



KATHRYN LASKY

*The Last Girls of*  
**POMPEII**

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*Viking*

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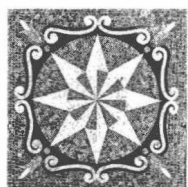
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# One



IT WAS TOO EARLY FOR THE BIRDS. So why had she awakened? Except for the soft, rhythmic breathing of her slave, Sura, sleeping at the foot of her bed, everything was quiet. Silence lay over the villa as thickly as the August heat. Nothing was stirring. But Julia was sure something had. Had she heard some tiny noise? Or perhaps she had felt something. Her eyes, now accustomed to the darkness of the room, fell on the water glass beside her bed. That was it! An infinitesimally small rattling sound. And yes, the surface of the water in the glass was trembling ever so slightly. She watched it closely for several seconds. What made it do this? Why, in the middle of the night, would water begin to shiver? Throughout this long and torturously hot summer, there had been unexplained tremors—slight ones that came up through the tiles of the floor or the paving stones of the street. Her mother claimed that the gods were angry.

No, not the gods, just one in particular, Venus, the deity of the household of Cornelius Petreius and of the entire city.

Quietly Julia slipped her feet to the floor and walked across the tile, which felt cool compared to the air. She did not want to wake Sura. She opened one shutter just a bit and peered down into the garden. The slender columns surrounding it were bathed in moonlight. To Julia they looked like spirits, fragile and feminine like the young virgin priestesses who guarded the shrine of the vestals. There was a long rectangular pool filled by the water that flowed from the Venus fountain at the head of the garden. One of Rome's finest sculptors had made it for her mother and father when they were first married and moved into the villa. The figure was that of the goddess reclining on a large shell that overflowed gently with water. Her mother had insisted that the sound of water must be quiet. "Water must slip and not spout," Herminia Petreia had pronounced.

"What are you looking at?" a voice from behind Julia asked.

It was her slave, Sura. Julia instinctively used her right hand to grab her left arm, which was much smaller and hung limply at her side. This was just a startled reaction, not embarrassment. Sura had known her since birth. If anyone was accustomed to seeing the withered arm, it was Sura.

"Sura. I thought I was so quiet. I didn't mean to disturb you."

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“It is too hot to sleep, mistress.”

“I know.” Then Julia nodded her head toward the pool. “Look how the reflection of the moon in the water trembles on this windless night.”

“Hmm,” was all that Sura said as she leaned forward to look. Her straight black hair swung like a curtain over one eye. So long and so straight. Julia envied her hair. She knew it was ridiculous to envy a slave, but she did nonetheless. Sura, at almost sixteen, was four years older than Julia. She was very pretty, and her eyes, like those of so many people from Thrace, were a soft green with flecks of gold.

Julia’s hair was curly and uncontrollable. Her best feature were her dark eyes, which at first glance seemed almost black but were actually the deep blue of a night sky. Her worst feature, of course, was her left arm. Nearly as small as a baby’s, it had never grown properly. But even though it was weak with barely any muscle, Julia had learned to do everything any girl her age could do with two arms. She could write and draw and even pluck the strings of a lyre. If it was just a question of usefulness, the arm wouldn’t matter. But it wasn’t as simple as that. The arm was not just different. It was ugly, and people stared at it. One hundred years ago, in the time of the Republic, she knew a deformity like hers had been referred to as the Curse of Venus. Julia was never exactly sure why a goddess of beauty would do such a thing, curse a family that worshipped her. She was grateful that her parents had never used this term in front

of her. It was awful to be thought of as a cursed creature; it made her feel slightly less than human. Although it was hard to have been born flawed into a family that worshipped the goddess of beauty, Julia had wondered countless times what would have happened if she had been born during the harsher times of the Republic or to another family, one not so accepting of a deformity.

Once when she was very young, she had wondered aloud about this, and her older sister Cornelia had replied in the voice of great authority that she seemed to have been born with. "You would have been put out on a hillside to die. Simple as that!" Unfortunately for Cornelia, their mother had overheard. In a flash she had raced into the garden and delivered a solid slap to Cornelia, before folding Julia into her arms and nearly smothering her with kisses. Julia remembered Cornelia's stunned face. Julia was stunned, too. It was the only time Herminia had ever slapped one of her daughters.

But Julia knew that there was a great deal of truth in what Cornelia had said. Although times had changed, even now people tended to think of those born with deformities as something separate and apart. Not marriageable, for the gods would forbid that such flaws should be perpetuated. Ironically, however, once a deformed creature was brought into the world, people often believed that its defects gave special powers, sometimes frightening ones—especially if the deformed child was female. This belief was one reason

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why so many such infant girls were abandoned and left to die. Those who survived often became either priestesses or seers who with their powers could glimpse the future, interpret the past, and decipher the many hidden messages, signs, and omens that wove through the daily lives of ordinary people.

"It's true, Mother, you know it," Cornelia had protested, touching the red mark on her face. "She would have been left to die."

