

The Dearly Beloved: Apphia's Story

Chapter One

*Children are a gift from the LORD;
they are a reward from him.*
~Psalm 127.3~

AD 57
Mensis Maius
Laodikea

On days like this—the sun’s gentle light flooding the room, the scent of apple blossoms riding the faint spring breeze, sparrows twittering as they scoured the streets for crumbs of stale bread—Apphia could almost forget the dull ache that had burrowed deep in her heart.

On a low stool, she leaned against the wall and set aside the robe she’d been embroidering. She studied the rooms where she’d spent so much of her life. The *tablinum* at the front of her family’s *fullonica* boasted a wide, low window that allowed her to serve customers. It also let in fresh air, giving her some relief from the unpleasant—and ever-present—smells of a fullonica.

Inside, the office opened into the atrium, which occupied the other two-thirds of the front of the building. Their coveted location—on the wide, east-west highway through Laodikea—brought them an abundance of traffic. An iron fence instead of a wall gave passersby a glimpse of the many essential services they offered—washing, pressing, mending, even dyeing wool and linen cloth.

Apphia had spent most of her childhood in this very room, playing at Mama’s feet. As Phia grew, her *matar* taught her to keep the records of money taken in each day, making fewer mistakes as each month passed. And when Mama died, accepting the clothing brought to them as well as the coins they gave in payment became her responsibility.

It was a task she excelled at, and enjoyed, even if life at home was not always pleasant. She’d escaped for a while when she married, but now she was back here.

And would be here forever. Lugging sacks of fouled clothing, scratching and re-scratching names and prices on small squares of lead, and adding endless columns of numbers.

“Phia!” A woman about her age approached with a small chubby child propped on one hip.

Phia smiled at her childhood friend. “Midasia, it’s good to see you. And how is this little one?” She reached toward the baby boy and tickled his tummy, a flurry of excited giggles and a sloppy smile her reward. “He is so adorable.”

“He looks like that now, but maybe not so much when he’s screaming in the middle of the night.” Midasia flashed a grin. “Just wait. You’ll see.”

Phia tried to ignore the sharp pain that tore through her heart. She was far too old. She would never *see*. And though Midasia knew that full well, she continually tried to brighten Apphia’s day with little hints of encouragement. What would her dearest friend say if she knew her "encouragement" sliced through Apphia’s heart like a Roman sword?

She hurried to change the subject. “What have you brought me today?”

The woman leaned forward and dropped a bag onto the table.

Phia untied it and pulled out two cloaks and a tunic. “Oh, what beautiful silk!” She held the deep crimson tunic by the shoulders, the shimmering fabric draping like a waterfall.

“Isn’t it? I absolutely love it. Daos brought it back for me from Rome. I think it came from the Far East.”

“That’s true. They’re the only ones who have it.”

“I heard they make it from a special tree.” Midi whispered conspiratorially.

“That’s a myth. Some kind of insect makes the threads, kind of like a spider.”

“Oh.” Midi seemed disappointed. She loved tales of foreign lands, the wilder the better, and her husband provided her with an abundance of them. Most of the time he was wrong, but Midi didn’t care.

Phia folded it carefully, then reached for a shard of pottery and a reed pen. She scribbled “two cloaks, one silk tunic” on it, along with the price. “We’ll take very good care of it. ”

“As always. Two days?”

Phia squinted at the clouds hovering over the city. “Might be three unless the sun cooperates.”

Midasia pointed to the purple tunic on the stool. “Another robe?”

She sighed. “For another Roman. They love the gold thread. Makes them feel important.”

“You do beautiful work. Best in the valley, maybe all of Asia.”

Apphia scoffed. “There are many who do beautiful work.”

“One day I’ll have you make one for me.”

Apphia smirked. “Sure you can afford me?”

Midasia laughed as she grabbed the broken piece of pottery. She kissed the boy’s temple. “Say bye-bye.” He proudly raised a hand and waved.

Apphia gathered the thin squares of lead scattered on the table into a pile, their clinking a familiar sound. She selected a tag and with a stylus, she scratched Midasia’s name, then “2 tunics - 2 *sesterces* each.” On a third line she etched “1 silk tunic. 1 denarius.” After putting the clothing back in the bag, she slipped the string through the hole in the tag and tied it around the neck, then dragged it and three other tagged bags to the atrium a few steps away.

“Four more.” She placed them at her father’s feet.

