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Daughters of Rome

Written by Kate Quinn

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Daughters
OF
ROME
KATE QUINN

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Prologue

AD 58

A HAND.
Just a little girl's hand like any other, plump-fingered and a little sticky, but for a moment he saw blood all over it.

'Interesting,' Nessus gulped. The girl stared up at him, expectant, and he looked at her palm again, hoping it had been a trick of the light. Maybe a shadow. But no, there it was: not a shadow but blood.

You're seeing things, he told himself. *You're seeing things.*

'What?' the child said, curious.

He swallowed a sudden burst of nervous laughter. Wasn't an astrologer supposed to see things when he looked at the stars, or into a palm?

But he never had before, not once since he'd started in this business. Astrology wasn't about truth, after all – it was about pleasing the clients. Telling pregnant women that their stars foretold healthy sons; telling legionaries their futures held medals and glory. What successful astrologer told anybody there was enough blood in their hand to soak all Rome?

I could have run a wine shop. The sun was hot overhead, but Nessus felt chill sweat start to creep down his neck. *I could have become a trader. But no, I had to become an astrologer. Reading stars, reading palms when business gets slow, oh, why*

didn't I just open a wine shop? The only blood anybody saw in a wine shop came from drunks giving each other a swollen nose.

And the morning had started with such promise. Nessus had come early to the Forum Romanum, staking himself a place on the shady side where the afternoon sun wouldn't beat down on his head like Vulcan's hammer, and laid out his little display of star charts on threadbare silk. By noon he'd been commissioned for three horoscopes (payment on delivery), read the palm of a grain merchant and spoke mysteriously of fat profits coming on the next harvest; squinted at the hand of a giddy young woman and whispered of a rich husband. Nessus had just been mopping his already balding forehead on his sleeve and contemplating a jug of wine at the nearest tavern when four little girls arrayed themselves expectantly before him.

'We want you to read our futures,' the tallest had announced, and the rest promptly collapsed into giggles.

'There's no time,' their nursemaid scolded, but Nessus looked them over with a practised eye. Patrician girls, or he'd eat his straw sun hat: silk dresses, tooled leather sandals, veils over their hair to shield their skin. And patrician girls, even little ones like these, had coins to spend.

'Such futures ahead of you!' he intoned mysteriously. 'Your stars sing to me of fame and fortune, beauty and love . . . two sesterces apiece, and cheap at the price. Which of you first?'

'Me, me!' Four hands presented themselves, variously grubby.

'No, me first, I'm the oldest! I'm Cornelia Prima, and that's my sister, she's Cornelia Secunda, and that's Cornelia Tertia and Cornelia Quarta, they're our cousins—'

Definitely patricians – only patricians had such a complete lack of imagination when it came to naming their daughters. Four girls born to one clan – undoubtedly the Corneli! – and as was traditional, they'd all just been named Cornelia and

then numbered in order. Nessus listened to their chatter with half an ear, not bothering to figure out which girl was which. They ranged in age from perhaps thirteen to five or six: a girl with dark hair wound in a crown around her head, a taller girl with the beginnings of a bust, a scabby-kneed towhead and a plump little giggler.

‘Yes, what a future!’ He put on his most oracular voice, and the first of the girls leaned in with round eyes even as the nursemaid sighed impatiently behind. ‘A golden-haired man who loves you, and a long journey over water . . . now, for *you*, let’s see that hand. A dark stranger who adores you from the shadows, who turns out to be a prince in disguise . . . And for you a rich husband, yes, you’ll have six children and dress in silk all your days . . .’

He’d been congratulating himself on a nice fat fee when he got the last palm. His breath stopped in his throat then, and for a moment the whole busy Forum – the housewives bustling past with their baskets, the hoarse-voiced hawkers crying their wares, the stray dogs and noisy children and clouds of white summer dust – seemed to freeze in place.

