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# CHAPTER 1

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*If this has anything to do with Hector, I will kill that spawn of a slave's whore.*

Alexius's gaze ventured down the night-filled street littered with garbage and trash shifting over the stones. A brisk February wind whipped as he wondered how he was supposed to find his betrothed out here. Not an easy task in Herculaneum, even during the day.

His mind played through the million places where she could have been dragged. Sons of Dis and Jupiter, he did not want to do this. Messalina could be anywhere.

He could not believe that Didius had actually climbed over the dividing wall between their houses to beg him to go find Messi. "Please, before the dominus returns home, or he'll beat me and sell me. I am too old, young dominus. Please."

It was not like Messalina's father to threaten to beat an old trusted slave. However, it was not like Messalina to sneak out either. There was no logical reason for her to do that other than to see Hector—that interloping piece of dog dung. She knew how dangerous the streets were this late at night.

Alexius flung his legion cloak over his back and checked for his dagger in his belt. In the two years, he as tribune laticlavus to Agricola, everything about Messi had changed. The ugly duckling had become a regal swan.

However, it was just as easy to see that Messi still despised him for nicknaming her Medusa when he was a teenage fool. Something, he well deserved. Now that he was back, he was determined to do whatever it took to redeem himself in her eyes. However, he could not if she were lying dead in some alley.

Alexius stepped out of his doorway and into the shadows. Entry torches over doorways guttered in the wind. Clouds hung heavy in the evening sky, thick with the smell of rain. His mother had mentioned something about Messi being upset over her friend Rosa for not answering her letters. So maybe Messi had received word that Rosa had returned home.

Well, that was as good a place to start. All he had to do was cross the street to Balbus's house, wake up the door slave, and ask. Didius had not thought of this?

Frustration escaped with a heavy sigh as Alexius strode the twenty paces across the street to Balbus's house. After bruising his fist on the hard oak door, a pair of sleep-filled eyes appeared in the peephole.

"Is the domina Nonia Rosa present?"

“No, dominus.”

“Then, has the domina Messalina Claudia been here tonight?”

The eyes glared at him. “No. Certainly not at this hour, dominus!” The small flap snapped shut, jolting Alexius back on one leg. He stared at the closed peephole. If Messi was not there, then where in Hades was she?

Hector’s? Fury burned in his veins as he stepped from Balbus’s stoop. Footsteps sounded behind him. Alexius wheeled about, dagger drawn. The face hidden in the shadow stopped his hand.

“Fosco? What are you—?”

“You didn’t think you’re searching for the young domina alone, did you?” His personal slave joined him by the stoop.

“I guess not,” Alexius said, actually relieved to have Fosco out there with him. He let out his breath and slid the dagger back into its sheath. “You have any idea where Messi could have gone?”

Fosco shrugged. “Hector’s been banned from her house. Could she have gone to his, maybe?”

Alexius fingered the dagger’s hilt. “She had better not.” Marcus had written that Hector had been stupid enough to request her father grant him Messalina’s hand. It would be like that fucking idiot to try to steal her away. By the gods, she was his!

The night shadows lurked around their feet as he and Fosco marched toward the corner of the block. Like a guiding light, silver moonlight spotlighted the Corinthian crowns of Hector’s entry. This time Alexius let Fosco hammer on the door, setting off the guard dogs inside.

An eternity passed until the peephole opened and another set of sleep-filled eyes appeared. “Yes, dominus?”

Alexius stepped closer. “I want to speak with Hector.”

“Neither are here, dominus. Father and son remain in Rome, not to return for another week.”

Alexius studied the slave’s eyes. “Is the domina Messalina Claudia here?”

“At this hour? No!”

Alexius stepped closer. “If you are lying, I will have—”

“Jupiter’s throne, I haven’t seen her!”

Once again, the small window clipped shut, leaving Alexius staring at wood.

A sense of foreboding shrouded Alexius as he returned to the corner that led to Herculaneum’s main shopping district. Whiffs of over-cooked chowders, rank odors of ale and rotten wine assaulted the busy air. Sounds of dice tumbling from cups mingled with cheers and laughter that grew louder with each step they took toward the busy tavernas.

