

# FLAVIA'S SECRET

Lindsay Townsend  
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## Chapter 1

*Britannia, 206 A.D.*

Flavia was sweeping leaves when he came out of the villa. Carrying a brazier, he strolled down the steps and passed the frosted lavender bushes with that loose-limbed stride of his, looking as if he owned the place. Which he did, she conceded. Marcus Brucetus now owned the villa and everyone inside it.

She clutched the broom close and darted behind one of the columns fringing the square courtyard and its central open space, whispering, 'Please.'

Please do not see me, she meant. She wanted him to leave, to be an absentee landlord of this small estate in provincial Britannia. It would be safer for everyone if he left. He had been watching her at the funeral, scrutinizing her with thoughtful dark eyes. She hoped he had forgotten her since then.

She risked peeping round the column. He had set the brazier in the middle of the courtyard, beside the ivy-clad statue of the god Pan, and was coaxing the fire into leaping tongues of flame. In the red glow of dawn and the orange glare of the brazier, she could see him plainly: tall and long legged, his simple dark red tunic showing off muscular shoulders. Above tanned, lean features his short, dark brown hair looked as tough and straight as a boar's pelt. He was a tribune, off-duty and no longer in armor, but still a soldier and a Roman, one of the conquerors of her country.

'Come here, Flavia,' he said quietly, without raising his head. Disconcerted at being discovered and more so by his remembering her name, Flavia stepped out of the shadows of the peristyle and approached, her rag-shod feet soundless on the icy gravel path.

'Gaius said that I would find you out here.'

Another shock, she thought. He spoke her language perfectly. Satisfied with the fire, he looked her up and down, studying her flyaway hair and wiry figure, her baggy, patched dress of undyed wool, one of the cook's cast offs.

She gasped as he took the broom from her.

‘I ask you again—is sweeping not Sulinus’ job? He is the gardener.’

‘He’s chopping wood,’ Flavia stammered, ashamed and alarmed at having missed Marcus Brucetus’ first question. She was conscious of his height and strength, both in stark contrast to the frail, elderly bodies of the male household slaves.

‘Sweeping is one of your tasks?’

Flavia nodded. ‘When Lady Valeria was alive, she wanted the courtyard kept tidy. We are a small household, sir. My mistress preferred to live quietly, with a few close attendants.’

‘Four ageing slaves and you,’ Brucetus corrected, ‘My adopted mother’s female scribe.’ He shook his head, tossing the broom casually from hand to hand. ‘Valeria never liked a man to tell her anything, and she always did pick the unusual over the conventional.’

Ignoring his amusement at her expense, Flavia fought down panic. Surely this Roman would not be so cruel as to sell the older servants? Surely he would not separate Gaius from his Agrippina, or Sulinus from Livia? She swallowed the rising knot in her throat. ‘We are all loyal, sir, and we know what the house needs to run smoothly.’

‘Indeed.’ Looking into Flavia’s bright gray eyes, he smiled and gave the broom back to her. ‘Be at peace. I don’t throw servants out into the streets to starve: loyalty cuts both ways. When you know me, you will see this.’

‘Sir?’ Flavia felt confused by this unexpected candor. She knew that she, more than any of the household, should be wary of this Marcus Brucetus, but she could also still feel the warmth of his hand on the broom handle. Over the crackle of the brazier fire, she could hear his steady breathing. ‘Thank you,’ she murmured, and turned to go.

‘Wait,’ he commanded. ‘I have some questions. Now that the official mourning period is over, it is time.’

Flavia’s heart began to race, but she did not think she had betrayed herself until Marcus said firmly, ‘Don’t stand there shivering. Warm yourself by the brazier. That is why it is out here, so we can talk in private.’

Flavia took a sideways step towards the glowing charcoal. She was trembling, but not from the cold. She was afraid of what he might ask.

‘How old are you?’

‘Almost eighteen, sir.’

His black eyebrows came together in a frown, swiftly replaced by a grin. ‘Don’t try to fool me, Flavia. You are young enough to be playing with dolls, a spry little thing like yourself.’

Flavia said nothing. If he underrated her, so much the better. Above all,

let him not ask too many questions about the death of her beloved mistress. She tightened her grip on the broom and wished herself far away.

