

<u>Nadia Aidan</u>

Book two in the Imperial Desires series.

Nivea has suffered once through a loveless, passionless marriage and refuses to do so again. Set to wed in two months time, she overhears Gaius Ovidius joking with his comrades how she shall never please her intended, who is well known for possessing *unique* desires. Nivea forms an idea... If Gaius knows so much about the pleasures to be had in her marriage bed, then she shall have the handsome centurion instruct her accordingly.

Initially set against her plan, Gaius eventually agrees. After all, how difficult could this be? Nivea has offered him a substantial sum in exchange for his *lessons*, and she is quite comely. Not an arduous task to bed a beautiful, lonely widow. It should have been a simple business transaction, a mutually pleasing but brief affair. Yet Gaius never wagered Nivea would steal his heart.

Now just days before her wedding, Nivea will be forced to choose—abandon a life of security with her intended for a lifetime of happiness with Gaius...a man who can offer her nothing except his love.

#### Ellora's Cave Publishing



Centurion's Vow

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# **CENTURION'S VOW**

Nadia Aidan

## **Chapter One** Siga, Imperial Province of Rome

The *forum* at Siga paled in comparison to the opulence of Rome's. Its shops were not as extravagant, its wares not as fine. But like every *forum* within The Empire, it was the center of any town, large or small, and thus, it was the place where the latest gossip could be heard.

Nivea Tibernius had not come to the *forum* for gossip. She'd set out just past midday to peruse the offerings of the *mercatores* in an attempt to escape her home, and with it the oppressive air of finality which had descended upon it ever since she'd accepted Flavius Cicero's offer. She'd practically fled from her villa to avoid having to endure her own endless musings of the wisdom of her decision, and had not set out to hear gossip of any kind. Thus, it was ironic that she utterly failed in escaping her thoughts when she stumbled upon a discussion of which she was the principle subject, that was riddled with *gossip*.

The golden rays of the sun poured down upon her, warming Nivea's skin as she walked through the long rows of shopkeepers until she came upon a woman selling fine adornments with intricate designs. Stopping to peruse the woman's wares, her attention was instantly drawn to a small comb of lapis lazuli and ivory with a band of pearls across the top. She fingered the comb with interest, setting it down for just a moment to reach into her drawstring satchel and hand the woman two *denarii*.

With a curt nod she accepted the carefully wrapped comb from the shopkeeper and turned to leave, but drew up short at the sound of her name floating upon the wind, followed by the hearty echo of masculine laughter.

Nivea stood within a shadowed corner, her frame hidden behind the flap of one of the shopkeeper's tents. The end of it rustled in the slight breeze, further obscuring her presence as she peeked out ever so slightly, her gaze lighting upon four men who lounged about in one of the shops that sold foodstuffs.

The four of them sat upon stools around a small platter that was filled with goat cheese, olives and figs. They were centurions, soldiers of the Roman Army, taking a break from their duties to enjoy their midday meal. And as each of them picked from the platter, their armor shimmered brightly beneath the blazing noon sun. She squinted against the burnished rays of copper and gold filling her vision.

"What do you think of the old general finally deciding to take another wife?" Nivea's gaze snapped to the man who'd posed the question. His hair was a dull blond, specked with gray, his bronzed skin leathered and worn. She studied him closely, wondering if he was referring to the only old general who Nivea knew.

"Who Cicero?" asked the soldier closest to him and Nivea stilled when he nodded.

"You jest, Lycenius."

"I assure you he does not," piped in another man, who was much younger than his three companions, and Nivea found herself eerily mesmerized by the shimmering blue pools of his eyes as he spoke. "My father shared with me the same. Cicero is set to marry the young widow, Nivea."

"Ah yes, Nivea," said one of the soldiers with piercing eyes that reminded her of a hawk assessing its prey. "She is quite comely, and wealthy I hear. Cicero probably counts himself fortunate to have secured her hand."

Lycenius shrugged. "Perhaps. Although Cicero has done quite well for himself since retiring, and I have never known of him to lack the attention or company of lovely women."

"Then why has he decided to wed after all these years?" questioned the man who sat beside Lycenius.

"Who knows really," he responded. "He may want sons –"

"Or he may wish to cloak himself in the propriety of marriage while he continues his *other* pursuits."

That last statement came from the handsome, blue-eyed man, and by the way the others stared at him, their expressions revealed to Nivea they were just as curious as she as to the meaning of his words.

"What are you about, Gaius Ovidius?" Lycenius demanded with narrowed eyes.

Gaius shrugged, but the small grin upon his face caused Nivea to hold still where she stood even as her ears perked up.

"Come now, I am sure you have heard of how Cicero frequents The Cave."

"Only that he frequents it," replied the man with the hawk eyes.

Gaius' lips curled into a knowing smile. "Well I shall say only this. From what I've heard of Cicero's pursuits, it would have been better for his bride and himself if she'd been a virgin and not a widow."

"Why is that?" Lycenius demanded to know.

Yes, why *was* that, Nivea wished to know as well.

"With a virgin, Cicero could teach her how to see to his..." Gaius paused as if searching for the right words. "His unconventional needs and she would never know the difference. Yet a widow knows of the marriage bed, and she will not be so quick to fulfill his baser urges because she is not ignorant. She will know what he asks of her is not typical."

Everyone's eyebrows arched, including her own, but the centurion closest to Lycenius was the only one to speak. "Do you think his new bride is ignorant of his ways?"

"I do not know." Gaius shrugged. "But I imagine so. I just do not know who I feel the most compassion for – Cicero because he will never find satisfaction in the marriage bed, or his new bride, because neither shall she."

"I say his new bride," Lycenius offered as he raised his cup to his lips and took a sip of wine. "Because at least Cicero knows what he is getting into, while she is woefully ignorant."

As if in agreement, the rest of the men raised their cups and chuckles rose from all of them as they shook their heads before drinking of their wine.

Nivea slipped away then as the soldiers continued their meal. Clutching the comb within her hand, she traveled home, her thoughts more muddled and jumbled than they'd been before she'd left her villa as her mind brimmed with a host of unanswered questions.

Why would those soldiers, who did not know her, have such compassion for her?

What was it about the desires of her soon-to-be husband that would make them pity her so?

And what was this place called The Cave?

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days ago Gaius Ovidius, legion commander of the province of Siga, had sat in the *forum* discussing everything from military pursuits to Roman politics with the regional generals who he reported to.

Thus, Gaius thought it interesting that when he rose for the morning he was greeted by a messenger requesting his immediate presence at the villa of Matron Nivea Tibernius—the very woman who'd been an almost passing topic in his lengthy discussion while he'd enjoyed his noonday meal.

He was not scheduled to return to his legion until the morrow, so he journeyed to Nivea Tibernius' villa just before noon. Yet, even if he'd been set to return that day, he would have delayed his departure to visit the Roman matron.

The former wife of Cyprus Tibernius was well known throughout Siga and beyond. His friend Lycenius had not spoken false when he'd heralded the woman's beauty and her vast wealth. What he'd not mentioned was that Nivea Tibernius was of a

distinguished patrician family whose influence was vast. Gaius also came from an influential family, but their stature and power paled in comparison to that of Nivea's. As it was, he would have been a fool to refuse her summons, and Gaius was not, which was why he found himself entering her villa just as the sun climbed to its highest point in the sky.

Gaius trailed behind the servant as he was led through the open colonnades, past the opulent gardens, which boasted a trickling marble fountain that emptied into the crystalline waters of a large pool.

He turned a corner and was ushered into the private *triclinieum*, a modest room lined with couches and lit by the small firelight flickering from the oil lamps along the walls.

With a nod, the servant announced his presence and then slipped from the room. Despite the light from the lamps, the small space was weighed down by shadows and Gaius was forced to squint in order to see the small figure standing across the room.

The sound of sandaled feet treading softly across the mosaic tiles grew louder as the figure drew nearer. He inched closer. He narrowed his gaze, his eyes slowly adjusting to the muted light at the same time the figure stepped from the shadows into the soft rays of the firelight.

He'd never been a personal acquaintance of hers, but he'd caught glimpses of the woman before him over the years. Yet to gaze upon her, closer than she'd ever been to him and beneath the soft light, caused a slight stirring within his gut.