Herminia glared at her oldest daughter and nervously fingered the amber pendant of Cupid that hung around her neck. This was a habit she had when she grew agitated, as if she were invoking this god of love, the son of Venus, to come to her, be it to handle an unruly child or a stubborn husband. "If you don't want me to beat you like a slave, Cornelia, you shall never say such a thing again."

From her mother's arms, Julia had peeked triumphantly at Cornelia. Seeing Cornelia slapped was almost worth being born with a withered arm, she thought briefly. Almost, but not really.

Sura now touched her mistress's shoulder. "You must get to bed. Your mother plans to leave early tomorrow."

"Oh, no! The augurs again! Really?" Julia sighed. "Sura, my mother has had enough chickens slaughtered to feed everyone in Pompeii. All because of this stupid wedding date."

"And they all say the same thing," Sura sighed. "That Cornelia shouldn't get married on the twenty-fourth of August."

"Of course, it's *Mundus Patet*," said Julia. That was the day that the doors to the underworld were thought to open.

"But Cornelia says that's old fashioned," said Sura.

"Why doesn't Mother just say to Cornelia, 'Old fashioned or not, you're not getting married on that day'?"

Sura rolled her eyes. "Just say no to Cornelia? Tell her no wedding on that date? To delay? If they were to delay, the wedding couldn't be held until late September. Your father is going to visit the lumber merchants on August twenty-fifth and is away through most of September. There is no way Cornelia is waiting that long. And earlier is out of the question because of the *Vulcanalia* Festival on the twenty-third. No one ever gets married on a major festival. As it is, the twenty-fourth day of August is barely a month after Flavia's wedding. The weavers were very clear that they could not finish the wedding cloth any earlier. They had hardly removed the linen for Flavia's *tunica recta* from the loom. So earlier is out of the question, and later is too late for Cornelia's taste."

"Yes, I guess you're right, saying no to Cornelia is never easy."

Julia knew it was easier for her mother to keep dragging around to one more augur, one more priest, one more seer,

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than to say no to Cornelia. Cornelia could not abide the fact that her younger sister Flavia had been married before she was, even if it had only been a month ago. Julia herself felt that she had heard enough about weddings during this incredibly hot summer to last her a lifetime. Not only was wedding talk boring but weddings were as well. Too many strangers in the villa, business friends of her father's, and since last winter when her father had been elected a magistrate, there were even more people that had to be invited.

"You'd better go to bed now so you will be fresh for morning."

"I have an idea!" Julia said suddenly, her dark eyes gleaming. "Let's go swimming."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. We'll be very quiet. No splashes. It's so hot. Please? Remember we did it last summer? And this summer is much, much hotter than last summer."

Sura cocked her head as if she was thinking about it. "Well, all right, but if we get caught, you know who gets punished for being in the pool."

"I'll take the blame, I promise."

Sura laughed. "You always say that, Julia, and you know it's impossible. Slaves are here to take the blame. That is the way this world works. You might as well try to stop the sun from rising and setting, or the . . ." Sura searched for another example. ". . . or the tides from rising and falling."

"Well, it won't be that way when I grow up. Then I'll

give you your cap.” Julia touched Sura’s hair and tried to imagine what she would look like in one of the red freedom caps that freed slaves wore.

“But then, mistress Julia, who will take care of you, comb the snarls from your hair, rub your arm when it gets sore, take you to all the places in the city that your mother never would? Who will do that?”

“Well, you will. You see, when I’m grown up, I shall ask for all the money Mother and Father didn’t spend on a dowry for me and then I’ll set you free and pay you with that.” Julia giggled. She knew it sounded silly, but it wasn’t. Someday she would have a house of her own. She might even have a business of her own. It was not unheard of. Her mother had a friend, Claudia Plautia, who had never married and had inherited her father’s wine brokerage business. There were no sons in Cornelius Petreius’s family to inherit, just as there had been none in the family of Claudia Plautia. Herminia used to visit Claudia all the time, but now for some reason not as frequently. But right now Julia was too hot to think that far into the future.

“Let’s go swimming,” she said. “And if we keep our nightclothes on, they will be all wet and keep us cool as we sleep.”

“Maybe,” Sura said doubtfully. “But you must promise me you’ll go to bed right away after we swim.”

“I will. I promise.”

The two girls padded softly along the loggia that led to

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the stairs. Then, still walking softly, they passed through the summer dining room into the large garden. Statues were scattered throughout, and the white roses of which her mother was so proud glowed like ruffled moons on their trellises. Apricot trees lined the north wall, and the small orange fruits nestled in the darkness of the night. Julia went over to a tree and with a quick twist of her wrist plucked one and then a second.

"Here," she said, handing an apricot to Sura. They bit into the sweet flesh.

"Don't leave the pit in the pool," Sura said as Julia put her foot on the first shallow pool step. "Give it to me. I'll put it in this urn." An elaborately carved urn spilling with small white flowers stood at the top of the steps that descended into the pool.

