

## Sejanus – Chapter 1

The smoke from Dad's pyre gusted among the tombs, plain, ordinary woodsmoke, with no spices or perfume to mask the more unpleasant smells. His idea, not mine, and specified in his will: Tiberius disapproved of extravagant funerals, and the old trimmer Messalinus had toed a politically correct line to the last. Specks of soot blew into my eyes, and I wiped them away. After so long in Athens I'd forgotten how windy Rome could be.

Beside me, Perilla touched my hand. 'Marcus?' She said. 'Are you all right?'

'Sure.' I watched as the logs shifted. The fire was at its hottest, and I couldn't see the bier any more; he wouldn't last long at this rate. 'Why shouldn't I be?'

'No reason.' Her fingers wrapped round mine as we watched the flames together. 'I was just checking.'

It had been a good funeral; the old guy would've been pleased that even for a consular he'd rated such a healthy turnout, and I was glad his senatorial cronies had done him proud at the finish. Both consuls had come, Memmius Regulus and Fulcinius Trio. Trio was ignoring me. That came as no surprise. The last time we'd seen each other I'd accused him to his face of treason, and he'd never forgiven me because it'd been the truth,

Also conspicuous by his presence was Trio's boss, the imperial rep Aelius Sejanus. An honour, maybe, but one I could do without, and one that Dad, to give him his due, wouldn't've wanted either. When we'd shaken hands and he'd offered his condolences the cold sweat had broken out all down my spine. The last and only time I'd seen Sejanus had been ten years before in Phlebas's curio shop, where I'd been buying an incense burner for Mother's husband Priscus. Ten years may be a long time, but Sejanus was the reason I'd spent them in Greece, and I hadn't forgotten why even if he had. At least I hoped he had. A handshake at a funeral was as much contact with him as I wanted, deal with Livia or no deal with Livia.

He was standing now a dozen yards off, his back to the flames, chatting to Trio and my Uncle Cotta. I was surprised he'd stayed so long now he was the Wart's de facto deputy and he had an empire to run, but maybe it was business. I didn't want to know about that, either.

'Marcus, dear, I don't think you've met Cosconia.'

I turned. Mother had come up on my blind side. Even in her mourning and without jewellery she still looked good, and twenty years short of her real age. I felt Perilla's fingers tighten on mine as Dad's widow gave me a thin smile. We might not've met formally, but I'd seen Cosconia around. Like Mother, she was a looker; if nothing else Dad had had a good eye for women. Cosconia wouldn't stay single for long, that was sure. Female relatives of Sejanus - even distant ones like she was - tended to get snapped up as soon as they hit the market.

'Pleased to meet you, Cosconia.' Perilla's fingers left mine and she held out her hand. Cosconia took it smiling. 'I'm so sorry about Messalinus.'

'He didn't suffer much.' The widow's voice was brisk, and I found myself wondering if she'd started looking round for a replacement already. 'He wasn't conscious towards the end.'

'I wish Marcus and I had got back in time.' Perilla was smiling too. 'But there wasn't a ship.'

'It doesn't matter.' Cosconia gave me a quick glance. 'And I'm glad to have met you both finally after all this time. These family quarrels are such silly things, aren't they, Marcus?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Yeah, I suppose they are.' I looked away, at the flames. Dad was gone by now, the fire was beginning to die down and the pyre was collapsing in on itself. People would be getting ready to call it a day and head for home and a cup of warm spiced wine. Some of the older ones, like Appianus who'd read the funeral speech, had left already, but there were still a few who looked like hanging on to the very end when the embers were doused and the bones cooled with wine and put in the urn. Sejanus for one, which was bad news. I wanted nothing from that bastard, least of all false sympathy.

Over to my left - and well away from Sejanus - a white-haired old man was deep in conversation with a senator. He saw me looking and raised his hand. I frowned, trying to fit the name to the face. I knew him, sure, but not from Rome. Athens? Alexandria? Pergamum, maybe, or any of a dozen other places; Perilla and I had moved around a lot these past few years. Whoever he was I had the feeling the acquaintance hadn't been all that pleasant.

'Marcus!' Perilla's elbow dug me in the ribs. I turned back. She was looking frosty as hell. Mother, too.