The daughter of a Roman senator and Carthaginian princess, Nivea Tibernius was a regal, exotic beauty. Her lustrous sable locks hung in coiled ringlets down her back and brushed across the smooth skin of her cheek, which reminded him of shimmering, liquid bronze. A single tendril of hair rested along her delicately arched brow, drawing his attention to her golden eyes that tilted at the corners, which when stared into had the power to captivate a man.

Gaius found himself duly captivated as he drowned within her warm honey gaze that ensnared him, mesmerized him.

"Thank you, Commander Ovidius for responding to my note. I worried that you had already departed to the province outskirts."

Gaius smiled at the rich, dulcet tones of her voice as he nodded curtly. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, Matron Tibernius."

The ripe, full curve of her lips puckered slightly when she frowned and he wondered at the reason for her displeasure until she spoke.

"Nivea," she replied. "Given the reason why I have requested your presence, I would think it more fitting if you would simply call me Nivea."

Gaius' brows lifted at her odd statement, but he did not respond as he dipped his head in acknowledgement of her request.

On his way there, he'd done nothing else but wonder why she'd requested his presence, and his curiosity only grew as he noticed her shifting gaze and that her hands trembled as she wrung them together.

Gaius was tempted to speak, to say something that would put her at ease, except he did not know what it was that had her so anxious. So rather than utter a sound, he continued his silence, waiting her out. When she finally did speak, he froze, unprepared for the words that tumbled from her full lips.

"I did not set out to pry, but I was in the *forum* two days past, and I heard what you said of Flavius Cicero—"

Gaius started, his brows lifting. "My apologies Matron Tibern—"

He stopped when she held up her hand and shook her head. "There is no need to apologize. I was not offended by what you said. Quite the opposite." His eyes narrowed as he studied her quietly, pensively. "Your words left me with many questions. You have aroused my curiosity and I have brought you here, seeking answers."

Gaius, who'd grown still from the moment she'd mentioned she'd heard his conversation in the *forum*, became frozen in place, his heart hammering in his chest at the meaning of her words.

She could not mean to ask him –

"I see the look upon your face and I realize this must come as a surprise. A proper matron of Rome does not inquire of such things, but if you know of me, then you know I am not always known for possessing a conventional nature."

Gaius knew this to be true. Upon the death of her mother, Nivea's father had indulged her willful nature, thus, his daughter was well known for being headstrong and stubborn. Nivea Tibernius had often attributed her nature to her Carthaginian heritage, although Gaius suspected that was a convenient excuse used by a woman who did what she wished whenever she wished it. She had earned the reputation as a cunning and intelligent landowner who did not suffer fools and did not mince words.

"First, I wish to know of this place you called The Cave."

"Then I suggest you speak with your intended."

Nivea speared him with her gaze, but he held it easily. If she knew anything of him, then she also knew he was a man of indomitable will, a stubborn nature, and he would not be quick to allow himself to be dragged into what promised to be a complicated situation if he divulged the secrets of his former commander.

"Fine. Tell me this, why would Flavius be better suited to a virgin than a widow?"

"If you overheard my conversation then you already know this." Gaius found his breath dragging through his chest as he forced out the last words. Nivea had drawn closer, and with every step the sweet, subtle scent of her perfume tickled his nose and filled the aching spaces within his lungs so that every time he drew a breath he was filled with the scent of her. She was wreaking havoc upon his senses and she knew it.

"I only wish to know how to please my future husband. Would you deny me that?"

Gaius pondered her words as the visage of Flavius Cicero flickered into his mind. The retired general was his own father's age, and though he would still be considered fit and handsome, Gaius thought him a weathered old man with a brusque, almost cold nature.

Gaius had been within The Cave many times and witnessed the baser needs of Cicero. Flavius Cicero was given to desires that were satiated only from the pain of others. Gaius understood such needs, because he possessed them as well, the only difference was that Gaius sought pleasure from those he inflicted pain upon, while Cicero did not. Flavius Cicero desired only to cause pain.

"Trust me when I say you do not wish to please your future husband."

Her brows lifted. "Of course I do—"

"No-you-do-not," he bit out each word, his voice rougher this time. She was so close that he could touch her, she was so close that every pore within his body absorbed her essence and strained for more. He almost gasped with half desire, half surprise, when his cock swelled then hardened within the confines of his *bracca*. He'd not experienced such pure and instant desire for a woman in so long that it shocked him, it scared him.

"What is it that he does that I should fear?" she asked in a quiet voice, tinged with the very emotion she'd just named.

A war raged within him. Gaius longed to tell her the truth so she would end this betrothal and be done with Cicero, but the other part of himself told him this was none of his business, the affairs of others were not his concern. In the end, his sense of honor won out, as misguided and misplaced as it was.

"Your intended enjoys inflicting pain upon others. He derives a sense of pleasure from the suffering of others."

Her eyes widened.

"Now do you understand why I tell you that you do not wish to please your future husband?"

She nodded, but her next words told him that she did not.

"And you think I would be repulsed by this?"

His eyes narrowed. "If you are not then you should be."

"But I have never experienced such a thing." Her gaze bore into him. "How do you know I would not enjoy his desires when I do not even know myself?"

"Nivea – "

"Before I compromise my betrothal, I would know what I am getting into. I wish you to take me to this place called The Cave so that I may see for myself—"

"No-"

"Then show me what it is Flavius does to women—"

"It is not something to be shown."

She tilted her head to the side, her hair tumbling over a bare shoulder, and he knew the moment his words found purchase. "Then would you *do* these things to me?"

"Absolutely not."

"But you have done these things to women before, have you not?"

Gaius pierced her with a dark glare, his thoughts, his emotions oscillating between the desire to stalk out of there, and the need to shake her until she saw reason.

"I know of you Gaius Ovidius, just as I have known of the whisperings of my intended. Until two days ago I thought them to be rumors, and so I ignored them. But no longer. It took me two days to call upon you, because I spent those days asking questions of you. I know your desires are the same as Flavius' -"

"They are not the same," he blurted out before he realized what he'd just admitted to, before he had the temerity to stop himself.

She ignored him. "I also know you wish to retire soon, that you seek to purchase land to farm, but you have too few coins to do this as the second son of Claudius Ovidius. I could see that you have all the *denarii* you need to cultivate your own farm."

"If I stud for you."

She started at the sneer upon his face and the brusqueness of his voice, but she was not cowed. "If you *instruct* me on what pleases my intended."

"Why not ask him yourself?" he demanded, even though he already knew why. Matters of the marriage bed were never discussed, and certainly never broached at the time of betrothal. Once wed, one simply suffered in silence or took a lover.

"You know why," she said in answer to his question. "Besides, as I just said, I would know now before it is too late if this is a marriage I can endure. This arrangement stands to benefit us both," she pressed, her voice low.

Gaius was so tempted. He was so tempted to agree to this. Nivea had done well in asking of him. As the second son he stood to inherit nothing, the small fortune he'd amassed having come from his time in service to the Roman military. And still it was not enough for the plot of land he desired to purchase. He knew well of Flavius Cicero's desires – if anyone could teach her, prepare her, it was him.

He shook his head as if he could rid himself of the thought, surprised he'd just considered her offer. It was madness to even contemplate such a thing.

"For many reasons, I cannot agree to this," he said finally, firmly.

"And those would be?" she demanded to know.

"Most importantly, if Cicero ever learned of this, he would be furious, your reputation would suffer and he would end your betrothal immediately."

"That is my concern alone." Nivea nodded. "What else?"

He hesitated because he'd not expected such a response. Only then did he realize these many reasons were in fact only two.

"You said there were several reasons," Nivea hedged, as if reading his mind. "I wish to know why else you object."

He'd not been prepared to reveal his other reason, but as he met Nivea's waiting gaze he found himself wanting to give her the truth. He could have lied, but he did not, he *could* not as he said finally, "It has been a long time since I've lain with a woman."

Her eyes rounded and her lips parted in surprise. "Do you not desire women?"

Again, he could have lied, but for some reason he found he could only give those searching golden eyes the truth. "I desire women."