‘No indignant denial? Maybe you are almost eighteen.’ Marcus stretched a hand towards her, giving a grunt of amusement as Flavia stiffened. ‘You are almost as skittish as my horse. You have a leaf in your hair—see?’ He plucked a copper beech leaf from one of her blonde plaits, his thumb pushing her soft fringe away from her forehead. ‘Such smooth skin,’ he murmured. ‘You could make a fortune in the great bath-house in this city, selling your secrets for that skin.’ He flicked the leaf onto the brazier. ‘How long have you lived in Aquae Sulis?’

‘All my life.’

‘With the Lady Valeria?’

‘No, sir. She was the second person—this is the second household in which I have served.’

‘Were your parents free?’

‘No,’ Flavia whispered. ‘They were not.’

She tried to lower her head but, quick as she was, Marcus was too fast, catching her chin in his hand. She stared into his dark blue eyes, hating herself for the tide of color that she could feel sweeping up her face.

He watched her a moment. ‘Truly, you Celts are a proud people and you, little Flavia, you are so stubborn you will not even admit your condition. I can acknowledge the vagaries of fate that make us as we are when our situations might easily be reversed, but mark this—’ He lightly shook her head and then released her. ‘You are mine now.’

‘Do you think I don't know?’ Horrified at her own free way of speaking, Flavia clamped her jaws so sharply together that her head seemed to ring. It was instead the sounds of the metal-workers’ shops beginning another day’s work, she realized. Around her, hidden by the walls of the town villa, Aquae Sulis was stirring into life.

‘I shall let that go, but be careful.’ Marcus hooked his thumbs into his tunic belt and leaned back against the marble statue of Pan. ‘Do you remember them, your father and mother?’

‘A little.’ Flavia was unsure what to make of this man. One second he was looming over her, threatening, the next patient, rippling the fingers of one hand to invite her to talk. She was reluctant to share her memories with a Roman, but knew she must say something. ‘My mother had a beautiful singing voice. My father was very quick.’

‘Like you.’

Again, he had surprised her. In the silence that fell between them, Flavia heard a young street trader in one of the alleyways begin his piping cry,

‘Sweet chestnuts, freshly roasted!’ She could hear the rumble of hand-carts and smell the aroma of freshly baked bread. All were signs of her city waking up. A day her mistress, the formidable yet generous Lady Valeria, would not see.

Trying not to think of the old lady, Flavia looked up as Sulinus wandered past, dressed in his swathe of ragged cloaks—as many as the gardener could find in this frosty weather. A dark head blocked her view, a face in profile, gleaming in the red winter morning light like a cast of bronze, although no statue had such watchful eyes.

‘Have you people no proper clothes?’ Marcus muttered, a question Flavia knew she did not have to answer. She found herself watching his mouth: there was a small ragged scar close to his lower lip. His forearms carried several scars, the results of sword cuts in many skirmishes. A warrior, her senses warned, but even so, she was unprepared for his next question.

‘And where is your sweetheart in this city? An apprentice cobbler, perhaps? Or do you prefer someone with softer hands, another scribe like yourself? A desk man!’

‘Follow me!’ he barked, and strode along the gravel path, his sandaled feet stamping through ice puddles.

Flavia scrambled to keep pace with him. Whatever happened, she did not want him taking his ill temper out on Gaius or Agrippina or any of the others. These were all the family she had and she was determined no harm would come to them. No harm, especially, from what she had done.

‘No.’ Marcus ducked under the peristyle and then stopped, slapping one hand against the nearest column. He turned back to face her, his face rigid with distaste. *Memories of Germania do no good here*, he thought. He stepped out into the courtyard again and smiled at her, with his eyes more than his mouth. ‘We were speaking of your past, not mine.’ He took her free hand in his, running his fingertips over her palm. ‘These hands have held more than a pen. What else do you do here?’ And before Flavia could answer, ‘Let us walk in the air. The house is still hers to me—Lady Valeria’s. I am not surprised that you miss her.’

‘Every day,’ Flavia admitted. ‘She was a good lady.’

‘An honorable woman and a shrewd judge of character. I enjoyed our correspondence.’ He gave her a searching look. ‘Did you write her letters?’

‘Not all,’ Flavia said quickly. Her mistress had been writing or dictating letters to Marcus for the last four years, ever since the Lady Valeria had met the tribune on her single trip to Rome. Flavia had no idea why her mistress had made him her heir, but they regularly corresponded, especially in the last year after Marcus’ military career brought him to Britannia, to the

northern city of Eboracum.

