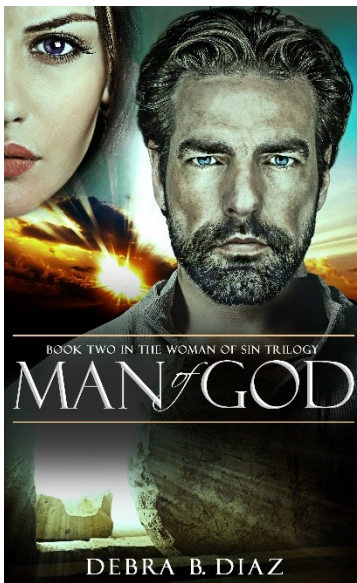
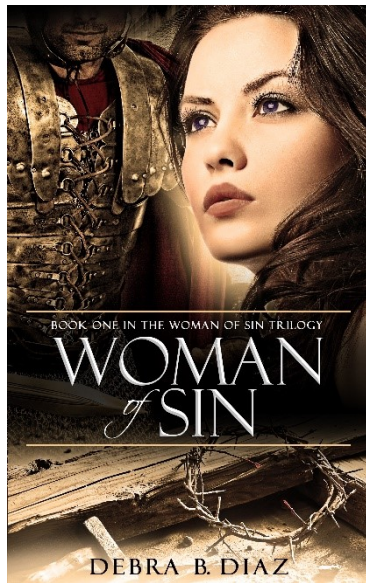


READ EXCERPTS FROM:



(For chapter beginnings, see the “Look Inside” tab on the Amazon website for each book.)

WOMAN OF SIN

...The legate entered the room at that moment, and since he was looking at Lucius it seemed obvious he had heard the remarks. He still wore his uniform. He apologized for his tardiness, handed his mantle to one of the serving boys, and went to an ornate table in the corner to wash his hands.

“Isn’t that so, Paulus?” Lucius said, smiling coldly.

“Is it true that I hate politics? As much as I hate hypocrisy and pandering and unctuous speeches. Forgive me, Senators Laurentius and Camillus,” he added dryly. “The statement is general and not directed toward you.” He pointedly did not mention Senator Eustacius, who sat staring at him without comprehension.

“About the slaves, I mean.”

Paulus wiped his hands and eyed his stepbrother with mock gravity. “There are certain aspects of slavery I find objectionable, but a mass freeing of slaves would achieve nothing but chaos. Especially since they outnumber their owners twice over.”

Decius looked puzzled. “See here, Paulus, we couldn’t survive without—”

“Slaves,” muttered Magnus thickly, having partaken of the wine almost as liberally as his father. “And where is that vixen you bought the other day? Kicked me in the head, then before I could stand up straight she was gone.”

Paulus stood perfectly still, having just noticed Magnus, for that one had been slumping over his plate and was hidden by his father’s bulk. Everyone seemed to think they had misunderstood the remark. It was unfortunate that Eustacius chose that moment to demand more wine. Alysia had completely forgotten her task until he thumped his couch and bawled, “I say, more wine! Is your slave deaf?”

The dining room steward, a stout Thracian who had remained almost invisible all evening, suddenly froze and looked terrified. Selena grew pale and gestured at Alysia, whispering, “More wine for everyone.”

Magnus giggled. “Father’s beastly drunk!”

Alysia moved forward, trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible. But Magnus was peering at her, his eyes squinted, his nose wrinkled and his mouth open, and she knew with a sinking heart what he was about to say.

“That’s her—by Jupiter! She kicked me in the face!”

“Alysia?” Antonia cried. “When?”

“At the sale!” Magnus hiccupped and continued, “I hope you gave her a wall—walloping Legate!”

Alysia paused, but Selena nervously waved her on and she began to pour the wine. Her hands shook, and as she filled Magnus’ cup the wine splashed against the sides of the cup and onto Magnus’ bejeweled fingers. He swore and shook them, flinging droplets across the table, then rose unsteadily from his couch and whipped his hand across her cheek.

Burning tears rushed into her eyes. Amid a chorus of horrified gasps, she tossed the entire contents of the pitcher into Magnus’ face. Magnus dropped back into his seat, spluttered, and shook his head like a wet dog. He grabbed Alysia’s hand in a surprisingly strong grip, twisting it until she cried out and fell across the table before him. She had a blurred glimpse of his face coming toward her, and to her disgusted amazement he pressed a wet, loathsome bite upon her throat. She clenched both her fists and was about to send them flying against his ears when he was yanked abruptly from his couch. When Magnus could focus his eyes, he saw the legate towering over him with a dark scowl on his face.