"If you think you shall not please me, again that is my concern alone," she said quietly into the strained silence that now hovered between them.

He inched closer, the heat radiating from her body surrounding him as he raked her with his gaze, so that she did not mistake his next words. "If I took you to my bed, I would please you," he replied, his voice just as low as hers had been, and when her tongue slid nervously across her lips, he knew she understood.

His words were not spoken out of pride or because he wished to boast. It was simply the truth. If he took this woman to his bed he would do everything within his power to see that she was well pleased, that she was well satisfied.

"If everything you have said is true then I implore you to consider my offer," Nivea said finally.

When he opened his mouth to protest, she shook her head.

"Just consider it. Whatever you decide, I would have your answer in person. I would have you look me in the eye when you deliver the news."

"And how long do I have to weigh your offer?"

"Since I am set to wed within the month..." She smiled, though it was only the slightest curving of her lips and it did not reach her eyes. "I would have your answer within the week."

## **Chapter Two**

A week's time?

Nivea Tibernius would have his answer by the morrow, he decided as he lounged upon the decadent couch and took liberal sips from his wine cup. Had she let him, he would have told her his answer before departing her villa, but she'd insisted he at least mull over her proposition for one night.

It was only appropriate, she'd told him.

He snorted.

Appropriate?

There was *nothing* appropriate about what she suggested. Not her proposal, not what he would do to her if he accepted it. None of it was appropriate at all.

"Are you still upset about Matron Tibernius' proposition?"

Gaius smiled as he relaxed into the hands upon his shoulders, the strong, calloused fingers easing the knots from his weary body.

Leviticus.

Gaius leaned into the young man's embrace, his lips gentle as they met the firm, strong lips of his lover in a brief, almost chaste kiss.

When he finally drew his mouth away, he turned and settled once again within Leviticus' arms.

Three years ago they'd met, when he'd been newly appointed to his post as legion commander and Leviticus had been one of the guards assigned to the home of Matron Anan Septinius, the regent of the province of Siga.

Gaius had immediately been taken with the young man and soon had him reassigned to his legion under his command. Three years ago Leviticus had been a

young, untried soldier, but Gaius had witnessed his growth, his constant metamorphosis. He bit back a sigh as he leaned deeper into the strong arms of Leviticus' embrace. And with the changes taking place within Leviticus, Gaius knew it was time for the soldier to move on from Siga.

Gaius' career within the Roman army was on the cusp of ending, but Leviticus' was just beginning.

"You did not answer my question," Leviticus whispered against Gaius' ear, forcing him to exhale a breath that was deep and strained.

"That is because I cannot begin to share how I feel. Upset? I am not upset, only torn, conflicted."

"Because you have long been without a woman."

That was one of the reasons but there were others. "That, and because it should not be my place to prepare her for the marriage bed, least of all Flavius Cicero's marriage bed."

"If she knows of you, then she also knows of Flavius' desires and yet, she still seeks to wed him, she still seeks to learn what pleases him." Leviticus shifted, forcing Gaius to turn his head to look up at him. "Nivea is well aware of what she is doing which is why I sense there is more to your indecision."

Leviticus must have noticed the flicker in Gaius' gaze and he gave a short sigh as he cupped his cheek, his hand running across the stubble of Gaius' jaw. "You will not hurt me if you lie with her. I have long known your desires have been for the touch of both men and women, but your heart only longs for one."

Gaius started to protest, but the swift shake of Leviticus' head silenced him.

"You wish to retire soon and settle here near your family to run a farm of your own." Leviticus' smile was patient, serene. "Siga was my first assignment, and within days I am to transfer to Rome. We have tried to avoid this, but eventually we knew this had to be said—"

Gaius silenced him with the hard press of his lips to his. It was not that he did not wish to hear what Leviticus had to say, because he'd expected it and was prepared for it. He silenced Leviticus because he could not bear to hear the pain that weighed down his lover's voice, the heaviness of the sorrow that also filled the young man's heart.

The sadness in Leviticus' eyes wrenched out his heart, but there was nothing Gaius could do or say to take the man's pain away. Leviticus had long known Gaius desired the touch of men and women, but he had only ever loved women. How he'd tried – desperately he'd tried – to love him back, the way Leviticus desired.

Gaius had loved a woman once, he refused to love one again, but for some reason he could not fall in love with a man, and love him with the deep intimacy needed to sustain a union. But Gaius had still tried, he'd made a valiant effort at trying to give the man his heart, at returning Leviticus' love. And truly, Gaius loved him, cared for him, but not in the manner Leviticus desired, not in the manner he needed.

That was why Gaius had finally found the strength to let him go. He'd approved Leviticus' transfer to Rome so that hopefully one day the young man would forget him and find another to love him in the way he deserved to be loved.

Shifting their bodies, he covered Leviticus' with his as he deepened their kiss, his tongue probing deep. "I am sorry," Gaius whispered against the hair-roughened skin of Leviticus as he kissed a pathway across his torso, his abdomen. When he reached his manhood, cradled within his *bracca*, Gaius quickly undid the leather bindings, releasing Leviticus' hard, proud cock that jutted to the sky.

"I am sorry," Gaius said again as he drowned within Leviticus' clear, blue eyes.

Leviticus' smile was a gut-twisting combination of sadness and acceptance as he tunneled his hand through Gaius' dark hair. "I know," he replied in a quiet voice. And that was all he said, that was all that needed to be said. They both knew how sorry Gaius was for not being able to love Leviticus back. Gaius could not help who he gave his heart to; he could not make his heart beat for someone he could not love fully.

Gaius gave a heart-wrenching sigh because he knew he would remember the look upon Leviticus' face for the rest of his life, and he swore it would torture him for just as long. That was why he closed his eyes and lowered his head to take the man's shaft into his mouth. As long as he did not drown himself in Leviticus' gaze, as long as he could focus on giving the man pleasure, he could at least pretend the guilt he would always feel did not exist, at least in these moments.

Leviticus' hand clutched the back of his head, his fingers curling tighter as Gaius bobbed his head up and down upon his lover's swollen length, taking his shaft hard and deep inside his mouth.

Leviticus moaned, Gaius with him, but the sounds of pleasure were drowned out by the fluid harmony of noises all around them. People milled about—young widows, mature widowers, those who'd divorced.

The Cave was where the wealthy, the privileged class of the extensive Roman province of Siga came to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh. Gaius was only allowed inside because of the wealth of his father. But his face was well known, and that of his constant companion, so no one took notice of the two men writhing upon the couch in plain view.

And writhing was exactly what Leviticus was doing beneath the ministrations of Gaius' hands and mouth. With one hand, he found the heavy weight of Leviticus' sac and cupped him, massaging gently as he deepened the pressure of his lips, sucking harder, taking the man's cock all the way to the back of his throat.

With every stroke, his nose brushed against the blond nest of curls that circled Leviticus' groin and Gaius drew the scent of the man inside him, his lungs filling up with the heady aroma of sweat and desire, the perfume of arousal hovering all around them.

Gaius tightened his lips around the man's flesh and Leviticus grunted harshly as his body tensed. Leviticus' shuddering release came in an explosion of seed into Gaius'

mouth and it stirred warm upon Gaius' tongue. Working his throat, he swallowed the man's essence until Leviticus' cock was soft and limp within his mouth.

Gaius released him from his lips, Leviticus' member curling softly against his body, still glistening wet with his cum and Gaius' saliva. Gaius weaved a path along Leviticus' body until he was once again hovering above him, his weight resting upon his forearms.

Leviticus' gaze found his and he reached out to cup the back of Gaius' head, pulling him close until their lips touched. Leviticus groaned into his mouth as Gaius shared the taste of his release with his lover.

He could feel the young man's cock already beginning to stir, but as for his own shaft, it was hard and ready, the tip leaking droplets of pre-cum. Not breaking the kiss, Gaius reached down, his fingers dipping into the open jar of olive oil until they were coated with it.

With his tongue still forging inside Leviticus' mouth, he slipped his hand between their sweat-slick bodies, his slippery fingers finding the tight, puckered hole of Leviticus' anus.

