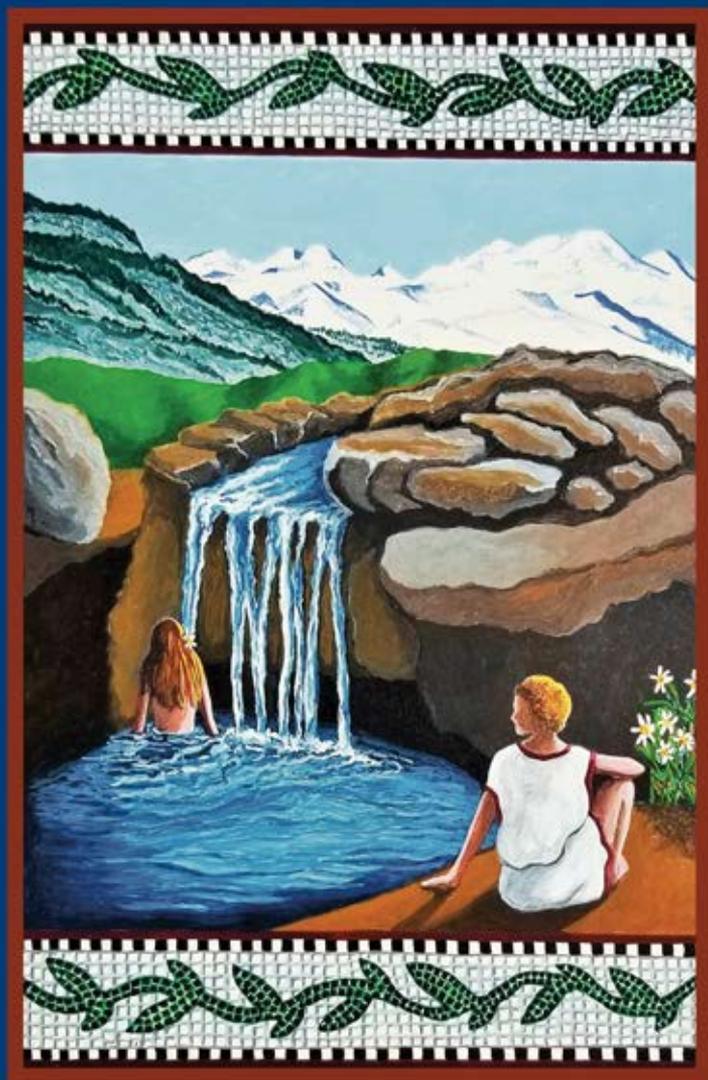


# HIDING FROM THE PAST

AN EIGHTH CASE FROM THE NOTEBOOKS  
OF PLINY THE YOUNGER



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ALBERT A. BELL, JR.

[ MMXX ]

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS BOOK has been more of a challenge than others in this series because it contains several flashbacks. Writing those sections hasn't been the challenge as much as deciding how to distinguish them from the sections that take place at the narrative date of the book. I already use italics to set off sections written from Aurora's point of view. I didn't want to use another font for the flashbacks—and my editor wouldn't want me to. I finally decided to accept the suggestion of my writers' group and put (A.D. 77) at the head of the flashbacks and (A.D. 87) at the head of the sections that take place in the narrative date. I find that a bit jarring, because it would have meant nothing to Pliny, but they said it made things much clearer for them. Having been in the group since 2001, I've learned to respect their collective judgment on most things. I have put those dates at any place where I felt there was a possibility of confusion about when a section is set. My editor, of course, has had the final say. If a section doesn't have a date at the beginning, it takes place in A.D. 87.

Another option, I guess, would have been to give the dates in the Roman fashion, either A.U.C. (*Ab Urbe Condita*, from the founding of the city; 753 B.C. was the legendary date) or in terms of regnal dates of the emperors. But A.D. 77 was in the reign of Vespasian, while A.D. 87 was in Domitian's reign. Figuring out all of that would be like dating things today in "the eighth year of Franklin Roosevelt" and "the third year of Dwight Eisenhower." Perhaps readers can visualize the book as a movie, with a fade-in to the flashbacks, perhaps even a change to black-and-white.

While this hasn't been an easy book to write, I've enjoyed seeing Pliny the Elder and Monica, Aurora's mother, as living characters

instead of memories and Pliny and Aurora as teenagers still uncertain about their relationship. On the other hand, I've missed Pliny's mother, her servant and friend Naomi, and other characters in Pliny's household who have populated the earlier books. If the series continues, they will return.

I say "if" because I am getting on in years and I have several other projects on my bucket list. One of those projects I accomplished when my cozy mystery, *Death by Armoire*, won the Genre Fiction category in the 2018 *Writer's Digest* contest for self-published books. My wife wants me to retire, but I don't want to. I like having a schedule and some discipline in my life.