“This is my mother’s house,” Paulus said evenly. “It is a house of honor, and you have assaulted the property of my sister.”

It was too much for Magnus. His eyes rolled in his head and he slid slowly to the floor where he sprawled atop a pool of wine. His father had preceded him in slumber, having dropped his head

into his plate immediately after demanding the refilling of his cup. His snores punctuated the music, which—after an uncertain pause—played serenely on.

Everyone stared at Paulus, who said with a heavy inflection of mock politeness, “I’ll leave him now to the ministrations of those who love him.” His eyes found Alysia, who had risen to a sitting position on the table. “Come with me.”

Lucius began, “The slave will have to answer for—”

The legate didn’t wait to hear the rest, striding from the room with Alysia reluctantly following behind. They crossed the atrium and entered one of the reception rooms at the front of the house. Lamps set into the walls burned dimly. Paulus turned and she saw that he was angry, but she couldn’t tell if his wrath was directed toward her, or Magnus.

“Slaves have been killed for lesser offenses,” he said. “Perhaps you have a death wish?”

“Did you think I should have stood there while that—that jackal beat me? He’s not even human, he’s an animal!”

“From the moment he struck you, you should have assumed complete submission. I would have stopped him from doing any further harm.”

“How was I to know that? Would you stoop to defend a slave?”

“You have complicated a situation that was already—complicated.”

“Through no fault of my own!”

“You should not have done what you did.”

Alysia caught her breath and tried to speak calmly. “So I am to remain still, and do absolutely nothing, and allow myself to be abused or even killed?”

“As long as there is someone to defend you, yes. As I said before, slaves have been killed for doing less. In this household, abuse of slaves is not tolerated.”

Alysia turned away from him, overwhelmed with a feeling of despair. “You don’t understand how—” she began, but no more words would come. It didn’t matter. She was only a piece of property to him, and he must protect his property. She said more clearly, “Perhaps I do have a death wish.”

“I suppose I don’t understand,” he said quietly. “But I cannot spend the rest of my life interceding in your behalf. Why do you inflict this misery on yourself? Why not accept what has happened? As a slave you have great value, and will be treated well. If you were free, where would you go? I happen to know that you have no family left. Have you any means to support yourself?”

“Do you know what happened to my father?” she asked suddenly.

He looked into her eyes. “I only know that he’s dead,” he answered in a low voice. “Felix had it written in his records. I don’t know—how. He was accused of treason.”

“A false accusation! My father was a good man.”

“Good men often die these days. I can only say I’m sorry.”

She turned her back and felt his hand on her arm.

“Alysia.”

When she heard him speak her name, it was almost as if he’d done something kind and intimate, and it was too much to bear. She would rather he stayed angry with her! She refused to look at him and felt his hand tighten on her arm.

“Paulus?” A voice from the doorway broke the silence.

He turned slowly. “Come in, Megara. Alysia, go to my sister. She probably thinks I’ve killed you by now.”

“My dear husband, you did not look as if you were going to kill her,” Megara said flatly, giving Alysia a cold stare as she hurried out.

Alysia paused outside the door. She was frightened now, as the folly of what she had done began to be clear to her. She could be stripped and flogged, or worse, as a lesson to all. Listening hard, she heard only a murmur of voices. Down the long hallway, she could hear Magnus’ wife crying and the rumble of Decius’ deep voice speaking in conciliatory tones. She couldn’t go back there—someone else could pour the wine, and Selena didn’t need her. She went upstairs to Selena’s room and entered her own tiny chamber.

She sat for a long time staring at the wall. At last she heard Selena come in, moving about and then getting into bed and growing quiet. The fact that she didn’t say anything seemed far more ominous than had she flown in with screams and remonstrations...

MAN OF GOD

...“Tell me, Uncle,” the emperor said one day, pretending to yawn with boredom, “what do you think of this new sect that calls itself the Nazarenes, or whatever it is?”

Claudius’ mouth sometimes worked and twitched a few times before anything came out. “I—I don’t think anything about them. After all, they worship another god instead of those of Rome and your Divine Maj—majesty. It is wise to ignore them and most likely the whole thing will die out eventu—ally.”

Caligula rose from his marble, cushioned bench and strode to the edge of the palace balcony where he struck his habitual pose, bending a knee, grasping the finely embroidered edge of his toga. He cocked his head and rolled his eyes thoughtfully.