A soft sound escaped his lover as he pushed inside him with his fingers, his digits plunging deep, stretching the man until both of them were trembling with pleasure and the efforts of their restraint.

In a single motion, Gaius tore his lips from Leviticus' and hooked his arms beneath his legs, the hardened tip of his shaft poised at Leviticus' slippery entrance.

Gaius maintained Leviticus' gaze, as he held him spread wide, and then with achingly slow movements, he plowed inside his lover's tight tunnel on one sure thrust. Leviticus' head rolled back, his eyes closed as he let out a soul-stirring moan. Gaius' own body pulsed and shuddered with pleasure as Leviticus' rectum stretched then clenched all around his surging cock.

Buried balls-deep inside Leviticus, Gaius waited a few seconds until Leviticus' body was stretched fully enough for him to move. Then Gaius waited a moment longer until he felt confident he wouldn't spurt the second that he did.

His thrusts were gentle at first, as sweat licked across their bodies, until they were slipping and sliding against one another. With every thrust, Leviticus took him deeper until Gaius was pounding inside him on deep, plunging, frenzied strokes, his sac slapping against the other man's ass with loud smacks, joining the sounds of breathless groans rising out of them.

Gaius could already feel the tingling at the base of his spine as it wormed its way across his entire body until he was trembling with the release welling up inside him. Leviticus rocked against him, taking Gaius' cock deep, until Gaius' rod was buried fully within him, pummeling hard and strong on each and every thrust. The feeling was exquisite, the tight ring of muscle clamping down around him with every stroke of his cock.

He could no longer stave off his climax. He pounded inside Leviticus' ass until with one last deep thrust, he slammed his way inside him and stayed there. His cock twitched, his body convulsed and then he was shooting his seed within Leviticus, his hips grinding as his cock pulsed with his release. He was vaguely aware of hot streams roping his belly, his chest, as Leviticus pumped his cock, spurting out his seed all over Gaius' torso.

When both of them were finally spent, he collapsed atop Leviticus, who wrapped Gaius within his arms and held him close. They lay there together for a long while, their hearts pumping, their breaths coming in jagged pants. Even after their bodies returned to normal, they did not move as they savored the moment—the last time they would ever share a bed again.

The sound of boisterous, familiar laughter finally stirred them and they turned their heads to see Flavius—Nivea's intended—naked, drunk and stumbling from one of the private rooms with an equally nude young man upon one arm, and a nubile woman

upon the other. Both of Flavius' companions wore the evidence of lash marks across their bodies, while Flavius' sallow skin was glaringly unblemished.

"Do you still suffer guilt that you will take this man's intended to your bed?" Leviticus asked. "Nivea is comely and you need the coins." Gaius could feel Leviticus' shrug beneath his head. "So why not be paid well to teach her how to please a man such as Flavius, although it is obvious he does not deserve such a gift."

Gaius seethed as his gut twisted with knots. He did not wish to teach Nivea how to please such a brute. He did not wish to see her lovely, dusky skin battered and blemished with the marks of a whip, the angry imprints of a palm. Nor did he wish for her to suffer alone in her marriage bed, because Flavius would not come to her, because Flavius could not be fulfilled by what she offered.

As if reading his mind, Leviticus said, "It is Nivea's choice to wed Flavius, just as it is her choice to learn what pleases him. You may only warn her, what she decides after, that is her decision, and hers alone."

"You are right," Gaius finally said with a sigh. And Leviticus was—right, but such knowledge did not ease the pit within his stomach.

He still had not decided if he would accept her proposition, but he knew if he did, he was not certain if he could face himself knowing he'd trained her to please a man such as Flavius – a man who took pleasure in pain, but gave no pleasure in return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, Leviticus said goodbye to Gaius.

Leviticus was certain their parting would not be forever, for their friendship was genuine. But their time as lovers was at an end.

As Leviticus left for Rome, he wished Gaius well, and truly he meant only the best for the man who had taken his virginity, who had shown him kindness and tenderness, and in his own way had loved him deeply.

He was the only one who knew the shadows that haunted Gaius, the ghosts that plagued him, that kept him from knowing true love and that was why he wished such happiness for Gaius.

Leviticus did not know if he would find such a love in the arms of Matron Nivea Tibernius, but he prayed to the gods that Gaius *would* one day find love in someone's arms.

As for himself, Leviticus knew it would be a long time before he loved again. Gaius had been honest with him from the beginning, and it had not been Gaius' fault he could not fully love him in return. But knowledge did nothing to lessen the pain of the rejection, the bitterness that came with a broken heart. As Leviticus set out for Rome, he wished Gaius well and that he would one day know love again, while at the core himself, Leviticus wished for the same, although he knew it would be some time before he trusted his heart to another.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days after Leviticus left for Rome, Gaius still faced guilt and remorse over his relationship with the young soldier. He knew he always would. Leviticus had told him he wished for him to find love, and in the same breath he told Gaius to accept Nivea's proposition.

Gaius' brow furrowed. He did not wish to accept her proposal. Leviticus' face swam before him as he brought his trotting horse to a stop.

But out of guilt he'd promised Leviticus he would accept—but only because of the money, *and* that he felt sorry for her and what she would endure upon wedding Flavius.

As Gaius dismounted from his horse he still experienced indecision, yet as he entered the home of Nivea Tibernius and came face-to-face with her inside her *atrium*, he wagered the time for indecision was at an end.

With a curt nod, she dismissed the servant who'd led Gaius inside. When the young man disappeared, he asked, "Are we alone?"

"Yes," she replied in an almost breathless voice as she looked at him curiously. He noticed she wrung her hands together and reasoned she was nervous. Gaius stepped closer, not because it would ease her nervousness, but because by the way her eyes widened, he suspected it only heightened her anxiety.

Gaius possessed ways to put her at ease, but he would employ them at another time. For now, he only wished for privacy as he spoke to her, which is why he drew closer.

"You speak bravely of your reputation being your concern alone, but I would not wish your reputation ruined because of this. That is why, when I come to you, it will always be at nightfall when all your slaves are asleep. As for the two guards posted outside, dismiss them to other parts of your villa until midnight," Gaius instructed. "I will leave my mount a safe distance away, hidden from the main road and walk to your villa from there."

She blinked in surprise, her eyes darkening when she realized what his words suggested. "So you have agreed to my proposition?"

When he nodded, her face brightened, which forced him to say sharply, "Do not appear so excited. You may regret this later when you find yourself in Flavius' bed."

"Or I may not," she shot back. "I may be grateful."

He did not imagine so, but he did not correct her. Instead he said, "I shall join you this eve -"

"So soon?" she gasped.

"Because of your approaching wedding, I assumed you wished for your instructions to begin without delay, but if you require more time -"

"No." She shook her head. "Truly, I did not expect you to agree, so I was simply surprised that you would actually want to start straightaway, but no, this is what I wish."

She was nervous, he could feel it pouring off her in waves, and for some reason he longed to touch her. With the caress of his hand against her cheek he yearned to ease the storm flickering within her eyes.

From him, she had nothing to fear. He would never hurt her unduly, at least any pain he gave her, he would also follow with pleasure.

Now Flavius?

Gaius shook his head, trying to dispel the vision of her intended from his mind. He did not wish to think of what Flavius would do to her. That was not his concern— preparing her for the swine was his only task.

"I trust you have seen to the matter of guarding your fertility," he inquired directly.

Though he had not set out to embarrass her, a scarlet blush darkened her cheeks. Yet it was a discussion that was necessary and when she nodded, he knew she understood as well.

"While I have never required such things until now, I know of many women who drink the tea of mugwort and cohosh. I am assured such methods are effective, but I will understand if you prefer to withdraw from me."

"No, I do not believe withdrawal is necessary, as the tea you speak of is well known for its effectiveness, but if you have reservations then I will do as you request."

"I have no reservations," she said firmly, and Gaius knew well from her expression that she spoke not just of the matter of her fertility, but their entire arrangement.

"In that case, I shall come to you tonight just before the moon is at its highest point in the sky." He turned to leave, even as he continued to speak. "Make sure all who would speak of my visit are asleep and that you are alone in your quarters—"

"That is all?"