‘What is it?’ the girl said again, looking at him quizzically. Nessus felt icy fingers dancing up and down his spine; he had to force himself not to drop her hand like a hot coal and go running around the Forum for a while shrieking. But thread-bare young astrologers just getting started in the business of telling the future didn’t last long if they went around shrieking in front of the customers, so he forced a bright smile.

‘Little mistress, you have a very grand future ahead of you. All little girls dream of wearing a crown, but you’re going to be Empress of Rome some day! Wife of the Emperor, with more jewels and slaves and palaces than you can count. Isn’t that wonderful?’

‘*I* want to be an empress,’ one of the other little Cornelias objected.

‘No, me!’

‘Horsie,’ crowed the youngest, waving chubby fingers at a cart horse plodding by.

Nessus dropped the hand of Cornelia Number Three or Two or whichever one she was. *I didn’t lie*, he thought queasily. *I just didn’t tell . . . all of it.*

He looked at the other girls, the ones to whom he’d promised rich husbands and dark lovers and many children, just as he promised all girls, and now he could feel the sweat pouring down his body. Because he didn’t need to look at their hands any more; he could see futures for all of them.

You’re ill, he told himself. *That fish you ate last night. A piece of bad fish, and now you’re hallucinating.*

But he wasn’t. Clear as day he saw widowhood for three of the four girls; a fair amount of misery for one and fame for another; a total of eleven husbands and eight children between them – and of course, that one little hand spilling over with blood.

The four girls went skipping off into the Forum after some new diversion, veils fluttering behind them. The nursemaid counted a few coins into Nessus’s hand, gave a censorious sniff at his threadbare tunic for good measure, and swished off after her charges. Nessus quickly packed up his star charts and headed to the nearest tavern.

He had had his first vision of the future, and he needed a drink.

‘I am entering on the history of a period rich in disasters, frightful in its wars, torn by civil strife, and even in peace full of horrors. Four emperors perished by the sword.’

— TACITUS

PART ONE

GALBA

June AD 68–January AD 69

*‘All pronounced him worthy of the empire, until he
became emperor.’*

— TACITUS

Chapter 1

‘**W**e’re going to a wedding, not a battle.’ Marcella blinked as her sister came into the bedroom hauling a huge spear. ‘Or are you planning on killing the bride?’

‘Don’t tempt me.’ Cornelia sighed, looking up the length of the spear. ‘Lollia and her weddings . . . I sent my maid out for just the spearhead, but of course she came back with the whole spear. Put that pen down for once, won’t you, and help me get the shaft off.’

Marcella shoved her writing tablet to one side and rose from the desk. She and her sister tussled the spear between them, Cornelia yanking at the head and Marcella twisting the long shaft. ‘It’s not coming,’ Marcella complained, just as the blade came loose and sent them tumbling in opposite directions. Marcella banged her elbow against the tiles and swore. Cornelia began a dignified reproof but started to giggle instead. Her stern, serene face cracked for just a moment into a little girl’s, bracketed by those deep dimples she disliked so much. Marcella started to giggle too.

‘All this trouble,’ she said ruefully, ‘just so you can part Lollia’s hair with a dead gladiator’s spearhead and give her a happy marriage. Did it work the first two times?’

‘I have faith.’

‘It didn’t work at my wedding either—’

‘Enough!’ Cornelia rose, holding out one elegantly ringed hand. Marcella took it and scrambled up. ‘Aren’t you ready yet? I swore I’d be there early to help Lollia.’

‘I got wrapped up in chronicling Nero’s death,’ Marcella shrugged. ‘You know I’m writing up Nero now? It’ll make a short account, but not as short as my history of Caligula.’

‘You and your scribbling!’ Cornelia scolded, rummaging through Marcella’s dresses. ‘Here, wear your yellow . . . when did you change bedrooms?’