“I don’t know about that. Look at the Jews. They worship another god and we have very graciously allowed them to do so. Perhaps that has been a mistake. I can only imagine what they would do if I

required them to bow down to me. In fact, I decided some time ago I would put a statue of myself in their Temple over in Jerusalem.”

Claudius tried to conceal his horror. “It wouldn’t be worth the consequences, your Majesty. You know they would fight to the death before allowing such a sac—that is, what they consider a sacrilege, my Lord Emp—orer.”

“That’s just the problem, Uncle,” Caligula said softly, with small pouches puffing out on either side of his mouth. “And the Nazarenes are just as stubborn. They worship the same god, I hear, but somehow this dead Jew is mixed into it and they think he is on equal footing with their god. I don’t like it. It doesn’t make sense. It would be better all the way round if everybody stopped this twaddle, and admitted there is only one Lord, one King!”

“One Lord, One King,” Claudius intoned. It was Caligula’s favorite appellation for himself.

Caligula turned and strode toward his uncle, who sat beside a small potted tree and seemed to be trying to hide behind it. “I am going to call for an assembly. Rulers and chieftains from all over the empire. We shall see how widespread this problem is and decide how to deal with it. Well, actually, I have other reasons for this gathering, but that one will do well enough. And now for that other matter that concerns me. You remember Paulus Valerius, do you not?”

“We met several times, years ago. He was always k—kind to me.”

“Kindness is weakness, Uncle! Paulus Valerius Maximus is not weak. It was pity for your wretchedness you saw. Tiberius was most anxious to find him, before his—death. And I have often wondered what became of Valerius. He has recently been seen here in Rome! Someone reported it to me. But we can’t find him. When we do, you can be sure we will have some questions for him to answer.”

“Questions?” Claudius repeated, reluctantly.

“Yes, questions!” The emperor’s eyes became fixed; his tone softened again. “Such as, why did he abandon his appointment and leave Jerusalem? Why has he remained hidden these seven years? And where is that woman he supposedly rescued, the one who killed Magnus Eustacius?”

“Why such an interest in Valerius?” Claudius was afraid to ask but knew his nephew expected it.

“I liked him,” Caligula almost whispered. “He reminds me of—someone. Why is his statue not in the Forum of Augustus?”

“He never p—permitted it, your Majesty. It seemed he lacked the pa-patience for such things.”

“I want him as head of my bodyguard. Flavius will have to take second place.”

Claudius didn’t think that was a good idea. “Even though he helped the woman escape? Even considering he has broken his oath and is no longer a soldier?”

“We shall see about that. As for the woman—well, who cares about Eustacius! He was a bumbling sot, like his father. But he was an aristocrat, after all—therefore, she must die.”

Caligula jerked his head around as if listening, then turned back to his uncle who now sat with alarm bells ringing in his own head. “Jupiter has spoken,” the emperor declared, with a familiar, wide-eyed expression that Claudius could never decide was comical, or one from which to flee as speedily as possible.

“We will start a search for the woman. We have a description; she is quite a beauty, I’ve heard. Indigo eyes, hair like a black waterfall. Whoever said that is a poet! She’s Greek, an aristocrat herself, before her father was executed and she was sent off as a slave. I am certain that when we find her, we will find Valerius as well. And both of their fates will be up to me—not to the dead Nazarene, not to the unknown God, and not even to Jupiter. Don’t tell Jupiter I said that, Uncle. One Lord, One King!”

CHILD OF THE KING

...The faintest hint of red glowed in the western sky as Metellus approached the spot of land to which Daphne had directed him. He had to cross a large field, step over rocks and in and out of small gullies, until he came near to where he thought Rachel would be. Just before pushing through a thicket of shrubbery, he heard a sound that made him stop and stand perfectly still.

She was singing. She had a clear and lyrical voice—but its tone was sad and haunting, as was the melody she strummed on a lyre. Beginning to push through the tall shrubs, he could see her sitting on a rock, the lyre on her lap, and she was looking up at the village that crowned the opposite hill. There were a few sheep scattered here and there, and two lambs lying next to each other near the edge of the copse in which she sat.

Before he could move she stopped abruptly, and barely seeming to stir, set the lyre on the ground next to her. At the same time she grabbed something with her hand. Reaching behind with her other hand she drew something forward, and he saw with astonishment that she held a bow and arrow. His eyes moved swiftly over the landscape near her and he saw the wolf, low in the bushes, its glowing eyes on the two resting lambs.