He was already stalking out of the room, but her words stopped him. He looked at her from over his shoulder, his gaze spearing her. Gaius knew well the meaning of her question.

Did he wish to greet her in the nude, tied up perhaps, blindfolded maybe, even gagged?

Whatever he did to her, he would do himself. All he wished for her to do was make sure she was alone when he came to her.

"For now that is," he said finally, turning to leave Nivea's villa until the time came for him to return.

## **Chapter Three**

Long before midnight, Nivea dismissed all her servants and slaves and instructed her guards to patrol her holdings, instead of standing watch at the entrance of her villa. Combing her vast lands was something she frequently asked of her guards, so they did not take the news with suspicion.

When Nivea was done, she took a bath and then retreated to her bedchambers.

As she donned a simple *stola* of a rich, deep indigo, her hands trembling along the golden clasp, she realized she had never been so nervous. Not even on her wedding night, as a naïve virgin, had her heart pounded so soundly in her chest, and her belly fluttered so wildly. When she noticed herself wringing her hands in earnest, she stopped, and with a sigh she settled upon the bed within her quarters.

Nivea finally acknowledged what had her so tense and anxious. It was not what Gaius would do to her, but the man himself.

Lithe, strong muscles rippling beneath golden bronze skin, and those piercing turquoise eyes that had the power to still her, then flay her where she stood. When he gazed upon her, she could imagine she was the only woman he thought of in those moments, for he focused upon her so intently, so intensely.

His riveting eyes had the power to rob her of breath, so she could only wonder what he would do to her when his calloused hands found their way upon the smooth skin of her body, when his rigid cock pushed its way inside her sheath.

Nivea shuddered at the vision, desire pulsing through her. She tried to tamp it down, reminding herself he did not desire women. She corrected herself. Gaius desired them well enough, he just never entertained affairs with them. He saved his serious attentions for men, although rumors abounded that he'd once loved a woman deeply,

that his loss of her was what had driven him into the arms of men where he'd not ventured from...until now.

At first she'd wondered why he'd decided to entertain an affair with her when he'd shunned such entanglements, but Nivea did not ponder for long, because she knew why.

Money – his desire to retire from the military to run his own farm.

Gaius was only there for the money. That was his sole purpose, his single reason.

A slight noise captured her attention and she glanced up just as the door to her bedchambers cracked open.

She stood at the same moment Gaius entered her private quarters and closed the door behind him, locking it soundly.

His eyes raked her, taking in the silk *stola* lazily draping her body, the whisperysoft fabric clinging to the fullness of her breasts, her rounded hips.

She'd worn the simple yet provocative garment to stir his passions and from the fire that leapt into his eyes, she decided his passions had been well stirred.

He stared as if he wanted her, as if he desired her and not as if it were the *denarii* which drove him to her bed.

With deft movements he removed his armor until he was clad in nothing but his leather sandals and a red tunic, then he crossed the room and halted before her, his eyes flashing with curiosity.

"I would pay well to know the thoughts brewing inside your head."

"You need not spend coins on something I would freely offer." Her smile was faint. "You gaze upon me with desire in your eyes. I simply wondered if it is my body that fuels your lusts more than the promise of *denarii*."

His lips twisted and the dark look that now shadowed his eyes told her she'd angered him.

"I accepted your proposition for the promise of coins. I come to your bed for the promise of *you.*"

She swallowed a gasp as his eyes ignited once again and she forced herself not to tremble against him when he cupped her cheek.

"Tonight I shall not make love to you," he said roughly, his thumb lightly stroking her lips, her chin, the side of her face. "I only wish to put you at ease with me, just as I wish to learn your body."

To emphasize his point, he lowered his head and she stared at him wide-eyed, thinking he would kiss her until his lips touched the skin along her shoulder.

"Close your eyes," he whispered as he trailed a languid path of kisses across her shoulder, along her collarbone and against her neck.

She slid her eyelids closed, her body trembling at the pleasurable sensations coursing through her.

He did not kiss her lips, he did not even seek to remove her *stola*. Instead he traced every curve of her body with his hands, cupping and massaging her supple flesh as he set out to do what he promised to do and that was learn her body.

With every kiss against her skin, he hesitated as if waiting for a telltale sign from her body. With the soft catch of her breath or a moan from her lips, with every sensuous caress, he seemingly trained himself to the cues of her body, kissing her in that place again if it made her moan, touching her just the same, if his gentle stroke made her sigh.

She surmised it was his intent to ease her mind, that every act at this point was to prepare her for what was to happen between them in the coming weeks as he set about gently coaxing a response from her.

Yet despite his patience, and despite the languid warmth spreading through her body that ached for more, Nivea was still not quite at ease. It had been some time since a man had shared her bed.

No matter that she had brought him there knowing what he would do to her, when Gaius trailed a pathway of kisses along her cheek, moving steadily toward her mouth as if he would kiss her, she hesitated.

She'd expected that maybe they would talk first, discuss what was expected of her, discuss matters in general. She'd wanted this and yet she'd not expected him to begin so soon, and in earnest.

All of a sudden she was nervous, her mind telling her things were proceeding far too quickly, even as her body's needs grew ever more urgent.

She could not ignore the war raging between her body and mind and she tensed beneath him, her lips clamping firmly shut when he pressed his mouth to hers. She was not even aware of what she did until he dipped his head lower, to once again kiss the space along her neck, just beneath her ear.

"I desire only your surrender, Nivea. That is the first step along this journey, but you must relax if you are to give that to me.

"You were at ease in my arms only moments ago. Recall that feeling of me kissing you, of me caressing you and know that I shall never push you before you are ready, that I shall take you further than you are prepared to go."

She did not expect her resolve to crumble so effortlessly, but the stroking of his tongue against her throat, the gentle caress of his fingers across her thighs as they slowly pushed her *stola* up along her body, his tender, gentle ministrations easily plowed through her defenses. His coaxing words shattered the last vestiges of her resistance, until she was trembling against him.

This time when he settled his lips upon hers, she opened her mouth beneath his, a soft moan escaping her as their tongues twined and she tasted him upon her lips. A ball of heat furled in her belly and her blood ran hot through her veins as she clasped her hands behind his neck, holding him close.

The swells of her breasts flattened against the hard, muscled planes of his body as the iron length of his bulging manhood pressed deep into her belly.

He groaned against her lips, deepening the pressure of his kiss as he urged her backward. When the backs of her knees reached the edge of the bed, he gently lowered her until the upper half of her body was nestled against the soft woolen blanket, while her legs dangled over the side.

A gasp of surprise rose up and out of her when Gaius dropped to his knees to spread her thighs and settle them atop his shoulders.

She was bare beneath her garment, the lips of her womanhood glistening wet with her arousal. He knelt before her within the crook of her legs he held spread wide, and she had never felt so vulnerable, so open and exposed.

When he leaned forward as if to press his lips against her core, she nearly shrieked as she pushed at his shoulders.

"What are you – " Nivea couldn't bring herself to finish and she tried again. "What are you doing?"

An imperious eyebrow arched. "Do not tell me you are a stranger to such things?"

Her cheeks blossomed with heat at the look within his eyes, and without words he conveyed his every thought.

She was a widow, no stranger to the marriage bed.

Yet her husband had not done such things to her, with her.

She was likely as inexperienced and untried as a virgin.

Which meant his task would prove more complicated than he'd first assumed.

She struggled against him, trying to wrench free of his grasp and the expression upon his face that made her feel the fool.

With his strong grip upon her thighs he imprisoned her with his hands and then lifted himself to cover her with his body, trapping her against the bed. He leaned over her, his face hovering close so that with every breath warm air stroked across her skin.

"That your husband did not make love to you with his mouth is not your fault but his." As Gaius spoke he dipped his head to kiss the tip of her nose, then both cheeks.

She closed her eyes and he kissed each eyelid. When he finally brushed his lips against the crook of her neck she was a writhing puddle of desire and arousal.

"Your husband was a fool and a selfish lover," he whispered against her throat, and Nivea swore his voice brimmed with anger that her husband would neglect her so. She smiled at the tender gesture, though he could not see it as he once again settled between her parted thighs.