‘When Tullia decided she preferred my view to her own.’ Marcella made a face at the narrow little corner chamber that had recently become hers, tugging her plain wool robe over her head and dropping it on the narrow bed. ‘So our dear new sister-in-law got the nice bedchamber with the window over the garden, and I got the view of the kitchens and the mosaic with the cross-eyed nymphs. No, put that yellow dress back, I want the pale blue—’

‘Pale blue, too plain,’ Cornelia disapproved. ‘Don’t you ever want to be noticed?’

‘Who’s going to be looking at me?’ Marcella dived into the pale-blue *stola*, shivering in the November chill that crept into the bedchamber despite the drawn shutters. ‘For that matter, who’s going to be looking at the bride? You’re the one they all want to see – the future Empress of Rome.’

‘Nonsense.’ Cornelia looped the silver girdle about Marcella’s waist, but a little smile hovered at her lips.

‘If it’s such nonsense, then why did you dress the part?’ Marcella surveyed her sister: Cornelia Prima, twenty-four to Marcella’s twenty-one; the oldest of the four cousins collectively known as the Cornelias, and the only one of them not to get a nickname. A severely elegant figure in amber-brown silk, a wreath of topaz about her throat and coiled mahogany hair crowning her head like a diadem, her oval face as classic as any statue’s. As sombre as any statue’s too, because when

Cornelia smiled a dimple appeared on each side of her mouth, deep enough to sink a finger into, and she'd long since decided that dimples weren't dignified. Smiling, she looked like the sister who had helped Marcella steal sweets from the kitchens when they were little girls. Unsmiling, Cornelia could have been a statue of Juno herself. 'You look very queenly.'

'Not queenly enough. Oh, why didn't I get your height?' Cornelia mourned, looking into the glass. 'And your figure, and your nose – this little snub of mine just isn't dignified.'

'Isn't Imperial, you mean?'

'Don't *say* it! You'll spoil Piso's luck.'

'Where is he, anyway?' Marcella reclaimed the mirror, coiling her hair quickly on her neck and reaching for the box of silver pins.

'He'll come later, with the Emperor.' Cornelia's voice sounded quite casual, but Marcella slanted a brow at her and she blushed. 'Maybe the announcement will come today . . . ?'

Marcella didn't bother asking *what* announcement. All Rome knew Emperor Galba needed an heir. And all Rome knew how highly Galba regarded Cornelia's husband, Lucius Calpurnius Piso Licinianus . . .

The November morning had dawned blue and cold. Breath puffed white on the air as Marcella slipped down from the litter at the outdoor shrine of Juno and went to join the wedding guests already waiting. Cornelia had gone to assist the bride, still toting the spearhead. *We'll see if it works any better this time*, Marcella thought as she slipped in with a group of cousins, avoiding her brother and his loathsome new wife. At the shrine stood Lollia's latest betrothed with his own entourage – Marcella had to admit he wasn't an appetizing sight. Fifty-seven, bald, wrinkled, and glaring . . . but he was very eminent; consul and adviser to Emperor Galba. All Lollia's husbands were eminent. *The richest heiress in Rome can afford to choose.*

Strains of music came fading through the crisp air at last,

and the guests rustled. The bridal procession: flute players, slaves tossing flowers into the street . . . Lollia's proud grandfather, born a slave and now one of the richest men in Rome, a festival wreath perched atop his wig . . . a curly haired doll of a little girl, Lollia's daughter from the first of her short marriages, beaming from her great-grandfather's arms . . . Cornelia, regal as any empress, leading the bride by the hand to her newest husband . . . and the bride herself in her long white *tunica*: Cornelia Tertia, known to everyone as Lollia. Not the prettiest of the four cousins, most agreed, but Lollia did have a soft chin, a lush mouth that looked almost bruised, and merry painted eyes. Her mass of curls, dutifully parted by Cornelia with a gladiator's spear to ensure luck for her coming marriage, had this month been dyed a violent red that clashed cheerfully with the flame-coloured bridal veil. Lollia's kohl-rimmed eye gave a wink to Marcella as she passed, and Marcella smothered a snort of laughter.