Her father bent to read the tags. “Ah, silk.” He pulled the bag to the side and set it against the wall. “I’ll do that one myself. Thank you, Phia.” He squinted at the sky through the open roof above the *impluvium* that gathered rainwater. “The sun is almost down. Why don’t we count the money? Then you can take it to the temple before we eat.”

“*Nai, Tata.*” She nodded.

Apphia returned to the front room, her tata shuffling slowly behind her. She retrieved a small box from underneath the table, opened it, and scooped up a handful of coins, letting them filter through her fingers. The various sounds produced by the metals soothed her ears. Mostly bronze Roman *sesterces*. A pair of silver Greek *drachma*. A Laodikean *cistophorus*. Three silver *denarii*.

She counted the coins the family had earned for the day’s hard work, converting them all to *sesterces* in her head, then slid the bronze and silver disks off the table into a small leather pouch and tied it shut. She checked the wax tablet that listed each transaction for the day and reached the same total. “Fifty-seven *sesterces* today, Tata.”

He grinned. “A good day.”

“Very good. I shall thank the Matar.” She dropped the pouch into a cloth bag, then pulled the long strap over one shoulder and her head. “I’ll take this to the temple and be right home. I started the stew already, and bought bread. We have cherries left as well.”

“Thank you, Phia.” He kissed her cheek. “Be careful.”

“*Nai, Tata.*”

Her sweet tata said that every day, though the Temple of Apollo was moments away. He knew the route was quite safe, and she was never off the main streets. And when was the last time bandits struck inside the city walls, even after dark? He would happily make the trip each day himself, but his legs couldn’t handle even that long of a walk. And storing the coins at home was just asking for trouble.

Adjusting the bag so the weight bounced against her hip rather than her stomach, she stepped down onto Syria street and headed west. The colonnaded east-west road sat lower than the shops on either side. The stately columns threw their lengthening shadows in dusky stripes across her path. A moment later she turned right toward the temple complex at the north end of Laodikea.

Apollo’s massive temple dominated the sacred agora. Facing west, the main building sat atop ten white steps. Six marble columns stood like armed soldiers spaced across an open porch. The priests lined up their

triangular tables at sunset each day for banking. Soon she stood behind other merchants waiting to deposit funds for safekeeping, the marble steps warming her bare feet.

As each merchant finished his business and left, another priest was freed up and everyone stepped forward.

Finally she faced one of the older attendants. The priests knew most of the merchants by face if not by name, and he nodded at her. “Apphia. A good day, I hope?” His floor-length, purple chiton was infused with frankincense, and a matching headband held back his long hair.

She set the box on the table that separated them. He reached for it and carefully spilled its contents before him.

He silently counted, her lips moving along with his. “Fifty-four sesterces.”

She sucked in a sharp breath.

He looked up, one brow raised.

She winced. “I think it should be fifty-seven.”

A sly smile flashed across his wrinkled face for a brief moment. “Only for you, Apphia, would I count again.”

He repeated the process, then looked up at her through sparse lashes. “Right, as always.”

He pulled a reed pen and piece of parchment closer, then scribbled her name and the amount at the end of a long list. He pushed it toward her and she signed next to the name of the fullonica.

If only everything else in her life could be totaled up and set to right so easily.

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Their profit safely entrusted to the priests, Phia paused for a moment. On the other side of the sacred area sat the temple of Athena, the sun sinking behind it to the western mountains. She descended to the tiled floor of the sacred agora.

Smaller than the dwelling of her twin Apollo, the temple of Athena sat atop only three stone steps. Four, not six, marble columns held the roof while a bronze double door remained open for worshippers at all times.

Here there were no priests in flowing robes. No incense burned. Athena was the goddess of weavers and artists, not the god of Laodikea like Apollo, and her smaller temple reflected her lower status.

But the Phrygian Mother Goddess was not bound to such an earthly temple. She made her home in the mountains, though all creation belonged to her and was protected by her. The worship she demanded was simple.

Apphia faced the mountains to the north. She closed her eyes and raised her hands as she silently offered thanks.

Matar of the mountains, mother of all gods and men, we thank you yet again for your provision this day. She bowed from her waist and turned toward home.

Her stomach growled. A hot dinner of fish and barley stew would be ready as soon as she reached home. She could taste the fresh wheat bread, the honeyed wine, and root vegetables already.

As her foot hit the border between the smooth tiled floor and the stone-paved street, she heard a faint cry behind her, likely the complaint of one of the many cats that roamed Laodikea.

Another step. The soft whine came again, barely audible and yet at the same time somehow splitting the evening calm like thunder. Apphia froze at the sound, shifting her bag from one shoulder to the other and listening.