He kissed the insides of her thighs, teasing her with the soft brush of his tongue against her skin, but never once moving to touch the core of her.

Nivea clutched at his head, her fingers wringing his hair as desire battered her, only to be denied. When finally she could endure no longer she called out his name. He looked up at her, his eyes arrogant, his grin wicked, but he did not speak as he kissed his way along her leg. Gaius held her gaze as his lips feathered against her skin, the heat of his breath whispering across her body. Not once did he release her from the spell of his gaze, and she did not have the strength to pull away. So when he finally settled his mouth against her dripping wet core, she could do nothing else but drown in the depths of his eyes as pleasure burst inside her.

With desire coursing hot through her veins, her head fell back against the bed and she clung to Gaius, her fingers clenching the back of his head. His tongue was wet and slippery against her moist folds as he pushed inside her, then pulled out, initiating a pulsing rhythm that set off a firestorm within her.

A low moan escaped her lips as his fingers dug deeper into her thighs and he devoured her in earnest, his mouth closing around the tiny bud at the apex of her womanhood. He sucked the tender flesh deep within his mouth, teasing her hardened nub with his tongue. Her hips jerked as an arrow of heat pierced her. The wave of pleasure that swamped her was so unexpected and so intense that for the briefest of seconds it stole her breath and her voice.

As her climax washed through her, she cried out on a broken sob, her hands trembling in his hair as shudders racked her until she was boneless, until she was spent.

She was barely able to breathe when he lifted above her, his lips glistening with the wetness of her desire. Before she could say a word, he claimed her mouth in a strong, possessive kiss that seared her. She wrapped him in her arms, her legs clasping behind him as she savored the taste of her essence upon his lips. It was a heady feeling, as if she'd overindulged in wine. It was a feeling she'd never experienced before.

For Gaius, the euphoric bliss that raked through him was one he'd never felt before, along with the disconcerting tranquility of the moment, which settled within his bones at the steady pumping of Nivea's heart, that beat in time to his.

Not even with Leviticus had he felt such serenity, had he known such pleasure in awakening the desires of another. All of it was unsettling, but he could not tear his lips from hers as he stretched out atop her, one hand plunging into her wild locks while the other clutched her thigh to hook her leg behind his waist as he helplessly ground his pelvis against the moist warmth of her center.

He'd promised he would not make love to her this night, but his desire for her battered against him, the heat of her clung to his body, enveloping it, then filling every part of it. He rocked harder against her, his tongue probing deeper.

Gaius realized too late what was happening, what he was doing. His body tensed, and on a strangled cry he convulsed. He spurted right there, right there within the crook of her spread thighs, the warmth of his seed stirring within the confines of his *bracca*. Too late he realized he was losing control. Too late he realized, with his lips, his cock, he was trying to brand her.

But she was not his to brand, to claim.

He wrenched away from her.

"This was a mistake," he said, his voice hoarse. He tried to pull away from her, to pull out of her arms, but she held him close, and when he met her wide-eyed gaze he froze.

Those golden pools were so knowing, so intelligent, and yet so innocent. She leveled him with her stare and crumbled his defenses with her words.

"My husband was a kind man, not cruel at all," she began in a quiet voice. "But he was much older, and he was ill even when we first married. He took me to his bed only a few times." She looked away as her voice dipped. "I told myself it was his illness, but for so long I wondered if it was me."

Gaius gleaned the direction of her thoughts and he hushed her with a gentle kiss upon her lips before she could utter words that held no truth.

"It is as you said. It was Cyprus Tibernius' illness and his age, not a lack of desire nor your inexperience that kept him from your bed."

"If that is true, then why do you already believe this to be a mistake? Was I not pleasing—"

"Nivea," he groaned, his head bowing, his eyes closing because he could not gaze upon her and witness her emotions, her insecurities revealed so openly without being affected by her. "It is not that at all - "

"I have only experienced such pleasure from the touch of my hand," she continued, as if he'd not spoken. "But never with a man, until you." Gaius shuddered at the meaning of her whispered words, even as he fought to reject it.

*This is a mistake.* The statement echoed in his head, over and over again, but if anything, instead of pulling away as he should have, he held her closer, tighter.

"I thought something was wrong with me, that something was missing inside me. Tha – that was why –"

"You wished for me to prepare you for Flavius. Because you thought you would disappoint him." His eyes snapped open and he held her gaze. He did not know what she glimpsed in his eyes when she looked at him, but he knew he wished for her to see what he knew himself to be true. "But you could never disappoint a man within his bed."

As he spoke his hand glided across the silken skin of her bare thigh. "You barely touched me and I spurted." He ignored her gasp of surprise. "And even now I am finding it difficult to maintain my promise not to make love to you." The last words came out as if wrung from him.

#### This is a mistake.

She is as naïve and untrained as a virgin.

But his body wanted her, it yearned for her, to have her, to master her, to dominate her, to brand her. He shuddered. *To claim her*.

But she was not his to brand.

She was not his to claim.

As if she sensed the storm brewing inside him, she cupped his jaw, and within an instant the tempestuous violence that raged within him stilled, quieted.

Gaius settled on the bed beside her, pulling her within the circle of his arms.

His body rejoiced in the closeness, the intimacy. His mind rebelled against it, thundering in his head that to continue this journey with her would be foolish, it would be unwise.

He'd taken women to his bed, many of them, and done the things he planned to do to Nivea. The same could be said for the men he'd mastered in his bed as well.

But never had he felt such an overwhelming stirring inside him to master another as strongly as he did with Nivea. Never had the need to dominate and claim another come upon him so quickly, so intensely.

Her hand settled upon his chest, directly over his pounding heart and he looked down into her upturned face. Her eyes were closed, her thick sable lashes resting softly against her cheeks.

Gaius told himself to pull away, to pull out of her arms and leave her bed now and never return. He did none of those things, he thought wryly, as he lifted his hand to graze his fingertips across her cheek, in a gentle, almost reverent caress.

She was now soundly asleep so she didn't stir, and something inside him tightened then twisted as her even breaths warmed his palm.

Nivea thought herself inexperienced, and indeed she was, but that she was not pleasing was a lie. What she lacked in knowledge she overcame with her passion, her desire to please, to satisfy her lover.

Flavius did not deserve her. She was newly blossoming, and under Gaius' tutelage he would see that she awakened fully to the passions that could be had between a man and woman. But Flavius would destroy her, he would neglect her desires in the pursuit of his own.

But that was not his concern.

Had she not said so herself?

It was her decision to wed Flavius Cicero. If she did not fully know, she'd certainly heard of the desires of her intended. If she chose to wed him anyway, then that was her choice, and it was a decision for Nivea to labor under, not him.

Only when he was certain she would not awaken did he slip from her bed.

He was due back to his camp at dawn and would not be able to return to her for a few days time. When he found a moment, he would send a note by messenger to her so she would know not to expect him until then.

Even as he crept quietly from her bed, Gaius debated on returning. He gave her sleeping form one last fleeting look and did not mistake the clenching of his gut.

Gaius let out a ragged breath, tinged with frustration, and resigned himself to the knowledge he would return.

Because he'd vowed he would, because he'd accepted her proposal and he would honor it.

No matter how much it cost him-despite the sickening dread that he would awaken this woman's passions only to send her to Flavius and watch as a man so

wholly undeserving squelched every one of her desires until she was a shell of the woman he'd just held within his arms.

# **Chapter Four**

The province of Siga was a vast Roman territory, carved out of what was once the Dahomey region, just southwesterly of Egypt. Dahomey – Siga – all of it was now a part of the Roman Empire and while its origins as a Roman territory had been tumultuous, in recent years Siga enjoyed relative peace, owing much of its stability to its regent, whose loyalty was to both Dahomey and Rome.

Anan Septimus was beloved by the Dahomey people, while Rome and its emperor respected her. Whether Roman or Dahomian, her subjects trusted her. And Anan was proving her trust was well earned as she was a fair and just ruler, who did well in balancing her loyalty to her homeland, and that of Rome.

Anan had made Gaius' task as legion commander relatively simple over the past three years. Border skirmishes had ceased, rebellions and dissent had quieted.