Cornelia put Lollia's hand into that of Senator Flaccus Vinius and took her own place in the crowd of wedding guests. 'Don't tell me,' Marcella murmured. 'You gave Lollia your little speech about how when she put the red veil on she was a carefree girl, and when she takes it off she'll be a married woman with all the attendant duties and responsibilities.'

'What makes you say that?' Cornelia whispered back as the priest began to intone a homily on the virtues of marriage.

'You gave me the same speech at my wedding. You really should get some new material, you know.'

'Well, I'm her bridal escort. I'm supposed to prepare her for what's coming.'

'She's nineteen, and it's her third wedding. Believe me, she knows what's coming.'

'Sssh!'

'*Quando tu Gaius, ego Gaia.*' Lollia joined hands with her senator at the altar, intoning the ritual words.

‘At my wedding I was so excited I could hardly stammer the vows,’ Cornelia whispered, and Marcella heard the smile in her voice.

‘At mine I was too busy hoping I’d wake up and find it wasn’t real.’

Lollia and Senator Vinius shared the ritual cake, sitting on stools inlaid with gold. Lollia’s rubies winked – cuffs on both wrists, brooches at both shoulders, shoulder-sweeping earrings, and a collar wrapping her throat. ‘Lollia gets such nice presents from her grandfather whenever she gets married,’ Marcella mused. ‘All Father gave me was a letter of congratulations sent four months late from Gaul. And he couldn’t remember who I married.’

‘Our father was a great man.’

‘He couldn’t even tell us apart! He barely bothered giving us enough of a dowry to marry on, and he didn’t come home from his precious legions one year in five—’

‘Great men have more important matters to tend to than domestic concerns,’ Cornelia sniffed. She had mourned their father very properly when Emperor Nero ordered his suicide, observing all the correct rituals, but Marcella hadn’t seen any point in pretending grief. She hardly knew her father, after all – he’d been too busy crashing around Gaul during her childhood, racking up victories. *I suppose all those victories made Nero nervous. It just goes to show that too much success is bad for one’s health.* That might make a neat little aphorism on ambition, with a bit of rewording. Just the thing to finish up her account of the life and reign of Emperor Nero . . .

A white bull was led forward onto the steps of the altar, and the priest shoved back his sleeves and cut its throat with a practised double slash. The bull bellowed, but went down easily before the shrine – a good omen for the marriage. Marcella twitched her pale-blue hem away from a creeping trickle of blood and heard a careless voice at her shoulder.

‘Am I late?’

‘Yes,’ Marcella and her sister said in unison. Diana, of course – late for everything. The bull might be dead on the altar and Lollia fidgeting, but the priest was fussing with the bloodied knife and consecrating it to the goddess of marriage, so Diana slid into place behind them.

‘I saw the most marvellous race in one of the little circuses! Four Arab stallions and a Greek running for the Whites beat Perseus and the Greens – gods’ wheels, Cornelia, what are you fussing about? Lollia won’t care if I’m late. Can you imagine the Whites beating the Greens? They’ve already sworn the Greek can’t do it in the Circus Maximus, but I think he might. Good hands, a nice sense of timing, driven eight months for the Whites so of course he hardly has any victories because Helios the Sun God couldn’t get many wins driving those mules the Whites call horses – Marcella, what are you rolling your eyes at me for?’

‘Because you’re drowning out the priest and everybody’s shushing you, that’s why.’

The wedding was over. The priest finished his prayers, and Senator Vinius offered Lollia his arm. Marcella and her sister fell in behind with the rest of the guests, making a slow procession back towards the house of Lollia’s grandfather. Everyone with a spring in their step now, as they looked forward to the wedding banquet. Lollia’s new husband was already engrossed with a gaggle of balding well-wishers, and Lollia beckoned her cousins up on her other side. ‘Come keep me company! Gods, that was a dull wedding. Is it just me, or do they get more boring every time?’