'Cosconia's lips had tightened into a line. 'No, don't bother, Perilla,' she said. 'I only wanted to introduce myself properly and welcome you home. Another time, perhaps, if and when Marcus has more liberty for conversation.' She walked off unsmiling before I had a chance to apologise and explain.

'Oh, shit,' I murmured.

'Marcus, I am ashamed of you!' I'd never seen Mother so angry. 'Your behaviour was abominable! And that is no sort of language for a funeral!'

She was right, of course. I knew that without being told, even though I hadn't meant to offend anyone. Still, Mother ought to have known better than spring Dad's second wife on me without warning and expect light social chit-chat.

'Uh, yeah,' I said. The white-haired guy was looking at me again. I still couldn't place him, and it worried me. 'Yeah, I'm sorry. Excuse me, will you?'

'Marcus!' Perilla snapped. I ignored her and moved towards him.

Sejanus peeled himself away from Trio and Cotta like bark from an elm branch and stepped into my path.

'Bought any good bronze ducks recently, Corvinus?' he said.

So he did remember. 'It was a goose,' I said. 'Etruscan.'

'Really?' His eyes measured me. 'I thought it was a duck. That's right, Trio, isn't it?'

The consul had joined us, smiling the doughy smile I remembered from other days. Cotta had made himself scarce. That shifty old chancer can scent trouble a mile off.

'A duck it was.' Trio was fingering the broad purple stripe on his expensive mantle. That had come since my day; when I'd seen him last he'd been a lightweight narrow-striper on the make. He'd risen high since then, if you can call it rising. 'A dead one.' He gave me a sour nod. 'How are you these days, Corvinus? Doing well, are we?'

I didn't answer. Sejanus laughed. His eyes hadn't left my face.

'A pity you never took me up on my offer,' he said. 'You'd've done much better working for me than...' He paused. 'Just what are you doing at present, exactly?'

'Oh, this and that.' I remembered Dad asking me the same question at Priscus's birthday party. The one I'd brought the Etruscan goose to. I'd given him the same answer, and for the same reasons. 'I'm not a politician, Sejanus. As you know.'

'Who could be, in Athens? It's the world's backside.' He was studying me carefully. 'I'm speaking politically, of course.'

'Yeah. Sure.' I was shaking, and trying hard to hide it. He was being friendly enough once you'd made allowance, but he still made my skin crawl and I had to admit that he terrified me. It wasn't the power, although Sejanus had more of that than anyone in Rome, probably more than the Wart himself these days, in real terms; it was just who he was. 'We're happy enough there, Perilla and me.'

'Oh, yes. Your wife. You must introduce us.' He looked across at Perilla, but she was still talking to Mother and Cosconia, who'd rejoined them now the grouchy stepson had made himself scarce. The three of them were probably raking over my roasted giblets. If that isn't an unfortunate phrase at a funeral.

'Yes, I must do that,' I said. 'At some stage.' Whether he had the high on me or not, I wasn't letting the bastard within a mile of Perilla if I could help it, no way. 'Perilla likes the academic atmosphere there. Me, well, the wine's not bad. And as you say it's peaceful.'

'But hardly the place for a Roman.' Sejanus's smile hadn't shifted. 'Or have you decided that being a Roman is outwith your capacities?'

Trio sniggered. I shrugged and turned away. The guy meant to needle me, obviously, but if he thought he could make me lose my temper in public that was one satisfaction I didn't intend giving him.

He laid a hand on my arm and gently pulled me back. 'You're staying here long?' he said.

'No.' I looked past him. The old man with the white hair was still talking to his friend, who I did recognise: Lucius Arruntius, one of the Senate's leading lights. A straight guy, as that mealy-mouthed crew went, but getting on now as were most of the people at Dad's funeral. 'No, not very long. A month or two at most.'

He nodded. 'Good. Rome's no place for slackers.' Another measuring pause. 'Or for fools. Not now.'

'It takes all kinds.' My fist itched to smash itself into his gut. I buried it in the fold of my mantle.

Another nod, a satisfied one this time; whatever I'd said Sejanus seemed to have got what he wanted. I remembered the old empress's words, the last time I'd seen her: You're beneath his notice, Corvinus. Killing you wouldn't be worth either the trouble or the risk. Not very flattering, but true enough. I meant to keep it that way.