An odorous shadow appeared from a black alley and held up a wooden cup. “Denarius, young dominus, so I can eat today.”

“Have you seen the domina Messalina Claudia tonight?” Alexius asked the beggar.

The man drew back into the hovering darkness. “I...No. I haven’t seen her.” He glanced nervously up the street. “I haven’t seen anyone.” The bowl lifted again. “Please, I haven’t eaten for days.”

Alexius motioned to Fosco to deliver a coin. “If you do see her, find me. You will eat for a month, I assure you.”

“Yes, if I see her. Yes.” The coin dropped into the cup with a dull thud. “May the gods bless your election, young dominus.” The beggar clutched the bowl to his chest and withdrew into the darkness.

Alexius moved on. Yes, my fine election. The thought snarled through him. He had never expected to come back from Britannia to start working on his election to the Senate. He scowled into a narrow alley of angry dogs and unconscious drunks. That was not supposed to begin for at least five more years.

However, no. Balbus, his own father, together with Messi’s father, had managed to obtain Vespasian’s approval for him to run for early appointment to the Committee of Twelve. If that was not enough, they had arranged his appointment to Gaius Pomponius Beastius’s financial committee.

Alexius growled at the next dark alley as he recalled Messalina’s father boasting, “Gain Pomponius’s approval, and your appointment is done.” Never once had anyone asked him what he wanted.

Fosco approached a group of men lounging outside the taverna to ask about Messalina.

“Yes. She’s up there. I just finished fucking ‘er.”

“She’s with someone else now. You’ll have to wait your turn. Line’s a long one.”

“No she ain’t, you ass. Saw her about an hour ago. Goin’ that way.” Another drunk pointed down a narrow alley thick with smells of urine and garbage. “Or was it that way?”

“The young domina Claudia, yes. Saw her earlier. Went home, she did. One of her slaves came for her,” another assured.

Alexius studied the number of vagrants that seemed to be multiplying like hungry rats. Wanting to bash their lying faces, he scanned the filthy street for any sign of her. Female laughter, giggles, grunts, and groans plummeted down from the second stories, nothing like a struggle or rape. Thunder rumbled the ground beneath their feet.

The night patrols, the Vigils. Where were they? Not here, obviously. That was another situation that he had found himself in. The retired centurion Flaccus had been thrilled that Alexius had volunteered to act as tribune and help patrol Herculaneum’s streets at night.

Only, he had not volunteered. His glorious father had done that masterful work for him.

Once again, the shifting moonlight broke through the black clouds. In that instant, Alexius saw something white like a beacon bobbing through the filthy bodies. It nervously turned, revealing a glimpse of Messalina's face in the brief light.

The urge to strangle his betrothed exploded with a sense of relief. Alexius pressed toward her. However, a mass of filthy bodies suddenly spawned between them. Hands reached out for offerings or grabbed at his cloak, his wrist, his arm.

Alexius slapped, shoved, and punched them away as he fought to keep her in his sight. When Messi darted into a dark stairwell of an apartment building near the corner of the main street, anger coiled in his veins. More men went down, falling over the street curbs where he and Fosco tossed them.

At last, Alexius barged into the stairwell and pinned Messalina's lush body against the stairway wall. "Messi, what do you think you are—"

An arm clamped around Alexius's neck as a knifepoint pierced through his cape. "Let her go if you wish to live, dominus."

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed another knife at Fosco's throat, rendering the slave useless. "The vigils are coming," he said, hoping they were. "I called for them."

A deep-throated chuckle sounded in his ear. "They're busy at the moment." Fragrances of rancid wine and garlic drifted across Alexius's face. "I'm not repeating this again, let her go, dominus."

Every way to get rid of this man flashed in Alexius's mind. However, he would have to risk letting go of Messalina. Something he was not going to do. "She stays with me."

"Then you die with your slave."

"No!" Messalina jerked against him. "No. Alexius, I am safe. Let me—"