Flavia had never seen the tribune until he rode down from the north in response to her own letter to him, informing him of the Lady Valeria's sudden death. Now that she had met him, Flavia only knew that he made her uneasy in all kinds of ways.

They had returned to the brazier and the statue. Flavia leaned her broom against the statue and began to tease away a strand of ivy from the squat marble figure. Marcus had not yet released her other hand. She was wary of that and of having to look at him.

'The letters I received from your lady—yours was the rounder hand?'

'Yes, sir,' Flavia agreed, wishing that she did not blush so easily. They were coming to dangerous ground again, and she said nothing more.

'Could either of your parents write?'

'No, sir.'

'So you didn't learn it from them.' Marcus lowered his head towards hers. 'From your first master, perhaps?'

Flavia shook her head. 'I was very young, then.'

Marcus' fingers tightened around hers, almost a comforting gesture, and then he let her go. 'How old were you when you were separated from your mother and father?'

Flavia stole a glance at him, but his face was unreadable. 'We were not separated. I lost them—when I was eight.' Her voice faltered.

Marcus crouched beside the statue so that he was looking up at her. 'Go on,' he said quietly.

'There was a fire in the slave quarters. My father got out, but he went back for my mother and the roof fell in on them both. I was told this. I was not there. I was with the daughter of the first mistress, walking with her by the river. I had been ordered to play with her.'

Marcus saw the change come over the small blonde slave. When he had first seen her, standing so grave and quiet beside the cremation pyre at the funeral of the Lady Valeria, she had reminded him, piercingly, of little Aurelia, his own daughter. Flavia had the same delicate appearance, the same golden tumble of hair, even down to the way it tended to curl by her ears. In these things she might have been a mirror of Aurelia, who was now dead. Little Aurelia and her mother both dead of fever in the wilderness of Germania, five years ago.

The memory had almost overwhelmed him a moment ago, but he should not take out his grief on Flavia. He had thought her a soft house slave, as insubstantial as a water spirit, but her hands were toughened with years of work and she had endured loss. He could hear it in her voice.

‘They sold me soon after the fire. Perhaps they were afraid I would sicken and die. Everything was an effort to me. I could hardly run, much less play.’

She would run well, Marcus thought. Her body—the little he could see under that patched gray shift—looked straight. Skinny, one part of his mind said, but then he had surprised himself by asking about her sweetheart. A crass inquiry. Marcus scowled and listened to the rest of her story.

‘I was sold when I was eight years old and the Lady Valeria bought me. She gave me a home, a new family. She taught me to read and write. I owe everything to her,’ Flavia said simply.

He could hear her honesty, and something more. The girl was hiding something. Then he shrugged. Although his father owned slaves, this was the first time he had done so for himself and only because of Valeria’s inheritance. He felt uncomfortable with the whole business of slave ownership, especially a girl as young and pretty as this. What poor wretch of a slave did not have secrets? ‘Tell me your duties,’ he ordered.

‘I was my lady’s scribe and personal maid,’ Flavia answered crisply.

‘In place of the foolish woman who used to style her hair? Yes, I remember Valeria scribbling something to that effect on one of her letters.’ Marcus Brucetus smiled at Flavia’s stare. ‘So you will do the same for me?’ Flavia ripped another strand of ivy from the statue. ‘If that is your wish.’ She whirled about and dropped the ivy onto the brazier so that her back was to Marcus Brucetus.

‘Even your neck goes red when you blush,’ was his smug response, a remark that made Flavia long to use her broom on him. Surprised at her vehemence, she tended the fire, glad to be doing something. He chuckled, rising to his feet. ‘You are not used to dealing with men, are you?’

‘I talk to Gaius and Sulinus every day,’ Flavia shot back, a reply that made him laugh out loud.

‘Indeed! But I see that Valeria was right. How did she describe you?’ Behind her, Flavia could hear Marcus Brucetus tapping his face with his fingers. She clenched her teeth, part of her angry that her mistress had mentioned her, part of her alarmed. If the Lady Valeria had regularly added more than her signature to her letters before sealing them, what else had she told Marcus Brucetus?

Please do not let harm come to the others, Flavia prayed. If she had done wrong, only she should pay.