Sejanus let go of my arm. 'Well, pleasant as this is,' he said, 'I must be off. Affairs of state call, even though I am simply a private citizen nowadays.' He smiled at Trio, who smiled back. Until the beginning of the month Sejanus had been co-consul with the Wart. When Tiberius had given up his consulship he had done the same; a prelude, so rumour went, to even greater honours. 'It's a little late to change your mind, but there might still be something for you. If you ask nicely.'

My fist was clenched so hard now the nails were cutting into my palm. I didn't trust myself enough to say anything, but it seemed an answer wasn't required. Sejanus gave me a bright smile and a wave, then walked with Trio towards the consul's waiting guard of axemen. I was still glaring after them when someone spoke.

'You don't recognise me, Corvinus.' It was the white-haired guy. He put out a trembling hand. 'Aelius Lamia.'

I hesitated, then took the hand and shook it. I remembered him now, sure I did, but remembering I wasn't surprised I hadn't known him. The last time I'd seen Lamia was when he'd thrown me out of Syria for asking too many questions about the Wart's adopted son Germanicus Caesar. Then, he'd been a middle-aged man in his prime. Now something had eaten him up from the inside, and all that was left was the shell.

'How are you. Governor?' I said.

'Well enough.' The skull grinned. 'My condolences. Your father was a splendid man. Splendid.' No reference to Syria, but then I wouldn't've expected it. Even when he was chewing my balls off Lamia had been the perfect diplomat. 'You know Lucius Arruntius?'

'No. At least, we've never met formally.' We shook hands. Arruntius would be about Lamia's age, I'd guess, but he looked a dozen years younger and good for a dozen or two more. I'd give Lamia twelve months at the outside.

'You're here for long?' Arruntius asked.

The same question as Sejanus's, and with the same edge. Maybe coincidence, but the hair on my neck still bristled.

'Just a visit,' I said. 'Rome doesn't suit me any more.'

'The place or the climate?'

I was cautious. 'I miss the Subura, sure. And the smell of the Tiber. Other things.'

'But not the politics?'

Sejanus's question again. I was beginning to get bad feelings about this, especially the way they were looking at me. Like lepidopterists deciding where to shove the pin. 'Politics doesn't interest me,' I said. I glanced over to where Dad's pyre was sinking into a pile of glowing ashes. 'I haven't even notched up a junior magistracy.'

'So I hear.' Arruntius dropped his voice. 'Yet you were exiled.'

'I was never exiled. Formally or informally.' This was familiar ground. I'd been over it a dozen times in the last ten years until I had the answer off pat; so pat that I'd begun to believe it myself. 'Choose to live outside Italy if you come from one of the top families and you're automatically in exile, voluntarily or otherwise. Finish, end of story. That's the way the Roman mind works; only crooks and disgraced politicians live abroad from choice. I'm no crook, sir, and my reasons had nothing to do with politics.'

Arruntius smiled. Then he said quietly: 'Come now, young man, of course they did. That's why we need to talk.'

Uh-huh. Coincidence nothing; this was a proposition if I'd ever heard one. The old guys were still looking at me like I was some sort of pickled specimen, and I knew I should just walk away from them, collect Perilla and make a run for Puteoli and the first ship out. Wherever it was headed.

Lamia's hand was on my arm, and he moved me further out of earshot. Not that there were many people left to overhear. The crowd was thinning fast.

'Corvinus,' he said, 'matters have reached a crisis. You may or may not know that Tiberius is on the point of naming Aelius Sejanus formally as his successor.'

'Is that right, now?' I tried to keep my voice level. Confidences like this I could do without.

'That is right.' Evidently my tone hadn't fazed him. 'Since you claim to have no interest in politics it may not concern you overmuch. On the other hand, knowing the man as you do you may share our opinion that his nomination would be a disaster for Rome.'

Yeah. No prizes for what was coming next. I could've scripted it myself. And I'd bet good money the 'our' didn't mean just him and Arruntius; it smelled of broad purple stripes.

'Governor,' I said wearily, 'I've met the guy exactly twice, once ten years ago and once today. Neither meeting lasted above five minutes. That's hardly time for a valid assessment. And as far as his being bad for Rome is concerned the emperor obviously thinks otherwise. Or are you calling Tiberius a fool?'