The water was barely cool, but it still felt good. Julia loved the feeling of her tunic floating out from her. She loosened her long curly hair and lay back in the water. The locket around her neck bobbed. She touched it lightly. It was a special amulet called a bulla, a symbol of childhood worn by both boys and girls to ward off evil luck. Boys continued to wear theirs until they became men at about age fifteen. But every girl wore hers until she married. Julia's bulla, like that of her sisters, contained "the lock of Venus," a curl clipped from her mother's head on the day of Julia's birth and tucked into the bronze locket. She wondered what her mother had thought on the day of Julia's birth

when she saw the withered arm and put the bulla on its chain around her neck. Did she think any worse luck could befall her child than already had? Since the worst in one sense had already happened to Julia, what could the bulla protect her from?

Sura swam up beside her. "Feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Wonderful," Julia said. "I wish I could invent a bed that could be used in the water. Just think of it, Sura, how nice it would feel to sleep in this pool all night." She giggled at the thought.

"Shhhh," Sura cautioned her.

Julia put her feet on the bottom of the pool. She looked down at the tunic that radiated around her. "Look! Aren't I just like a flower with petals now?"

On the water's surface, stars floated in great drifts, and through the branches of the trees overhead chips of moonlight like white moths fluttered in the night. Pushing off with her feet, Julia very quietly began swimming toward the reclining Venus on her half shell. She stopped just under the lip of the shell and put her head back, letting the water from the fountain pour over her face. *Am I an offense to you, Venus, goddess of our family? Were you punishing my mother when I was born? Why?*

Though she would never admit it to her parents, Julia, of all her family members, was the most skeptical of the gods and all the superstitions surrounding their religion. She believed like her favorite cousin Marcus, who was

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fourteen, that there could be other laws at work. As Marcus had said to her one day, "It's all nonsense. These augurs make stupid pronouncements like if lightning strikes a temple it's a sign from the gods. But there is metal on the roof of the temple of Jupiter and not on the temple of Apollo, which is practically next door. So couldn't that make a difference?"

Julia had thought about what he said. Marcus was smart, very smart. He had read most of the books of Pliny the Elder, the great scholar who wrote about almost everything one could think of.

"There's probably some simple explanation for why your arm is that way," Marcus had said.

"Like what?" Julia had asked.

"Well, maybe you were upside down or something for a while in your mother's womb."

Julia didn't know if there was a simple explanation, but she certainly did not think it was as simple as a punishment from Venus.

Now she hoisted herself onto the shell and looked at the figure of Venus. The sculptor had taken the most time with the goddess's body. He had rushed the face, and it seemed rather blank to Julia. She touched the stone chin. *It's just stone*, she thought. *Stone and some artist's dream of a beautiful woman*. Julia had a sudden thought. If indeed there were a goddess Venus, with passions and feelings, capable of jealousy and love, might she not be angry that this artist had

rushed the sculpting of her face, leaving her to look dull and slightly stupid? And if so, wouldn't she take vengeance on the artist, not on the client's family? A very interesting question. She must remember to discuss it with Marcus. He would be coming for dinner the next evening.

Even in a short time out of the water she had grown hot. So she slipped back in and resumed floating on her back. Sura drifted next to her and studied the stars overhead. She often wondered about the stars. Did the same stars drift over Thrace? She could barely remember the time when she and her brother had been captured and sold into slavery. The memories of her mother and father were so dim. Their village, the farm—she remembered a bed that she had shared with her grandmother. But she didn't really remember her grandmother. However, she must have loved them all, her parents and grandmother. She had tried to get her older brother, Bryzos, who was captured with her and trained as a gladiator, to tell her stories. But he didn't like to. It made him sad, he said. *I can't even be sad*, Sura thought, *because I can't remember enough to be sad*. And that, she knew, in its own odd way, was the saddest thing of all. And yet she felt nothing. It was hard to miss something if you couldn't remember it. Julia floated closer to Sura, and their hands touched in the water.

What Sura would truly miss, if they were ever separated, would be Julia. Julia and her family had marked the beginning of Sura's life. Her earliest real memories went

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back to the time of Julia's birth. She remembered everyone crying because the baby had been born with an ugly arm. But to Sura she was perfect. And taking care of Julia made her feel important. Even though she was barely five years old at the time of Julia's birth, Sura and the wet nurse were the only ones who could quell the baby's crying. And when Julia was weaned, she and Sura grew even closer. Sura looked over at her now.

"This is fun," Julia said. "I love doing things when everyone else is asleep. It's like a spice. It adds flavor to whatever you're doing." Sura chuckled softly. Julia had such an original way of saying things.

"But it's time to go in. You have an early day tomorrow," Sura said.

"Just one more minute."

"You promised, Julia!" Sura said, trying not to raise her voice.

"All right." Julia swam toward the stairs. "I still don't see why I have to go along to yet another augur."

"Your mother wants you there."

"Papa doesn't go."

"He can't. He has his shipping business to run, and now that he's a magistrate, he has to go to the forum. Come on to bed. I will fan you," Sura urged.

"I don't think Mother likes it that he is a magistrate."

"Now why would that be? It's a great honor."

"You have to spend money when you're a magistrate—