Marcus Brucetus cleared his throat. ‘A mettlesome little thing. May need watching. Valeria was a shrewd old bird, would you not say?’ Flavia remembered the Lady Valeria walking in this courtyard only a few weeks

earlier, in a sunny day in late summer, when the roses were in bloom. Her mistress, who had once been as straight as a spear, had been forced to lean on Flavia's arm and use a stick. She had complained vigorously.

'Look at me, shriveled like an old fig!' Lady Valeria had pinched one of her arms and then continued, 'I used to stride around this garden and now I shuffle. Don't you dare help me on these steps, girl! I want to do it myself.' She had been an independent woman, the widow of a Roman knight. Her mother had been a British princess and Lady Valeria, tall and handsome in her youth, had become a learned and decisive woman. With her iron gray hair in its severe, old-fashioned bun, her plain green gowns, her penetrating brown eyes and her restless curiosity, Lady Valeria had displayed another kind of Celtic pride. She had fought the infirmities of age.

'I've buried a husband and a daughter. I've endured the worst,' she often told Flavia. 'Let it all come! These aching limbs and failing eyes. When I become too bored I shall end it. Now that I have adopted Marcus Brucetus, he can perform the funeral rites.'

Flavia never liked to hear her mistress speak in this way, but in the end Lady Valeria, proud Romano-British matron, had chosen a Roman death. Leaving her papers all in order and dressing in her richest gown and in her best jewels, Valeria had told her attendants to leave her alone in her study for the evening. There she had taken a draught of poison in a glass of her favorite wine and died, sitting in her wicker chair, her head supported comfortably by cushions. Flavia had found her the next morning.

Remembering, Flavia shuddered. She had not cried since Lady Valeria died and she did not weep now, but every night since then she had come awake in the middle of darkness with the question, Why? on her lips.

'It is a pity,' Marcus Brucetus remarked.

Restored to the present by his voice, Flavia blinked and turned to face him. Strangely, his presence tempered her grief, if only because she had to be wary of him. 'What is, sir?' she asked.

'Your lady. My adoptive mother.' Marcus Brucetus pointed a long bronzed arm towards the great bath house and shrine of *Aquae Sulis*, the heart of the city. 'I wrote often to her of the virtues of the hot springs of this city, but no doubt she continued to bathe no more than her usual twice a week.'

'She did,' Flavia agreed faintly. Lady Valeria had considered more than two baths a week to be wallowing in luxury, a sign of moral weakness.

'But the winters were always hard for her,' Marcus Brucetus said. 'She never complained, but I could tell.'

'Often in the darkest months she would speak of making her final journey

to join her husband Petronius,' Flavia found herself admitting.

'Now she has done so—and we are the losers.' Frowning, Marcus Brucetus watched a raven floating over the thatched and tiled roofs of the villas and shops. With a curse, he turned and strode over to the nearest of the four strips of garden that bordered the courtyard's central marble statue. He snatched up a handful of earth, returned to the brazier and threw the frozen soil over the fire, instantly extinguishing the flames.

'Don't worry, I will carry this back into the house myself, later,' he said wryly, catching Flavia's anxious glance at the large, heavy bronze brazier. 'We have said enough here and I have something to show you.'

He moved off, beckoning her to accompany him.

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Flavia's spirits sank further when Marcus Brucetus led them straight through the villa to the small cozy room Lady Valeria had chosen to be her study. Closing the door, drawing the door curtain across, Marcus sat at her desk on the simple stool that Flavia had used in this room. Someone, possibly Marcus himself, had moved the wicker chair in which her mistress had died to the darkest corner of the room, a small mercy for which she was deeply grateful.

There were no windows, but Marcus Brucetus lit an oil lamp, placing it on one end of the desk. He picked a stylus from the desk, then put it aside.

'You found her here,' he said, reaching for a jug and a cup, both of red Samian ware, both new to this house.

'I did.' As he poured a cupful of wine, Flavia wondered if she should have offered to serve him.

Across the desk, he stared back at her, his dark blue eyes bright with amusement. 'I can do many things for myself. Often I prefer to. Now are you going to sit down so we can talk comfortably?'

Flavia looked hastily about the room. Aside from the wicker chair, which she would not use, there was only the blue and gold couch set against one of the plain plastered walls and the wolf skin rug in front of the desk. Lady Valeria had never permitted any of her servants, even Gaius who had been with her for twenty years, to sit on the couch.