‘It’s marriage, Lollia,’ Cornelia sighed. ‘Your third or not, *try* to be serious.’

‘I think of it as less of a marriage than a lease agreement.’ Lollia lowered her voice so her new husband wouldn’t hear. ‘Senator Vinius gets conditional use of me and my dowry for

a period of time not to exceed his usefulness to my grandfather.'

'Fair enough,' Marcella conceded.

'Sorry I'm late.' Diana sauntered up to link her arm with Lollia's, not sounding at all sorry. Half a dozen charioteer medals clanked around her neck, a sprinkle of freckles gleamed like powdered gold across her nose, and her red silk dress was knotted so carelessly it looked ready to slide right off her shoulders. All the men present were probably hoping it would. 'I saw the best race!'

'Oh, don't go on again,' Marcella groaned. 'You're more boring than the whole Senate house put together.' But a beauty, of course, could get away with being boring: Cornelia Quarta, the youngest of the four of them at sixteen and certainly the most lovely, all white-gold hair and blooming skin and cloudy blue-green eyes. But Diana didn't care a fig for any of the suitors panting on her doorstep. The only thing that made her eyes shine was horses, horses and chariots wheeling around the hairpin turn at the Circus Maximus. As far as she was concerned everything else could go to Hades, including all the men begging to marry her. The spurned suitors were the ones to nickname her Diana: the virgin huntress who scorned all men.

'I adore Diana,' Lollia had said many times. 'But I don't understand her. If I were that beautiful, the last thing I'd be was a virgin *anything*.'

Marcella envied Diana too, but not for the beauty or the suitors.

'Diana, your hair looks like a bird's nest,' Cornelia was scolding. 'And couldn't you have worn something besides red? You know only the bride wears red at a wedding. A nice blue to bring out those eyes—'

Diana bristled. 'You think I'd wear blue after the way that Blues charioteer fouled us at Lupercalia?' There were four racing factions at the Circus Maximus – the Reds, the Blues,

the Greens, and the Whites – but to Marcella’s youngest cousin there was only one, and that was the Reds. She went to the circus every other day, cheering her Reds and cursing all the others like a pleb girl on a festival day. It should never have been allowed, but her father was another odd bird in the family Corneli, and he let his daughter do as she pleased.

So lucky, Marcella thought enviously, and she doesn’t even realise it.

‘Enjoy those races while you can, my honey,’ Lollia was telling Diana. ‘Galba disapproves of horse races – “frivolous waste of funds”, he calls it. If you think festivals and chariot racing won’t be first in line for budget cuts—’

‘Where did you hear that?’ Marcella asked over Diana’s groan. ‘I’m usually the one with all the news.’

‘I had myself a Praetorian guard a few months back when Galba was first acclaimed,’ Lollia explained, swirling her scarlet bridal veil over her head. ‘There, am I ready for the banquet?’

‘In all ways but modesty.’ Cornelia gave a quelling stare as they came forward into the atrium, Marcella laughed, the slaves rushed forward to place festival wreaths on Lollia and her balding husband, and everyone trooped in for the feast.

Cornelia couldn’t help a weary little exhalation as the wedding banquet swept into full swing. Lollia’s doting grandfather had put on his usual spectacle: silver dining couches heaped with Indian silk cushions, musicians plucking harps in hidden alcoves, jasmine and roses twining every column of the vast blue-marbled triclinium that overlooked the whole of the Palatine Hill. A golden-haired slave in silver tissue stood at every guest’s elbow, and a stream of servitors scurried in and out with a series of exotic dishes: sow’s udders stuffed with soft milky eggs, flamingo boiled with dates, a roast boar stuffed with a roast sheep that was in turn stuffed with game hens . . .