As far as the Pliny series goes, I also face a dilemma in that after H comes I, but in Latin I and J are used interchangeably before vowels. Julius Caesar was just as easily Iulius Caesar. Given the alphabetical sequence that I have established for the titles, what would I do for a next book? Would it be *I, Julia*? (Hmm, I actually sort of like that possibility.) And then what about K? Aside from Kalends, the K section of a Latin dictionary is non-existent.

For the meanings of unfamiliar Latin words, please see the Glossary at the end of this book. It also contains the modern names of the cities that Pliny's party visits on their travels. For information about me or any of my books, go to my website: [www.albertbell.wixsite.com/writer](http://www.albertbell.wixsite.com/writer).

HIDING FROM  
THE PAST



## PROLOGUE

[ A.D. 77, JULY ]

“WHO’S THERE?” Junius peered into the darkness of his mill in the little Alpine town of Collis Niveosus, trying to see by the flickering light of a small oil lamp. “Snowy Hill” was anything but what its name suggested at the moment. The summer had been unusually hot and dry. At least melting snow from higher up in the mountains had watered fields when rain had been scarce. Junius and his two workers—his son-in-law and a slave—would soon be grinding that grain.

“I know you’re in here,” he said. “And I know what you’re after.” He hung the lamp from the lamp tree just inside the door. “You’ll never find it, you know.”

A hand shot out of the darkness and clamped around Junius’ throat. “Then maybe I’ll have to beat it out of you,” a voice snarled.

Junius’ head slammed into the stone wall. His face contorted in fright.

“What do you have to say now?”

Junius could only groan as his head hit the wall again.

“Just tell me where it is and I’ll stop.”

Junius said nothing and his head hit the wall again.

“Last chance.”

Junius said nothing. His head slammed into the wall one more time. The hand released its grasp as he slumped to the floor, leaving a bloody streak down the wall.



## I

[ A.D. 87, MARCH ]

**G**AIUS, WHY ARE YOU doing this?" my mother pleaded as my servants and I mounted our horses outside the walls of my villa on Lake Comum. I had come up here to supervise the final stages of the work we began last summer to add some much-needed space to the house. I'm planning to move some servants here from my other estates in hopes of making this one more productive. A cold, snowy winter had prevented the workmen from making as much progress as I had hoped. March was now offering a chilly start to spring, but the work needed to be finished.

I gathered the reins of my horse. "I'm doing it because Tacitus is my friend. He would do as much or more for me."

"But all the way to Lugdunum? The trip there and back will take you...months."

"Probably two, so we'd better get going."

"But there are rumors of bands of Gauls coming out of the mountains and raiding in our territory. The winter was hard up there, I hear, and they're desperate." Mother grabbed the reins of my horse and wouldn't let go. She has always been small and frail, but today her grip was firm, drawing strength from desperation. "Gaius, please. Anything could happen to you. You could be attacked and killed on the road. I might never know about it. And I would never see you again."

"Domitian could have me arrested tomorrow, Mother, and you would never see me again. Anything can happen at any time, whether

I'm here or somewhere else. We can't just sit idle and hope nothing ever happens to us."

"Tacitus' message didn't ask you to do anything, Gaius. He was just telling you that his poor brother is ill and he's going to Gaul to see about him."

"He didn't have to *ask* me to do anything. This is what friends do." She stumbled as I jerked the reins away from her harder than I intended and turned my horse to look over my travel party. Her slave and confidante, Naomi, helped her regain her balance.

I was taking four of my male freedmen—not slaves because freedmen, unlike slaves, can legally carry weapons—and two extra horses to carry some supplies. Tacitus' servant who had brought the message, a man named Charinus, would also ride with us. With the help of my stablemaster, Barbatus, I had picked out the strongest horses I owned. I needed animals that were capable of speed but also had stamina.

This might be a fool's errand, I knew. I had a general sense of where Tacitus would be traveling, but the chances of crossing his path were remote. I only knew I had to get started if I was to have any chance of meeting up with him. My hope was to cover forty miles a day. I can make the seventeen-mile trip from Rome to my estate at Laurentum in an afternoon at a leisurely pace. Even cavalrymen carrying their equipment can do sixty miles in a day.

"At least take one *raeda*," Mother said.

"That would only slow us down."

"But if you can't find an inn each night, what will you do?"

"We'll sleep on the ground. We can manage that for a night or two."

The last person waiting to mount was my servant Aurora. She is not just my slave. I can admit it to myself, if not to everyone else—she is my lover. Fortunately, my wife, Livia, prefers to stay on her estate near Perusia and tolerates my relationship with Aurora as long as I don't flaunt it. My mother has come to accept the situation. I don't dare say "approve of," but...