She began to make an excuse. 'Cook will be expecting me to go with her to market for the shopping.'

'Cook can take someone else with her today, but never mind. If you want to stand, you can.' Marcus took a drink of wine and resumed. 'You also found Lady Valeria's final letter?'

Flavia felt as if her throat was closing up, but she managed to say clearly enough, 'Yes.'

Marcus studied his cup a moment. 'I know this is difficult for you, Flavia, but I am trying to be clear in my own mind that my adoptive mother passed away peacefully.'

'Oh, she did, sir,' Flavia said. 'Her face, it was so calm.' She stopped as Marcus held up a hand.

'There were no signs of disturbance in this room, no signs of a struggle?' Flavia shook her head. 'What are you saying?' she whispered.

'Nothing.' Marcus drained his cup and rose to his feet. 'I suppose I cannot quite believe that she has gone. Wait here a moment.' He walked past her and out of the room.

Once she was alone, Flavia put her face in her hands and tried to take a deep breath. She knew that in the end, Lady Valeria had chosen her own path, a path which she would never take because her secret Christian faith forbade it. Although her mistress had never questioned her about her beliefs, Flavia guessed that the Lady Valeria had known that her young female scribe had been distressed each time she spoke of choosing death and so, in a final kindness, Lady Valeria had acted without telling her.

That was what Flavia believed, which was why she had done what she had. Finding her mistress sitting peacefully at her desk, looking as if she had fallen asleep, Flavia had written a final message as if from Lady Valeria, faithfully copying the hand of her mistress. She had done this because only two days earlier Gaius had rushed in from the market, deeply distressed by a rumor going around Aquae Sulis that a nobleman had died in Rome in suspicious circumstances and that his entire household of slaves had been put to death.

'They were all crucified!' Gaius had shouted in the kitchen, his usually carefully combed-over hair falling into his staring eyes and his wrinkled, homely face bleached with distress. 'Even the children!' When she had embraced him to comfort him, Flavia had felt the old slave trembling. That remembered horror had remained with her, a goad and a warning that she must continue to be careful. Marcus Brucetus was a soldier, used to dealing in death. If he decided that he did not trust Lady Valeria's servants, might he not be tempted to make a clean sweep of them?

He was coming back; she could hear his quick firm tread on the floor tiles outside the study. Flavia let her hands drop by her sides and checked her appearance in the faintly distorting reflection of the metal tray which held the Samian wine jug. A pair of wide bright eyes, flushed forehead, cheekbones, and chin and trembling full mouth flashed into view before she

stepped back onto the rug and straightened, ready to face him.

‘Read this.’ He thrust a piece of papyrus at her.

She knew what it would be, but even braced for the shock, Flavia felt herself begin to sway. She blinked and her own writing swam back into view, her hand faking the Lady Valeria’s spare, spindly scrawl. A hasty letter, written in panic and in fear of the possible consequences should any kind of suspicion fall on the household.

‘Read it aloud,’ Marcus commanded, standing in front of her.

‘To my adopted son and heir, Marcus Brucetus, greetings—’

‘Get on with it,’ he growled.

Flavia skipped the rest of the opening. The papyrus shook slightly in her hand as she read on. ‘I am sorry if what I’ve done here causes you any grief, but you should know that it is no hardship for me to leave this painful life. I have chosen my own end willingly, secure in the knowledge that I will be reunited in the hereafter with my beloved husband Petronius.’

‘Stop.’ Marcus cupped her chin in his hand and raised her face. ‘Why did she not free Gaius or Agrippina?’ His voice was soft, but the planes of his face were unyielding. ‘Would that not have been a final generous act?’

‘I don’t know why!’ Flavia tried to tear herself free, but even as his grip fell from her chin, Marcus clamped his arms around her middle.

‘No, you don’t.’ He gave her a shake and, as Flavia’s hands automatically came up to fend off possible blows, he dragged her against himself, trapping her arms against his chest.

‘Is that what you believe, Flavia? That your mistress was not thinking when she acted?’

His arms were tight around her and, just for a moment in his arms, Flavia experienced a sense of peace that she had never known before. In that second she spoke her heart. ‘It was unlike her to forget loyal service, but then in the end she may not have had much time.’

Flavia closed her eyes, seeing Lady Valeria in the wicker chair, her eyes closed, one hand lying flat on her desk as if stretching for her stylus. That was what must have happened. That was why her mistress had left no note.