A baby? No, it couldn't be.

Another faint cry, followed by a wail. This time the noise was unmistakable. She spun around, trying to locate the source.

Babies were routinely abandoned, exposed to the elements and animals. *Expositi* were usually left on the steps of the temple—Apollo's temple—and were snatched up quite quickly. On exceedingly rare occasions they would be raised in a loving home, but as a rule they were claimed by the poorer citizens as a free slave.

Or worse.

A louder, desperate cry drew her up to the portico of Athena. A soft whimper sounded from inside, and Apphia noticed the edge of a blanket peeking from under the bronze door. She stepped inside and knelt before the infant, who couldn't be more than a day old, two at the most. She removed the loosely draped blanket. This baby was *loved*—cloths wrapped tightly around each limb to help arms and legs grow straight and strong. Clean

skin, well-fitting tunic.

Left here and not with Apollo. Why? Did the mother desire that a worshipper of Athena claim the babe?

Was this infant deformed in some way? Apphia unwound the cloths and ran her hands down legs and arms, each firm and strong. Ten fingers. Ten toes. Bright, tear-filled eyes.

The babe was a girl.

Apphia slipped one hand under her trembling head, and the other under the baby's back. She scooped her up and held her close, her head in the crook of Apphia's arm. How was it babies always smelled of heaven?

The infant squirmed and mouthed Apphia's tunic.

She must be starving.

"I'm sorry, little one. I can't help you with that." She looked around. Was anyone coming to claim this baby? Would the father change his mind?

Holding the infant close, she stood and scanned the inside of the temple but found no one. She hurried down the steps again and scanned the agora. Deserted. Unsurprising, since everyone should be at home preparing to share the evening meal. "Let's go home and I'll try to find something for you to drink."

But how long could she keep the baby?

Tata, as always, would be quick to grant her anything that brought her some happiness.

Her *bratar* certainly wouldn't be and he would make his feelings known. Loudly. But thank the goddess, her brother didn't have the final say. For now.

She rushed home and tiptoed up to the the door of the fullery, pausing, ears cocked for any sound.

The scent of barley stew wafted onto the street, but she heard nothing. The silence meant the workers had been dismissed, and the family had retired to their private spaces upstairs, waiting to eat. She hurried to the wooden steps behind the tablinum and climbed to the second floor.

Tata waited patiently at the table and his eyes grew wide when he glanced up at her. "Is that one of Midasia's?"

"No." She chuckled. Midasia could barely keep up with all her children. How could anyone expect Tata to? "She's mine."

"Now I know I'm getting forgetful, but I think even I would remember a wedding and pregnancy." He grinned.

"I found her. At Athena's temple." She sucked in a breath. "And I'm keeping her."

She really had no business telling Tata what she intended to do. She should be asking. But she would do anything to keep this baby.

He smiled. "Let me hold her." He held his arms out, and she placed the infant in his arms. The joy on his face brought pride to her heart. Benios showed no interest in marriage and children, and though she had longed to make Tata a grandfather, it had not happened during her short marriage.

"She's beautiful," he whispered. He glanced up, his eyes moist. "Almost as beautiful as you."

If her life ended right now, she would die elated.

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Her joy was short-lived. Apphia ducked as a clay cup sailed past her shoulder, shattering on the wall behind her. Shards of pottery bounced off her back.

"Take her back!" Benios's face was scarlet with rage.

She'd known her brother's reaction would be bad, but not this bad. He'd waited until Tata left to deliver some clean clothes to one of their best customers before attacking her. The newborn babe in her arms cried, and Apphia snuggled her closer to her heart.

Benios stepped closer. "Put her *back* where you *found* her!" His voice was a low growl.

Apphia straightened her back. "I will not." She resisted matching his anger, though how wise was it to defy him? Some day, perhaps very soon, Tata would no longer be able to run the fullery, and Benios would hold all authority over it—and over her.

"She won't cost us anything, Benios. Some milk, and you know we have plenty of that. She won't take any of the precious coins you are hoarding."

Surprise cloaked his face. Apparently he'd not been aware she knew of his stash of silver.

He stepped closer. "Then she will be our slave."

“She will not!” Apphia twisted away from him, shielding the babe from his view, as though she could keep his rage from hurting either of them.

“She is an *exposita*! She is obviously deficient in some way, or she wouldn’t have been abandoned on the temple steps.”

“It could be just because she was a girl, and her tata wanted a boy,” she mumbled.