Such pomp and spectacle, Cornelia thought, *and for what?* She sipped her wine – ancient, expensive, and in exquisite taste, like everything else in this house. So much expense for a marriage that probably wouldn't last the year. Well, Lollia's grandfather *was* just a freed slave, even if he had managed to get rich and marry into an ancient patrician family. No matter how good his taste was, slave blood showed. Cornelia's own wedding had been a modest thing by comparison – her father would never have countenanced such expense – but she had at least managed to stay married to the same man for eight years.

Entertainers streamed out between courses: dancers in thin gauzes, poets with hymns to married love, jugglers with gilded balls. An orator in a Greek robe was just preparing a recitation when a sudden blare of trumpets drowned the plucking of harps. Cornelia looked up to see a line of red-and-gold-clad soldiers filing into the triclinium. The Praetorian Guard, personal army and bodyguards of the Pontifex Maximus and ruler of the world. Whispers ran across the throng: 'The Emperor!'

A hunched figure in Imperial purple stumped in. As one, all the guests in the room, from host to bride, rose from their couches.

'So that's him?' Marcella managed to cast her glance upward even when she bowed with the rest of the guests. 'Oh, good. My first close look.'

'Sshh!' Cornelia had seen Emperor Galba many times before – he was a distant cousin of her husband's, after all, and a guest at her table long before he'd taken the purple. A man of seventy-one, hawk nosed, wrinkled as a tortoise but still sturdy. Emperor for five months now, appointed by the Senate upon Nero's suicide. The Imperial mouth turned down in a frown as Galba looked around at the wreaths of flowers, the silver dishes, the flagons of wine. Everyone knew the Emperor had frugal tastes. 'Some might even say cheap,' Marcella murmured

whenever the latest money-saving decree passed through the Senate.

Galba made greetings in his barking voice, waving irritably for the guests to resume, and Cornelia rose from her bow and threaded breathlessly through the throng to the only figure in the crowd of Imperial arrivals who mattered. ‘Piso!’

‘My dear.’ He smiled down at her: Lucius Calpurnius Piso Licinianus, her husband of eight years. Chosen for her at sixteen, and she had never wanted another. ‘How lovely you look.’

‘Did he say anything?’ Cornelia lowered her voice as Galba stood barking orders at his Praetorians, and a troop of dancers in bells and beads undulated in to entertain the guests. ‘The Emperor?’

‘Not yet.’

‘I’m sure it will come soon.’

Neither of them elaborated. It rang loud enough unspoken: *The day when Galba chooses you as heir.*

Who else could the Emperor choose, after all? A man of seventy-one needed an heir, the sooner the better, and who would be more suitable than his distinguished and serious young cousin? Lucius Calpurnius Piso Licinianus, with his distinguished bloodlines and impeccable record of service to the Imperium? Everyone knew it would be Piso.

Certainly no man in Rome would make a handsomer Emperor. Cornelia looked at her husband: tall and lean, his features sombre but lightening when he smiled, his eyes that always looked straight at the world where other men looked for shadows. Emperor Nero had once mistrusted that straight gaze and threatened to exile her husband to Capri or even Pandetaria, where few men survived – but Piso had never looked away, and Nero had found a new fancy for his fears.

‘You look very serious,’ Piso smiled.

Cornelia reached up to smooth back a strand of his dark hair. ‘Just thinking of our own wedding day.’

‘Was that such a serious occasion?’ His dark eyes twinkled.

‘Well, I took it seriously.’ Cornelia shook her head at Lollia, who was peeling laughter from her dining couch and utterly ignoring her new husband. ‘Piso, do let me introduce you to the new Praetorian Prefect. Be sure to ask about his son’s appointment in the legions; he’s very proud of that—’

Cornelia was very proud herself, watching her husband from the corner of her eye as they made their way through the throng. A smile here and a nod there, a wine cup ready in one hand for a toast, the other hand ready to clap the shoulder of a colleague or press the fingers of a new acquaintance. Reserved, courteous, gracious . . . *regal* . . .