Mother surprised me when she took Aurora's hand. "If I can't stop

him, please watch out for him, dear. Are you prepared to protect him?" She patted her own thigh at the spot where Aurora carries a knife in a sheath strapped under her stola. I believed the weapon was a secret, but perhaps not as much of one as I thought.

"Always, my lady," Aurora winked.

"Well, don't let him do anything foolish," Mother said, fighting back tears. Naomi put an arm around her shoulder.

"I'll do my best, my lady," Aurora said with a soft smile, "but you know your son." She rolled her eyes, making my mother chuckle. A head taller than Mother, Aurora bent down to give her a kiss on the cheek, a gesture my mother returned. "Take good care of yourself, my lady. We'll see you as soon as we can, I promise."

Much to my surprise, Mother embraced Aurora. "I hope so, dear. I truly hope so."

I knew what Mother was hinting at. While she was bathing a year or so ago, she discovered a *kanker* in one of her breasts. Women know that such a lump presages death. The only question is how long it will take. Tacitus' mother died two years after she found a lump. As much as I felt the need to make this trip, I was afraid my mother might die before I returned. She had yet to tell me about the disease—I learned of it from Naomi—but I had no doubt now that she had confided in Aurora as well.

"We need to get started," I said, adjusting the strap on my traveler's hat and fighting down a different kind of lump that was forming in my throat.

But there was one more unavoidable delay. Aurora had to say good-bye to Joshua, a baby who came under my protection seven months ago, shortly after he was born. I know how much Aurora wants a baby—and what a huge complication of our lives it would be if she had one. We have a nurse for Joshua whom we trust implicitly. Aurora hugged the boy and kissed him on his forehead.

"Aurora," I said in my best master's voice, "we need to go. Now."

She handed Joshua back to the nurse and stepped away. "Yes, my lord." The boy fretted and reached out for her. Aurora hesitated, and I was afraid she might decide to stay here.

I had been surprised that she consented to my request to make this trip. I think she figured that I would need her more than Joshua would. He had the nurse, my mother, and Naomi to take care of him. I held the reins of her horse while Barbatus helped her mount.

"I think we're ready," I said.

"My lord, excuse me," one of my freedmen, Albinus, said from the back of the group. "Would it be possible for us to take one more person along?"

"Whom do you have in mind?" I was reluctant to add anyone else to the group. Even one more person—and one more horse—could introduce any number of possible problems and delays along the way.

"Sophronia, my lord."

I patted my horse's neck, the way Aurora has taught me, to calm him. "Why take another woman on the trip? And why Sophronia?"

Albinus, whose skin is as white as his name implies, has never been reluctant to speak for himself, though never disrespectful. "She would provide company for Aurora, my lord. And make things appear a bit more...proper, if I may say so."

"'More proper'? In whose eyes?" I knew exactly what he meant, of course, and he was right. A second woman in the group would divert attention from Aurora. "So again I ask, why Sophronia?"

"Well, she's good with horses, my lord. And a good cook."

"And she is your lover, isn't she?"

Albinus blushed and looked down.

"I'm not blind, you know. I am aware of what goes on in my household." It was actually just a guess, albeit a reasonable one from the way I had seen the two of them together. "But you make a good point. Barbatus, get her a horse. Albinus, get her ready to travel. Or is she already packed?"

"Yes, my lord, she is."

"Remind me never to play *latrunculus* with you," I said.

Albinus' brow furrowed. "Forgive me, my lord?"

"You've boxed me in very nicely." For a moment I considered telling Albinus to stay here, but he had been the first to volunteer. I'd always

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Also see glossaries in previous books in this series.*

***amicitia*** “Friendship”; the semi-legal status accorded to an aristocrat’s inner circle of friends. It created an obligation for men to assist one another.

***auctoritas*** The concept of “authority” or prestige, very important to upper-class Romans.

**Augusta Taurinorum** The Roman name of Turin, Italy. The full name would be Colonia Julia Augusta Taurinorum, a colony named after the emperor Augustus and the people known as the Taurini.

**Cynics** A philosophical group that developed in the late fourth century B.C. They professed to take Socrates’ teachings to their radical conclusions, despising social norms and wealth. They lived in the streets. Their greatest proponent, Diogenes, lived in a wine vat in a corner of the Agora in Athens. He was known as “Socrates gone mad.” The Cynics showed their disdain for social niceties by copulating in temples or performing bathroom functions in public. During the 1960s hippies were often compared to them.