As it was, after finishing with the early morning physical regimen he put himself through every day, and demanded the same of the men under his command, Gaius retreated to his tent where he found he had a great deal of time, as he always did of late, to pore over directives from the generals out of Rome and across the province.

But on this day, Gaius broke from habit and set his military work aside until later in order to study the plans and ledgers which he'd stashed away, well out of sight, although the slightest thought of them had plagued him constantly.

With careful hands he unrolled the parchment of the plans which he'd had drawn up of the villa he would build, the land he would harvest—if he ever acquired enough coins. He glanced at the ledger beside his elbow. Just days ago the sight of the paltry sum upon the parchment would have caused a sinking feeling to weigh down his belly.

Today was the first day in years he'd not felt the crushing weight of inevitable defeat – of failure.

Nivea's proposition had changed that. The *denarii* she'd already given him—half of what he was due when their arrangement came to an end—was more than enough to purchase the land, to build the villa. The rest would see that he was able to purchase seedling to plant and livestock to farm the land.

His desire to escape the shadow of his father, to stand on his own without the aid of his father's name, his father's wealth—Gaius' greatest desire was now possible because of Nivea. That thought unsettled him and he dragged a hand across his face, the breath he blew out was strained with weariness.

Yes, he would have his greatest desire, but at what cost?

Nivea's happiness?

*That is not your concern,* he told himself.

Yet he could not ease himself of the guilt that burdened him, so he was glad for the distraction when there was a gentle knock upon his tent post.

"Come in," he called, his eyes lighting with surprise when instead of one of the soldiers he'd expected, his father came to stand before him.

Claudius Ovidius' muscled frame blocked most of the rays of sunlight that threatened to stream through the parted flaps as the brawny man crowded inside the small space of a soldier's tent.

"Father?" Gaius asked as he stood to greet him.

Claudius Ovidius' vast wealth made him much sought after, but it was his father's distinguished handsomeness, his dark hair streaked with just a tinge of gray, his turquoise eyes that crinkled when he smiled, that drew women to him in endless droves.

Gaius believed none were immune to his father's charms and had even once thought Matron Anan to be his father's lover, for they were close, and spent a great deal of their days together. But Anan's unusual arrangement with her two centurion lovers had put an end to such musings.

"Son," his father said as he closed the distance between them and embraced Gaius heartily.

Gaius returned his father's embrace and the look that passed between them did not escape either one of them. Over the years their relationship had been strained, and for some time they'd gone without speaking. It had begun with the death of his mother, Claudius' wife, when Gaius had been unable to express the helplessness he'd felt at ten years old from suffering such a loss. Claudius had been grieving in his own right and unable to give Gaius what he'd needed at the time. Gaius had later understood the reason for his father's coldness, that it had everything to do with his own grief and not what Gaius had believed as a child – that Claudius had not loved him.

Time and age had allowed Gaius to see Claudius for the man he was—a father who had tried to do the best by him, even when Gaius had rebelled against his concern.

"What brings you out to my humble post?" Gaius asked when they finally parted.

"It is that wretched regent of ours," Claudius said, and if Gaius hadn't known his father so well he would have thought him serious. But Gaius did not miss the small grin which tugged at the corners of Claudius' lips.

"And what has Anan done this time?" Gaius questioned, his own lips twitching with a small smile as he thought of Siga's regent, nearly due to give birth to her second child. Gaius truly pitied Cassius and Titus, the two men with whom Anan shared a union, for she was given to ever-changing moods in her frustration that she had yet to give birth – despite the fact she was not yet due for two more weeks.

From Claudius' pained expression, it would seem her moods also now extended to her good friend.

"Anan is convinced she is going to give birth early so she has *ordered* me out here to safely retrieve Olivia so that the girl does not miss the birth of this babe," Claudius scoffed. "I understand it is not safe for a woman to travel alone but I do not know why Anan could not send one of her guards for such a menial task and absurd request." Gaius knew why, as the lovely vision of Anan's adopted daughter, Olivia, flickered before him. "It is because you are her friend and she trusts you with the protection of Olivia."

Claudius snorted in protest, but they both knew his words were true. To Anan, Olivia was a rare jewel who she would not have sullied by some common man, but Olivia's exotic beauty drew men endlessly. Yet Claudius had long vowed never to wed again, and had shown an uncommon immunity to Olivia's charms. Anan felt Olivia's purity was safe with a man such as Claudius.

Gaius, in turn, was not so convinced, but he would not be the one to bring it to his father's attention, and he certainly would not share such a thing with Anan.

"Olivia's villa is just a few kilometers from your camp." Claudius shrugged. "So I decided to visit a while to see how you fared."

Gaius sighed because the look upon his father's face was one he'd glimpsed many times before. He had no doubt Claudius was there to see how he fared, but his father was also there to broach the subject which had been a contentious one between them over the passing months.

"No, you came to inquire as to whether I have put in to retire, and if I did, have I weighed your offer." Gaius' gaze was direct. "I have told you this many times, but I shall say it again. I do not wish for your help with this. I will make my own way, as I always have."

Claudius visibly bristled at his brusque words and Gaius' face gentled at the pain that flickered briefly in his father's eyes. He'd not meant to upset him, but he knew Claudius did not like to be reminded of the years which the two of them had gone their separate ways, cut off from each other out of pride.

"My apologies, Father because your expression suggests that you have mistaken my meaning. I only meant that when I decide to retire and purchase a tract of land, I should like to do it without your assistance."

Claudius sighed. "Why you insist upon being so stubborn, I will never know."

"You know, Father," Gaius said quietly, his expression softening along with his words.

By law his brother stood to inherit everything. By law none of Claudius' estate was due to Gaius. And Gaius maintained that since it was the law. He would not take what did not belong to him, no matter what his father said, no matter what Claudius offered.

"Hadrian would never touch your holdings," Claudius assured, giving voice to Gaius' lesser concern.

"I believe that," Gaius replied truthfully. He was especially close to his brother and did not think such a thing at all. But by law, if Claudius provided the *denarii* for Gaius' farm, Hadrian would still be entitled to it upon their father's death. Gaius did not wish to live his life beholden to anyone. That he owed Nivea, no matter that it was a fair exchange, still did not sit well with him.

"I see your mind has not changed," Claudius said with a slight grin and the shake of his head.

Gaius' lips curved into a small smile. "And it never shall, but to have you visit with me is always welcome."

After that, he and his father eased into a companionable visit which lasted until just past noon when Claudius was forced to take his leave if he was to arrive at Olivia's villa before dusk.

After his father's departure, Gaius settled into his tasks for the day of pouring over food rations and weapon supplies. Gaius did not realize how much time had passed until he looked up to see the small ray of sunlight filtering into his tent had faded, and night was steadily approaching.

Setting aside his work, Gaius stood from his desk and stretched. As he worked the knots from his muscles, his mind drifted back to his conversation with his father.

Many things about their talk struck him—that they now shared a closeness and were talking at all was probably the most obvious—but Gaius kept returning to the passing discussion of Anan's adopted daughter.

# Olivia.

There was nothing which Claudius said of her that should have struck Gaius. Instead, it was the tiny flicker in his father's gaze, which he was certain Claudius thought he'd masked, but apparently not well enough for Gaius had seen it.

# Lust.

# Desire.

Olivia had long harbored a crush upon his father, but Claudius had never once been tempted by her because of her innocence. Gaius did not talk of such things with his father, but he knew well of Claudius' nature, one inherited by both his sons. An innocent, untried virgin in the bed of a man who straddled the line between pleasure and pain, a man who derived pleasure in domination, would be a disaster. For that reason Claudius had never once looked Olivia's way, but Gaius had glimpsed the fire in his father's eyes when he'd spoken her name and wondered if maybe something had changed.

Before he'd met Nivea, Gaius would have sworn such a pairing would be unwise. But now? Now Gaius was not as convinced as his body stirred to life just recalling how Nivea had cried out in his arms, her body shuddering violently with the intensity of her climax. Nivea was as untried as any virgin, but she was a passionate woman, possessed of an innate sensuality one could only be born with.

Maybe Olivia was the same. And maybe Claudius already knew this and her innocence did not deter his father, because her inner passion was so great.