'Personal acquaintance isn't the issue. And as you know, Tiberius is not in full possession of the facts.'

'Oh, really?'

'Corvinus, don't play games!' Lamia snapped. Either he had a lot less patience than when he'd been running one of the empire's top provinces or he was more keyed up than he appeared. 'You're too old for that now, and I certainly am. Ten years ago you were involved in an investigation which it was my duty as the emperor's representative to impede. I wasn't in full possession of the facts then myself, I don't claim to be now and I have no wish to be; however, I suspect they proved that while Sejanus was acting with the emperor's mandate he was also engaged in secret activities of which Tiberius was unaware, and which he would certainly have viewed as dubious.'

'Dubious', hell: the bastard had been committing treason, only not the kind he could be easily nailed for. Even so, I didn't see why I should make Lamia's job any easier. Let alone agree to what he obviously wanted from me.

'Like you said, Governor, that was ten years ago.' I turned away briefly. Perilla was still talking to Mother and Cosconia, but she shot a glance in my direction. She looked anxious. You and me both, lady, I thought. I turned back to Lamia. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe I am too old now to play games. Especially dangerous ones involving Aelius Sejanus.'

Arruntius had been hanging back like a Greek chorus, letting the governor take centre stage. Now he moved closer and took hold of my wrist. He had strong, blunt fingers like a wrestler's.

'We were hoping that you might agree to resume that investigation now, Corvinus,' he said softly, 'so that Tiberius can be apprised of the true situation and change his mind. Before it's too late.'

There it was. Masks down. We stared at one another, and it may've been my imagination but Lamia didn't look any happier than I felt. Well, at least he'd put out

the right signals in advance, and Livia had warned me this would happen one day. I'd always wondered, if and when the time came, which way I'd jump.

The snag was that I still didn't know.

'So you want someone to dig the dirt on Aelius Sejanus and hand it over in a nice neat package to the Wart?' I said. Neither of them answered. 'Why me?'

'We've been over that,' Lamia grunted. 'You have a head start, Corvinus. And you have the temperament for it. Uniquely so.'

Well, flattery would get him nowhere. If it was flattery.

'I'm still surprised you need me, Lamia,' I said. 'You're the bastard's cousin, after all.'

I regretted the words even before his bony face turned red with anger: I'd never believed even at the time that Lamia was in Sejanus's pay, and I didn't believe it now. But it was a fair point, and it needed making.

'We didn't expect immediate agreement,' Arruntius said quickly. 'Let alone trust. Think it over first before you give us your answer. But remember that in asking for your help we don't ask lightly.'

Yeah, that I'd believe. I knew that 'we', I'd heard it all my life from Dad: the patriotic plural comes second nature to broad-strippers, despite the fact that they're the most disunited bunch of self-servers you'd never hope to meet. So. Rome's Senate wanted the upstart Sejanus pegged out for the crows. No surprises there, but I was surprised that Arruntius had agreed to do their asking for them. If he had clout - and he had it in spades - it was because he wasn't one of the gang. Of the three men Augustus once said could run the empire Arruntius was the only one the cunning old bugger had no reservations about. That sort of recommendation doesn't come cheap.

I turned away again; not towards Perilla this time but in the direction of Dad's pyre. It was mostly ash now, with a few glowing embers and a scattering of charred logs at the edges. Time, soon, for the wine and the picking over of the bones. When we burned him, I'd once said, we'd find a poker with the words Property of the Senate and People of Rome written on it. I was sorry for that now; he hadn't deserved it, or not the way I'd meant it at the time. No, there'd be no poker. But a good part of the old guy had been Rome's after all.

'Oh, one more thing, Corvinus.' Arruntius was reaching into the fold of his mantle. He brought out a sealed letter. 'I was instructed to give you this. I don't know the contents, but I suspect they may be relevant, and they may help you decide.'

I took the letter and turned it over in my hands to read the spidery superscription: 'For Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus. Personal, to be delivered at the proper time.' No signature, but I recognised the handwriting. Sure I did. I could even smell the camphor.

Livia never let go, did she? Not even when she was two years dead.