His hand went to his side and he swore silently—he had left his sword behind. He made a move forward, but when he saw Rachel, instinct made him stop and stand motionless.

She had risen, one foot on a smaller rock before her, and with a perfect stance that astonished him still further, took careful aim. The sheep had begun to move restlessly, sensing danger, and just when Metellus thought the wolf was about to pounce, Rachel released her arrow. It pierced the animal’s neck, causing it to spasm and almost leap in the air before it dropped in an ungainly heap upon the ground.

She reached swiftly for another arrow and stood poised to let it fly should the wolf get back on its feet. He waited a moment, and the word escaped him before he thought: “Diana!”

He had spoken under his breath, but she heard him. She whirled to face him as he stepped through the bushes, the arrow now aimed at his heart. As recognition dawned, she lowered the bow slightly and glared at him.

“Do not ever call me that name again!”

“I’m sorry.” He half-raised his arms at his sides. “Please forgive my pagan ways, damsel. You looked exactly like her—goddess of the hunt.”

He was close to her now, and smiling. She noticed that the indentations on either side of his face deepened when he smiled, making it almost impossible not to return it, but she frowned instead.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked, when she did not move.

Grudgingly, she let down her bow and arrow. “Not yet. I suppose you’ve come to collect me, and I’m not leaving until the shepherd returns.”

“Then I’ll wait with you. Shall we sit?” He took a seat on a ledge jutting off the crag, opposite her own rock. It was almost dark. The sheep, momentarily alarmed by the brief appearance of the wolf, had already forgotten and were beginning to flock together as if also waiting for the return of the shepherd.

“I thought abandoning sheep was punishable by death,” he said, watching as she settled herself, keeping the bow and her quiver of arrows within reach.

“I don’t know about that,” she answered, “but it is very strange that Reuben hasn’t come for them by now.”

“Should we go and look for him? You don’t suppose the wolf—”

Rachel shook her head. “Oh, no. He will be here.”

Metellus crossed his arms. He could barely see her now but he sensed her uneasiness. He didn’t know if it was because of him, or the wolf. Probably, to her, one was as bad as the other.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked, gesturing toward her weapon.

She looked down at them. It was a long time before she answered in a small voice, “My father taught me.”

“He taught you well. You must have been practicing a great deal.”

She gave a little shrug. “You see, I don’t need your protection. I can take care of myself.”

“Nevertheless, you shall have me. Maybe you will see fit to save my hide should the occasion arise.”

She had to smile at so unlikely an occurrence. “Or put an arrow in your hide—should the occasion arise.”

“I assure you, I have the greatest respect for a marksman of your prowess. I promise not to give you the opportunity to display it.”

Rachel said nothing. Metellus uncrossed his arms, placed his hands on either side of the ledge, and leaned slightly forward.

“You really need have no fear of me,” he said quietly. “I give you my word. Even your guardians trust me.”

“And what have you done to earn it, except talk?”

“I was prepared to wrestle that wolf to the ground, at risk of grievous injury to myself, to save you! For what more can you ask?”

“I suppose the emperor would put you to death if something should happen to me.”

“Claudius is no Caligula. But I do take my duties seriously.”

He thought that she turned her face toward him, but then her voice sounded distant and muffled. “As you say.”

Something moved among the distant trees, and they both stood—it came crashing through the undergrowth and resolved itself into the missing shepherd.

He wore a short robe and carried a staff in his hands. He was panting heavily. “I’m sorry, Rachel. You know how close my house is—I was to be gone only a moment, but my mother is ill.”

“Then you should go to her. I’ll stay here, until Simon can get someone else.”

“My sister is with her now. Is everything all right?”

“Yes—but watch out for wolves.”

“Have you seen one? We don’t get many around here.”

“He’s over there,” Metellus told him, gesturing. “With an arrow in his throat.”

Reuben glanced at Rachel’s bow. “Good for you! Thank God you were here.”

“Goodnight, Reuben.”

Rachel reached for the quiver of arrows as Metellus picked up the lyre. She waited for him to precede her, but he said, “After you. Please.”

Hitching up the edge of her gown, she began to make her way over the uneven and rocky ground. She stumbled once and the Roman was instantly beside her, his hand on her elbow.

She shook it off and hurried away from him. He let her go but kept her in sight until they came to the house, whereupon he heard her skitter inside and the sound of a door slamming. He noticed Daphne standing in the shadowed hallway, watching...