‘How did she come by the poison?’

At the sound of Marcus’ voice, Flavia started, suddenly becoming aware of him again, making her even more conscious of the gulf between them, free and not. He could do virtually what he liked to her, to any of the others, and nothing would stop him, least of all Roman law or morality.

‘I don’t know,’ she stammered, looking up into his eyes. She wanted to plead for the others, but in the end it was the grave intensity of his face that made her add purely for his peace of mind, ‘The day before she died, Lady

Valeria went out alone to the baths. There was a healer there, an apothecary she knew well.'

'You think she bought the hemlock from him?'

Flavia nodded, afraid to speak in case she broke down. For the hundredth time, she wished Lady Valeria had not done it.

'If only she had spoken,' she murmured. 'I used to massage her with oils—she told me that they helped, that they eased the pain.' She could not go on.

'I will talk to this apothecary.' Marcus was staring at her again, his eyes as brilliant as a falcon's above his aquiline nose. 'You have eased my mind, Flavia.'

'I have?'

'Indeed. In some ways, at least.' His mouth quivered with suppressed amusement, but even as Flavia sagged slightly against him relieved that he was not angry, Marcus lowered his head.

For an instant, she was actually convinced that he was going to kiss her, but instead he gave her hair a quick tug. 'Are you listening?'

*What else would I be doing?* Flavia thought, but she stopped herself from saying it. She was still locked into his arms. 'May I sit down?' she asked, despising herself for asking, but wanting to be away from this disturbing man who remained a danger to her and to the rest of the household.

Marcus lowered his arms. 'There is your usual seat.'

Flavia walked stiffly round the desk and sat on the stool, her head high as she stared at him.

'Comfortable?' he asked, in mock solicitude.

'Perfectly, thank you,' Flavia answered, determined to show nothing, although her hands tingled with the desire to strike back.

'Good! I like my people to be comfortable.' Marcus began to pace across the wolf-skin rug, crossing the room from side to side.

'You are listening?' he asked a second time.

'Yes, sir.' Flavia found herself becoming apprehensive again. Her new master's next words did nothing to dispel her sense of foreboding.

'Then, I admit it, Flavia: I am puzzled. I find it curious that in the last letter I received from her, Valeria told me that she was looking forward to meeting me during the mid-winter holiday of the Saturnalia! Why should she say that, and then do what she did?'

Marcus stopped pacing, giving her a long, considering look, his black lashes and brows sooty in the flickering light of the oil lamp. 'You didn't know this? You didn't write that letter?'

'No!' Flavia was too shocked to be polite. 'You know I did not!'

‘Yes, the differences in the hand-writing; I had forgotten those for the moment.’ A glib answer that convinced Flavia he had done no such thing. As she stared back at him, Marcus began to explain.

‘Lady Valeria was looking forward to meeting me in Aquae Sulis. She seemed keen to discuss a recent imperial appointment with me; that of Lucius Maximus as a decurion, with a duty to collect taxes. For some reason, my adoptive mother disliked Lucius Maximus. She called him—what was it? “A traitor to the living and the dead, a grave robber, an unholy fellow. Not the sort of man anyone should make responsible for taxes in a city like this.” Yet Lucius Maximus is related to her through marriage: he is a Roman, one of the lady’s own class. So I do not understand.’

Marcus raised and spread his hands. ‘Do you understand it?’

‘I have never heard of Lucius Maximus,’ Flavia answered at once. ‘Is he a friend of yours?’

The instant she spoke, she regretted the easy jibe, while at the same time being astonished at the words coming out of her mouth. She had never spoken this way to Lady Valeria, never so...freely? Risking a glance at Marcus, she saw him become dangerously still, the dark stubble on his chin defining his clenched jaw. Flavia’s hands bunched into fists on her lap, then realizing what she was doing, she jumped to her feet, the stool scraping on the floor tiles.

‘Don’t think that because the desk is between us, I cannot reach you,’ he growled. He leaned over the papers and writing tablets and pinched out the lamp. ‘For your information, I do not know Lucius Maximus, but I have arranged to meet him at the baths this afternoon. You will be there as my scribe.’

His darkly handsome face took on a wicked look. ‘Perhaps you can massage me? Use some of the soothing oils you used on the Lady Valeria.’ Grinning, he turned and strolled from the room.

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