**distances and speed of travel** The Romans did not have saddles or stirrups, so horseback riding wasn’t easy. Cavalrymen, with armor, could make up to sixty miles a day on horseback, though. For people

who weren't in such a hurry and were traveling lighter, forty miles would not be a difficult day's trip. In *Ep.* 2.17 Pliny says he could get from Rome to his villa at Laurentum, a distance of seventeen miles, in an afternoon with no extra effort. That works out to about forty miles in a day.

The journey that I imagine in this book would be a long one, taking a couple of months from start to finish. In the first century A.D., a trip from Rome to London would have taken at least a month. Until the invention of trains in the 1840s that trip would still have taken about a month. Trains created what we call a "paradigm shift," a complete, mind-boggling change in the way something is done. Travel in Europe did not become any easier or faster until the advent of trains.

It's all a matter of what you're accustomed to. Before jet travel, it took five days to cross the Atlantic on an ocean liner. By the 1950s a plane could cover it in half a day. Now it's only a few hours. The Roman traveler did have the advantage of not crossing international borders and being able to use one currency all along the way. It has taken Europe only a couple of millennia to get anywhere near that situation again.

***duovir*** Towns across the Roman Empire were governed in various ways. Many in the west had a shared mayor's office, held by two men, the *duoviri*.

***fritillus*** Cf. "Venus throw," below.

**Gallia Lugdunensis** By Pliny's day the Romans had divided Gaul into several small provinces. Gallia Lugdunensis was the north-central part of the territory. Its capital city was Lugdunum (Lyon, France).

**Gaul** The Romans envisioned Italy as beginning where the peninsula joined the mainland of Europe, roughly at the Po River. Between the river and the Alps was Cisalpine Gaul. The Gaul that was divided into three parts, according to Julius Caesar, was Transalpine Gaul, modern France.

Directional and geographical names in the ancient world were highly ethnocentric. The Romans looked at the world as having Rome at the center. Mile markers on major highways noted the distance from Rome. For the Greeks, Delphi was the *omphalos* (“navel”) of the world. “North” and “South” weren’t as important as the direction in which rivers flowed. A Roman province could be “Upper” or “Lower” depending on which part of a river passed through it, and the Upper part would appear on our maps as south of the Lower part, just as Upper Egypt is in the south because the Nile flows from south to north.

**Genua** The Roman name for Genoa.

**hecatomb** A sacrifice of one hundred oxen or cattle at one time. That’s a very expensive proposition, of course, so the term is sometimes used of any large number of animals being sacrificed, not necessarily a hundred.

**hipposandal** A kind of metal cleat that could be strapped onto a horse’s hoof to improve traction. The Romans did sometimes use horseshoes.

**hypocaust** Romans heated buildings by raising the floors on piles of tiles and circulating warm air through the resulting channels. Ducts were extended into the walls. Such systems were normally used in public buildings, such as baths or inns, and occasionally in the private homes of wealthy individuals. They required a furnace, a fuel supply, and servants to tend the furnace. All of those constituted a huge expense and did heavy environmental damage.

**latrina** Roman toilets, whether in a house or in a public facility, were unisex. Since men and women both wore long, loose garments, it was possible to sit down, cover oneself, and do whatever was necessary, while chatting with one’s neighbor, who could be of the same or the other gender. Poets, musicians, sausage sellers, and other vendors would be strolling around the venue. As you entered, you would pick up a stick with a sponge on the end from a bowl. Your seat would have an opening in the front, where you would insert the stick and use the

sponge to clean up. You would then rinse the sponge in a channel of water running in the floor in front of your seat. As you exited, you would return the stick and sponge to the bowl, to be “disinfected” by water and vinegar and to be used by the next person.

**latrunculus** A board game, a mixture of chess and Othello. The objective was to surround the opponent’s primary piece, the *dux* (leader). *Latrunculus* boards are scratched into the steps of public buildings in the Forum, so people could pass the time while waiting on court cases or other public business.

**libertus/a** Word for a freed slave, masculine or feminine.

**Lugdunum** The Roman name of Lyon.

**Massilia** The Roman name of Marseille, originally a Greek town.

**Mediolanum** The Roman name of Milan.

**mounting stone** Since the Romans did not have saddles or stirrups, they got on their horses by standing on stones placed wherever they were likely to be mounting or by having another person help them. Plutarch (*G. Gracchus* 7) says that Gaius Gracchus (120s B.C.), as part of his road-building program, placed stones “at smaller intervals from one another on both sides of the road, in order that riders might be able to mount their horses from them and have no need of assistance.”

**Nemausus** Modern Nîmes, in southern France.

**Padus River** Latin name for the Po, the large river that flows from west to east across northern Italy. The Romans sometimes referred to the part of what we call Italy between the Po and the Alps as Transpadane Gaul (“Gaul across the Po”).