He smirked. “As I said, *deficient*.”

Apphia glared. *You need my help because you cannot keep track of our expenses well enough to ensure we make a profit, yet I am deficient?*

“She is *not* deficient. She’s absolutely perfect. There isn’t a thing wrong with her. She’s just unwanted.” And who better to take care of her than another rejected female?

He stomped away, then whirled back around. “She can stay. *For now*. But *you* take care of her then. And keep her from waking me up at night. There’s a reason there have never been babies in this house.” He stormed out through the arched doorway.

“Shhhh.” Apphia patted the infant’s back and tried to soothe her. But a soft voice was not going to fill her empty belly.

Who had she seen using a clay feeding cup? She sorted through her memories, trying to attach the image to a name, to a house.

Midasia. Of course. She leaned the baby’s head away from her shoulder. “Shall we go see Midi, baby?”

She ducked out the door and headed east down the stone street that lay straight as an arrow. “I can’t keep calling you ‘baby,’ though, can I?” She needed a name. A strong name. An ancient one, like her own. “What about Kaliya?” She pondered it a moment then smiled. “I like that.”

The door of Midi’s house stood open, inviting the spring air. The noise emanating from inside told Phia the evening meal was not yet on the table. Kids ran from one room to another, gleeful and laughing.

For once, the noise did not make Phia wince. She took one step inside. “Midi?”

Her friend kept her focus on the pot on the fire. “Just a moment.” She dumped several handfuls of crushed grain into the pot to thicken the stew and gave it a vigorous stir before she stood. Her mouth dropped open. “Did I sleep for a year? Who is this?” She brightened and neared them, rubbing a hand over the baby’s head.

“Ummm, I found her.”

“You found her? She is an *exposita*? What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing. She’s just female, I guess.”

Midi shook her head. “That’s enough for many.”

“I came to see if you have a drinking cup I can borrow for her.”

“Of course.” Midi spun around and disappeared into the room of her youngest children. She returned with a pottery cup shaped like a pear, with a tiny spout near the bottom.

Phia studied the cup, designed so it could be held upright but still allow milk to flow out the spout at the bottom edge. “And I can just put some milk in it?” She’d seen her friend use it countless times but had never paid much attention to the specifics.

Midi grimaced. “Yes, but it’s usually used for older children, to give them diluted porridge when they need more than milk. I don’t know how she’ll do with it.”

“Well, let’s try. Do you have any milk?”

Midi made a sour face.

“Not *yours*. From a sheep.”

“Sure.” She chuckled and disappeared again, returning with a terra cotta cup the size of a child’s fist. She poured a bit of the milk from it into the drinking cup.

Apphia lowered herself to a stool, avoiding the fire’s heat. She positioned Kaliya in one arm, and held the cup to the fussy baby’s lips. Her mouth open, she tried to grasp the hard nipple as she must have her mother. Frustrated, she balled up her fists and wailed.

Panic began to rise. “It’s not working.” What would she do now? Hire a wet-nurse?

“Give her a moment. Sucking is instinctive, not learned. She’ll figure it out.”

Apphia tried again, but Kaliya continued to fail. Apphia’s throat burned, signaling salty tears were soon to follow. She had to figure something out. She would not lose this baby.

“Tip it enough to let a drop of milk fall into her mouth,” Midasia said.

That should be easy. Her mouth was wide open, an ear-splitting howl emanating. Somehow Apphia managed to get a few drops of the white liquid onto her tongue.

Kaliya’s tongue darted in and out of her mouth as the crying dissipated.

Apphia tipped it again. Kaliya allowed milk to fill her mouth and swallowed. Soon she closed her mouth around the pottery nipple and greedily sucked down the rest of the milk.

Midi held out her arms, and Apphia slipped the infant into them. Midi placed her on her shoulder and patted her back. “But why did you pick her up?”

“It may be the only way I will ever have a family.”

“Oh, Phia. Don’t be ridiculous. You have time.”

“You know I don’t.” She kept her voice firm but kind. “I’m over twenty. I am a childless widow. No one will take the chance I would never bear a son. And Benios will not offer a large enough dowry to attract one without the promise of a child.”

“Apphia, you are beautiful. You’re kind, and generous, and”—she glanced around, grinning—“smarter than most men I know.”

“Perhaps. But you know me. You’ve been my friend since before we could walk. Most men won’t look beyond my past.” She retrieved the babe from her friend’s arms. “Anyway, she’s mine now. And I won’t let anyone hurt her ever again.”