

## CHAPTER 1

*Late summer, Stabianum, Italy, 295 B.C.*

“HE’S coming! He’s coming!”

Aelia’s heart chilled as she twisted the iron wedding band on her left hand. He’s coming. She didn’t want her husband coming home.

Her seven-year-old son raced toward her, eyes glowing with excitement. A cold shiver slid down her spine as she squatted before him. “How far away is...your father?”

“Not far,” young Cassius gasped. She brushed away the beads of sweat clinging to the dark curls stuck to his forehead on this dry, hot summer day. “Not far, Mama. I saw the dust from the horses. There must be thousands with him!”

She studied the round beaming face of her son as she adjusted the childhood protective charm on his necklace. He looks so like his father. I just pray he does not grow to be like him.

“Do you suppose he’s brought the whole army with him?” she asked. An ounce of hope ignited in her heart. If Cassius brought his soldiers, he’d be too busy for her.

“I hope so, Mama. Maybe I can go riding with them.”

Aelia scowled. “Young Cassius Julius Gullus, you’ll do no such thing.” Gennadius, her master slave, only recently taught him how to ride. At seven, the boy considered himself quite the equestrian. “You are not to ride until your father says you may do so. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Aelia glanced at the boy’s personal slave, who stood nearby. “See that he is prepared to meet his father.” She looked down at her son. “Now go. Be quick. You must not disappoint your father.”

“Yes, Mama.”

The slave scurried off behind her son.

Aelia’s stomach tightened even more as she scanned the atrium, the formal greeting room, for some flaw, for some overlooked error, anything. All she saw were fresh white curtains ruffling over the doorways to the back garden. The hot sunlight beamed through the opening in the ceiling onto the pool filled with water trickling into the cistern below the polished limestone floor.

A breeze full of herbal fragrances drifted through the potted palms and ferns boasting no dead leaves. She gazed across the atrium through the four columns and studied the two couches before the tablinum, the official office that faced the vestibule where she stood. She went to one couch and straightened it an inch. Perfect. Everything must be perfect.

Her heart thundered against her ribs. Cassius’s letter had arrived last week and, in that moment, all joy faded from her soul. For the last three years, her husband had fought with Rome against the Samnites and now was coming home victorious. And Cassius Julius Gullus liked being victorious.

“Domina, is there any more you need?”

Startled, Aelia swung about to face her dark-skinned slave, one that her husband would not recognize. “Gennadius, do you think anything is set wrong?”

He looked across the atrium and shook his head. “I see nothing amiss, domina.” The smile on the dark Greek face gleamed. “Should dust even consider resting anywhere in here today, it would come at a cost.”

She scanned the room for vagrant dust particles. Cassius expected perfection. His perfection. “Then see that everyone is correctly arranged outside. We must exceed his expectations.”

The master slave bowed in submission. The waves of black hair gathered at the nape of the slave’s neck gleamed in the afternoon sun. “Yes, domina.” He backed and motioned to the slaves. “Go!” he ordered.

Aelia stiffened and curled her hands into fists as her body pulled erect. It was her task to please her husband and, after seven years of marriage, she found that with Cassius it was an impossible task. Except during his absence.

However, her mother insisted that this was the reason for a wife’s existence. “It’s your obligation as a wife to see to his comforts, to see that his household works to his pleasure, and to bear his children,” she said. “Never forget this.”

How could she ever forget? She had tried to please Cassius. Honor his house. Be the virtuous wife that he could respect above all others. Doing so had gained her nothing. But none of this mattered to Cassius Julius Gallus. All he wanted was control of everything that breathed.

Her hand pressed against the fabric of her cream-colored linen stola bordered with light green embroidery. The touch did nothing to stop her churning stomach. She walked through the ornate vestibule, past the lararium drifting incense taking her prayers to the gods to make her husband approve of all she accomplished during his absence.

Three years, years that had made her independent, but now she must become humble and submissive again. She had no choice but to relinquish everything to him. That concern paled against the knowledge that he would expect another son from her.

Aelia blocked her mind against what that meant. Yet revulsion flooded over her as she appeared in the walled courtyard.

“Halt!” A trumpet played the order over the sound of thundering horses as drifting clouds of dust poured over the walls. Aelia heard her husband’s commanding voice. Her heart stopped as the rustle of footsteps gathered, formed, and shuffled beyond the protective walls. The sudden silence did little to restart it.

She looked around for his son, her son, their son. He must be there! “Young Cassius?”

“Here, domina.” The boy’s slave stepped back as the washed and dressed child appeared.

“Is he here, Mama? Is he here?”

“Yes.”

She rested her hands on the small shoulders and scanned the straight lines of slaves waiting like human walls. A hot breeze whipped through the courtyard as each slave waited for their first glance from their dominus for the moment they must drop their gazes in submission.

For new slaves like Eudokia and Gennadius, this would be their first time they would see their master, since both had been purchased during Cassius's absence.

Aelia glanced at her personal slave standing behind her. Eudokia scanned over the palla and nodded. The gesture released a frail sense of confidence through Aelia. Nevertheless, she drew the cream linen shawl tighter around her. Cassius would be furious if any part of her remained uncovered in public. She didn't want to endure his fury or such a beating ever again.

Her heart halted as her husband stepped past the opening gates. Young Cassius glanced up at her for permission to move, but her hands had frozen to his tiny shoulders. The boy squirmed beneath her grip as his father, little taller than she, appeared in the courtyard with all the importance of a king and all his officers.

All gazes other than hers dropped as Cassius Julius Gullus, citizen and patrician of Rome, inspected all before him.

His short, rusty brown hair gleamed with sweat from the polished helmet he carried at his side. His round face was tan. His drawn mouth matched the straight line of eyebrows puckered between his glowering gaze. His free arm, corded with muscle, swung at the side of his red tunic and chainmail shirt as he strode past the slaves, scanning, looking for an imperfection.

Aelia searched for any sign of appreciation or even joy. Anything that showed his approval.

At last, the challenging gaze came to her as direct as an arrow. It hesitated, and then lowered to the boy. She released their son to race toward him. The man broke form and squatted to accept the child into his arms.

"Are you my son, almost a man?"

"Yes, Papa. It's me. I've grown. I can ride. I can even swim now."

As the elder Cassius rose, he took the boy up with him. "Can you now?" It was a deliberate question, asked as if he'd been deprived of the information.

Mentally, Aelia raced through her husband's letters. Nothing was said of keeping these lessons from the boy. Nothing. She was positive.

"Yes, Papa, come. I'll show you."

"Tomorrow, young citizen. I must honor your mother's presence." He lowered the boy to the dirt and focused on her. "Aelia Sabina, I greet you."

Her soul braced. "Cassius Julius Gullus, I welcome you. May my husband find his home to his pleasure."

He glanced behind her at Eudokia. Aelia noted the spark of interest flare in his eyes. "So many new faces."

"I wrote you...about them. In my letters." Or more like reports that she had sent monthly.

Cassius drew his attention back to her. "Yes. I got them." He moved toward the doorway. Gennadius motioned for the door slaves to wash Cassius's feet and stepped back to the doorframe, keeping his gaze downward.

Aelia's heart lurched against her ribs as her husband halted and glared up at the black-faced slave who stood a full head higher than allowed. An eternity seemed to pass as her husband's feet were washed and replaced with house sandals.

“Papa, come on.” The young Cassius grabbed his father’s hand to drag him deeper into the cool depths of the vestibule, breaking the torturous moment.

Aelia forced her steps forward. She nodded to Gennadius to release the slaves to their jobs and entered into the vestibule’s shadow. It enveloped her.