She made the introduction to the new Prefect, smiled, and bowed out as a proper wife should once the conversation turned to politics. Emperor Galba stayed at the banquet only a few moments more, casting another disapproving glare around the lavish room and stumping out as abruptly as he’d arrived. ‘Thank goodness,’ Lollia tittered all too audibly as the Praetorians filed after him. ‘That sour face! Nero may have been crazy but at least he had *glamour*.’

‘And Lollia may be an idiot, but she’s right,’ Marcella murmured in Cornelia’s ear.

‘She is not. Galba had a very distinguished career.’

‘He’s a sour, cheap old man.’ Marcella spoke under cover of the white-bearded orator who had just come out for the second time to launch into sonorous Greek verse. ‘All those money-skimping policies—’

‘Nero emptied out the treasury. We should be glad someone’s trying to refill it.’

‘Well, it won’t make him popular. That will work in your favour, of course – by the time Galba dies, and at his age *that* can’t be long, everyone will be cheering your Piso like a god.’

‘Marcella, hush!’

‘It’s truth, Cornelia. And I always speak truth, at least to

my sister.’ Marcella lifted her goblet. ‘Or should I say, my future Empress?’

‘You should not say.’ *Empress . . .*

Marcella’s knowing smile curled Cornelia’s toes. She never could fool her little sister – though half the time people assumed Marcella was the older: half a hand taller and as statuesque as a temple pillar; a column of cool blue ice topped with leaf-brown hair and a calm carved face. *Much more regal looking than me. Oh, why didn’t I get her nose?* ‘You should go talk to Caesonius Frugi, Marcella. He spoke very fondly of your husband, I believe they were tribunes together in the Twelfth. I’m sure you could do something for Lucius there, advance his career—’

‘Lucius can take care of his own career,’ Marcella said. ‘I’m having much more fun watching you work the room.’

‘I don’t see why you’re always so dismissive of Lucius. He’s perfectly pleasant.’

‘You aren’t married to him. We weren’t all lucky enough to fall madly in love with the man our father picked for us, you know.’ Marcella’s eyes drifted over Cornelia’s shoulder. ‘Dear Fortuna. Is that the ghastly Tullia headed straight for us? Hide me.’

‘You always do that!’ Cornelia accused. ‘Ever since we were little! Disappearing to let me face the worst – Tullia, how delightful to see you!’

‘I can’t say the same for you, Cornelia – I understand you’ve had the Emperor to dine last week, and you didn’t invite me! Your own sister-in-law—’

Eventually the sun fell, the wine sank in everyone’s goblets, and soon the guests were drifting out for the final procession. Cornelia took her husband’s arm and joined the throng, Lollia and Senator Vinius in the lead, the slaves darting ahead to throw walnuts for fertility and silver coins for prosperity. Cornelia applauded with the rest as Lollia was carried over

the threshold of her new home and knelt for the first time to light the fire in her new hearth. Squealing girls lined up for the bridal torch, and Lollia tossed it straight at Diana. Diana poked the business end of the torch at a young tribune begging her for a kiss.

‘—must come with me,’ Lollia was groaning to Marcella and Diana as Cornelia approached. The last of the guests were trailing out of Senator Vinius’s house with tipsy congratulations. ‘It’s sure to be dull as Hades – Cornelia, Vinius is dragging me to dinner at the palace with sour old Galba next week. Tell me you’ll come and glare at me for drinking too much wine—’

‘Of course I’ll come,’ Cornelia smiled. ‘Piso and I were already invited. I thought I’d wear my blue—’

‘Not blue,’ Diana said at once. ‘I hate blue, and we all have to dress in the same colour when we sally out in force.’

‘Why?’ Marcella met her sister’s eyes over Diana’s head, and they traded familiar amused glances.

‘Because we’re like a chariot team,’ Diana explained. ‘Cornelia on the inside – slow, but like a rock around the turns. Marcella next, steady on the inner pair. Then Lollia, fast but wild. And on the outside, me. Fastest of anybody.’

