

## AMBER ROAD

### Chapter 1: Oath-Breaker

Nearly three months, and still she had not returned.

If not for that brave, passionate, unpredictable girl, I would have been a State official appointed by my bosom friend Caligula Caesar, getting fat from bribes and lavish dinner parties. I would have been the cosseted young heir of my noble family, sharing our old house on the Palatine with overfamiliar slaves, an influential and autocratic father, a mother who acquired factories and olive-oil mills as other matrons collect jewels, a twin sister ignominiously divorced for childlessness, and an urnful of ashes that had been my brother, who killed himself to escape dishonor.

I would have been Marcus Licinius Carinna, rich and popular, with my feet set on the path to the Senate and perhaps, one day, a consulship.

Now I was none of these things. Instead I was an ex-Army officer with a traitor's name, drinking away the wait for my beloved in a squalid *taberna* in a dusty little outpost in a province hundreds of miles from Rome.

And at the moment, I might have a problem.

When off duty, soldiers usually head for the nearest brothel or swill-hole. Why these legionaries from the Fifteenth had wandered to the most distant edge of town was a mystery. But even out of uniform, there was no mistaking the boast in their swagger: *We are the heroes protecting you ungrateful rabble from the barbarian hordes. Kiss our stinking feet.*

The first of them loomed up in the alley outside. Enough of the spring twilight was left to show mosquitoes hovering around his close-cropped hair. He rapped a coin on the open counter of the *taberna*. "Jug o' wine. Best you got."

"Aye, pour us the forty-year Falernian," added another man behind him. They cackled.

The *tabernarius* hastily uncapped one of the countertop wells and ladled wine into a jug. No one around here wanted to rile a soldier.

I turned back to my own cup. They were unlikely to recognize me slouched over a table inside the darkening wineshop. Unless they came in.

“Move, you two,” said another voice. “I need to fix this buggering boot nail.”

And the third one came in.

He bumped against a customer, swore, and upended the man’s bench, dumping him on the dirt floor. “And I’ll have this table, thanks.” He yanked it toward himself, spilling a partly full cup. The dispossessed drinker slunk away without complaint. “Here, brothers!”

The other two stumbled in, cursing. “Stinks like Hades’ bunghole in here.”

The small *taberna* was already so crowded there was hardly room to swat a fly. The soldiers choked it like six toes in a boot.

I hunched over, shielding my face with a hand. With luck I would be ignored.

“You! Get up. I want your seat.”

I pretended not to hear. Seven months earlier I had been a hero, rallying ambushed troops to end a Germanic uprising. I did not want to find out what the legion thought of me now.

“Are you deaf? Get up, I said!”

I lifted my head slowly. Saw the man’s hairy calves and second-best boots, laces knotted where they had broken. Then the patched tunic, faded but recognizably reddish. Ropy arms blotched with tattoos and grime. A sneer on an ill-shaven face that I did not think I knew. It is hard, though, to recall one face out of several thousand.

“A German!” His hand shot out to grab me by the beard. “Get out, you filthy barbarian!”

I lunged to my feet. Before I could force my way past, one of his comrades loomed up beside him, trapping me in the corner. And where was Ollius? Still emptying his bladder, the useless oaf.

“No trouble now, men,” the *tabernarius* bleated. “No one wants trouble.”

Trouble was the last thing I needed. But without warning some sort of furnace door burst open within me and I was engulfed in rage—at being unable to claim my own authority, at squandering my life in this dog’s crotch of a settlement, at waiting for a woman who did not come.

“Let me pass, you idiot,” I snapped. It came out in educated Latin, not the slum-garble I had trained myself to speak.

“Who do you think—” The soldier’s bleary eyes widened. “Tribune?” Shock gave way to fury that contorted his sunburned face. “What are you doing here?”

I hit him in the jaw so hard his teeth cracked together. He stumbled back. A bench toppled as other customers scrambled away. I hurled the table into the second soldier, then grabbed the third by his neck-cloth and drove my fist into his face.

Ollius blundered in, now that I did not need him. He snatched up a stool and swung it around, and men thrashed and sprawled in all directions. I yelled for him to stop. He was ruining my fight.

He seized my arm and shouted something. I kicked his knee out from under him.

The next I knew, I was being dragged by the belt through clumps of filthy straw in the alley outside the *taberna*. Children booting a ball hooted in glee. Chickens squawked and flapped away.

When Ollius let go, I scrambled up to pitch myself into the brawl again. He pushed me back. “That’s enough.”

“Hands off me!” I gave a mighty heave to knock him off his feet. Though shorter, he was strong and stocky. It would have been easier to tumble Augustus’s obelisk.

“I’m your bodyguard, you fool!”

“You’re dish— dismissed! Guard somebody else.”

“Marcus, stop,” he snapped.

It was like a slap of cold water. I shoved him again, but my madness was fading.

“Gods above.” He bent to massage his kneecap. “After all this time!” Blood speckled his shaved head.

One of the soldiers plunged through the tavern doorway with a broken table leg. Ollius swept his sword from its scabbard and smacked the club out of the man’s hand. “Get back inside, sonny boy. I’ve put better men than you in the sand.”

The soldier’s mouth twisted above a goat’s-beard of gore. Then something at the end of the alley caught his eye. “Fuck you, oath-breaker’s son!” He spat into the dirt. Retreating into the *taberna*, he called out, “Stand down, brothers. We’ll get him later.”

A hooded man was riding toward us, flanked by four guards. They tramped in a heavy cadence, clinking martially, past a slave with a water jar who shrank against the wall. A man wealthy enough to have an armed escort was a rare sight in this seedy

quarter, where the drink was bitter and the whores were vicious. Even the boys who had shouted insults in Pannonian paused their ball game to watch.

The little troop had already seen us. I rotated my head to loosen my neck muscles. Ollius sucked in a breath and squared himself.

Lamplight bloomed in the *taberna* as the rider reined in by a dingy fox and grapes painted on the outside wall. Someone blocking the light moved out of the way, and it spilled across the counter onto Ollius and me.

The rider let out an exclamation. He dismounted awkwardly, favoring a stiff leg, and stumped toward us.

Of all the blasted luck! I moved a few steps away. Back toward the stifling attic I shared with all four of my men, two dusty flights above a stonecutter's yard.

Too late. The uneven scuff of footsteps halted, and the man said, "Marcus Carinna?"

I turned. My heart still thumped hard from the fight. "Leonnatus."

Leonnatus pushed back his hood. Thick brows like snow cornices met over his long nose; his shovel chin jutted like a displeased schoolmaster's. Perhaps the dome of his brow was a little higher, the wreath of white hair a little farther in retreat, but he had not otherwise changed since the previous autumn.

"You are back in Carnuntum, yet you have not come to see me," he said.

In truth, I had been here since the great snowfalls of February. But I had hidden behind my beard and long hair, and had avoided places where I was known.

"I was shocked to hear of your father's death," Leonnatus went on. His small bright eyes were steady on mine. "Your lady mother wrote me that you had left Rome."

I inclined my head.

For a moment neither of us spoke. Women farther down the alley called in their children. Someone spattered slops from a balcony.

Then we both spoke at once. I overrode him discourteously: "When you write her next, tell her I am in good health."

"I have some of your favorite Baeterran, nicely chilled," he said. "Come and join me in a cup."

It caught me off guard. My skin and clothes were stained and reeking with sweat

and the unholy muck Ollius had dragged me through. “Another time,” I said gruffly, meaning never.

“Carinna.” He lowered his voice. “Humor an old man you once called a friend.”

“I am not fit company.” A few paces away I added without turning, “And I no longer use that name.”