‘Why am I the slow one?’ Cornelia wondered, and they all started giggling. Vinius frowned.

‘Better go, my loves.’ Lollia caught his expression, groaning. ‘And pity me, because the worst part of the day is yet to come.’

‘Don’t be crude,’ Cornelia chided.

‘He smells like sour milk,’ Marcella said, ‘and I imagine he’ll last about as long.’

‘Is he a Reds fan?’ Diana asked.

Lollia kissed them out the door, and Cornelia took her husband’s arm. She turned to wave her sister and cousin into the dark and saw Diana toss the wedding torch into the gutter.

‘A very good wedding.’ Piso raised a hand, and one of the

hovering slaves dashed forward to beckon their litter. 'An older man will steady Lollia, I'm sure.'

'He won't have her long enough to steady her.' The litter approached; Cornelia accepted her husband's hand in and drew the rose silk curtains against the garish yellow glow of the streetlamps. 'Lollia's grandfather will have her divorced and married to someone else the minute Senator Vinius ceases to be of use.'

Piso gave the litter a tap, and it rose swaying on the backs of six Gauls and went trotting into the night. The curtains fluttered, and a wedge of yellow lamplight cut across his aquiline nose and square jaw. Cornelia smiled. Her husband smiled back, moving from one side of the litter to the other to settle his arm about her, and she could feel the litter-bearers hitching below to accommodate the shifted weight.

'I went to the temple of Juno today,' Cornelia found herself saying against Piso's shoulder as the litter jogged into the night.

'You did?' Had he tensed?

'Yes. I had a sow sacrificed. I think it will do better than a goose.'

'You know best, my dear.' Eight years of marriage, and he had never uttered one word of reproach for her failure to provide him with children.

Sometimes I wish he would.

'So Diana caught the bridal torch,' Cornelia said brightly. 'She'll be our next bride.'

'They'll have a job forcing that one into a red veil,' Piso laughed. 'Lollia will be on her fourth husband before they get Diana to her first.'

'Lollia thinks husbands are like new gowns.' The litter jolted to a halt; Cornelia saw the flickering torches before their front gate and gathered her skirts as Piso stepped down. 'Just get a new one every season, and throw out the old.'

'She's one of the new wives.' Piso gave his arm to hand her

out of the litter. ‘There are not so many of the classic sort, my dear.’

He smiled. Cornelia squeezed his hand as he lighted her to the courtyard, and they passed under the guttering torches. In most houses the slaves would have all been dozing against the walls, but Cornelia’s slaves were alert and waiting, whisking the cloaks away and bringing drinks of warmed wine. Torchlight flickered on the long line of ancestral busts lining the hall in niches; Piso’s taking one wall, stretching back to Pompey Magnus and Marcus Crassus; Cornelia’s taking the other wall, starting with the first of the Cornelii who had come from the Etruscans. The last of the busts was Piso’s own aquiline face, carved by Diana’s odd sculptor father and presented on their wedding day. *He made the mouth too pinched*, Cornelia thought.

‘Lollia is one of the new model of wives,’ Piso repeated, putting an arm about her waist now that the slaves had retreated from their bedchamber. ‘I am pleased to have my Cornelia.’

Cornelia smiled a little, feebly. So Lollia was a fickle wife, vain and giggly and frivolous. She’d still been rewarded with a child: Little Flavia Domitilla, three years old and pretty as a sunbeam, whom Cornelia had carried upstairs to her bedchamber in the middle of the wedding banquet when she fell fast asleep in the middle of all the excitement.

And her cousin hadn’t even wanted Flavia. ‘I was so careful,’ Lollia had complained when she found herself pregnant. ‘How in the name of all gods did this happen? Who even knows if she’s Titus’s or not. I hope she looks like him . . .’ Cornelia had had to bite her tongue savagely at that.

Many years ago, another Cornelia of their family had famously been asked why she wore no jewels, and she had gathered her children about her to say that her sons were her jewels.