Whatever Olivia was to his father did not matter to Gaius, for it was none of his business nor his concern.

At that moment his only concern was the growing evidence of his arousal that had come with thoughts of Nivea. With a wry frown, Gaius realized he was no stranger to errant thoughts of her because with each passing minute of the day she'd found her way inside his head and at the oddest moments.

Already twice that day he'd spilled his seed as he'd pumped his flesh to the vision of liquid-bronze skin and golden eyes. And a groan now slipped past his lips, part frustration, part desire as his hand brushed across his bulging cock yet again, stroking it gently through the leather confines of his *bracca*, but his lusts would not be assuaged by his hand, not this time.

\* \* \* \* \*

A warm breeze slipped through her chambers, causing the light from the lamps to flicker. Dusk had fallen upon the villa and shadows now danced across the stone walls of her room, holding Nivea's attention for she could not sleep.

And the tempestuous churning within her belly, thwarting any attempt at a restful slumber, did not help matters.

Her intended.

Flavius Cicero had visited her just past midday.

He'd wanted to discuss their betrothal feast, something she should have planned but for some reason could not bring herself to do so.

With a small sigh, she closed her eyes, pulling the woolen blanket tighter around her body. She tried to imagine a life with Flavius, what it would be like, but she could not. Ever since she'd accepted his proposal, such imaginings had proven impossible. Many appreciated her reasons for wedding Flavius. He was handsome, wealthy, and most importantly, he would give her what she desired most, and that was children. So many men had crossed her path in the pursuit of one thing – her wealth. None had ever truly desired *her*. And in turn, none truly wished to give her the children she'd *desired*. By all accounts, she and Flavius were a well-suited match, and none would disagree. Except her, it would seem.

Yes, he would give her everything *she* desired, but what of him and his desires? Would she please him, satisfy him, fulfill him?

And would she make him happy? Would he make her?

Flavius' temperament was so much like that of her husband—kind but distant, patient but aloof. More friends than lovers, or husband and wife even. She should not complain, but Nivea could not escape the nagging feeling that to wed Flavius Cicero would be a mistake. And not only because of the rumors she'd heard of his desires, but because she feared such a union would reveal itself to be the same as her last—passionless and without love. And Nivea wanted more.

Instantly the image of Gaius Ovidius found its way into her mind to burn against the backs of her lids and Nivea's eyes snapped open, a gasp of surprise tumbling from her lips.

The pounding rhythm of her heart thundered through her as she struggled to draw in a shaky breath. Without a doubt, she knew a union with Gaius Ovidius would be one of passion, one filled with soul-stirring desire and unbidden lusts. But passion alone was not what she sought either. And besides, Gaius was not even up for consideration. She'd already accepted Flavius' proposal and she was honor bound to wed him. Yet even if she hadn't, Gaius would not have been an appropriate suitor.

He was the second son of a wealthy landowner. He was a Roman soldier. Gaius was well respected, but he stood to inherit nothing.

Nivea sat up in her bed, her back resting against the cool stones of the granite wall. She shoved a hand through her hair out of sheer frustration. She longed for things she could not have.

True companionship, intimacy, *love*. Such emotions were rare in marriages between the wealthy, and yet, Nivea yearned for such a union.

With Flavius she was certain she would not have such a marriage. But it was still a good match. Why could she not accept that, why must she desire more?

She slipped back down into her bed, beneath her blanket, and closed her eyes once again. But her mind and body refused to go quietly into the stillness of a peaceful, blissful sleep.

Kicking the covering off her, Nivea's hand slid across her body, slowly finding its way between her thighs. Maybe all she needed was to find release and her body would quiet, her mind would still.

Or maybe just the very image of Gaius Ovidius inside her head was what ignited her body, what had her so feverish? Twice she'd pleasured herself that day to thoughts of what he'd done to her the night before. If she was honest with herself, she would acknowledge Gaius had never been far from her thoughts all day. If she was honest with herself, she would admit it was thoughts of Gaius and the passion they'd shared, and not her musings of her impending wedding to Flavius, that had her body twisted into knots and her mind buzzing endlessly.

Nivea was not ready for such honesty, but the echoes of her body did not lie as it hummed to life with the vision of Gaius' hands upon her, his lips pressed against her skin.

She moaned into the night, her eyes closed as her fingers slipped between her folds to pierce her wetness. Nivea's belly churned with heat and desire as her breath grew ragged, dragging slowly through her chest. Her thumb circled and pressed against her tiny nub as she speared her cunt with two fingers, only to shudder at the wetness pouring from her, coating her thrusting digits.

# Gaius.

She could see him so clearly. The ripples and ridges of his muscles flexing beneath roughened, sun-bronzed skin. She could feel him, warm breath teasing against her nipples causing her to shiver. She could even smell him. That delicious scent of sweat and man, as if he'd bathed in the sea and then dried himself beneath the golden rays of the sun.

Her breath caught at the image of his eyes boring into her and the wicked smile upon his lips as she imagined her fingers were his – pumping, thrusting, pushing inside her tight, wet body over and over again.

Nivea grasped her breast through the linen shift, kneading the mound softly, pretending it was his firm, calloused hand upon her. The erotic sensations coursing through her were heady, mind-numbing and she began to tremble in anticipation of her release as she felt it cresting inside her.

She strummed her flesh faster, harder, moaning in earnest now. She thrust her fingers inside herself harder and deeper, her fantasy shifting until she envisioned it was Gaius' cock pummeling inside her, stretching her, forging deep into the depths of her tight tunnel.

A cry escaped her as she called out Gaius' name and her eyes flew open at the same time her climax crashed upon her.

She saw him as she found release, standing there before her, his body corded tight.

She cried out again, in surprise and embarrassment, tinged with a tiny measure of fear, but her climax was already upon her and she shattered right before him, holding his intense stare as she convulsed beneath his hooded gaze, which revealed no emotion, as he silently watched her come with steady eyes.

Gaius could not breathe as he stood above Nivea, her body trembling violently through the throes of her release. Her skin was tinged a dusky rose and glittered with a fine sheen of moisture. When she called his name, his belly tightened then twisted into hard knots.

She was beautiful as she found pleasure and it both shocked and terrified him that she'd been thinking of him. Although, it should not have, because he'd done the same with her. Had she walked in on him a number of times that day, she would have found him jerking his cock with her name upon his lips.

When her tremors finally subsided she looked up at him, her gaze darting about nervously. He still did not speak as he undressed before her, removing his heavy armor and his leather *bracca*, until he was clothed only in his scarlet tunic.

"Do not stop on my account," he said finally, his deep voice piercing the silence. "I wish to see you pleasure yourself again. Show me how you please yourself, show me what brings you pleasure."

Her cheeks darkened to a deep rose. He drew closer and settled upon the bed before her, his body nestled within the crook between her legs.

He could see she wished to protest, but he shook his head as he absently slid his hand along her bare thigh.

"Show me," he repeated, his voice gentle yet firm.

He followed her hand with his gaze as it parted the pink folds of her womanhood. Her cunt glistened before him, ripe and juicy as a peach. With a low, hoarse groan, he watched as she began to tease and stroke her tiny bud before dipping two fingers into her core.

Gaius did not know how long he would let her do this, because he did not know how long he would last. Already the scent of her, the heavy perfume of arousal and desire filled his aching lungs and a sharp arrow of need pierced him.

As Nivea's finger stroked harder and faster, the need inside him grew sharper until his cock was hard and heavy, tenting against his tunic and leaking with the evidence of his arousal.

An unbidden growl of desire rose out of him and he clamped his hand around her wrist, halting her movements before he spilled his seed right then and there.

She gasped, part surprise, part frustration, and he guessed it was because he'd stopped her before she could find release yet again.

He smiled, letting her wrist go. "Lift your arms."

When she hesitated he nodded at the wooden post behind her. "Lift your arms above your head and grasp the post."

Her eyes were uncertain, but she lifted her arms, stretching them high above her head to clasp her hands around the wooden post that ran along the head of her bed.

A ball of desire coiled tight in the pit of his stomach as his gaze raked her. The full swells of her breasts pushed against the thin fabric of the garment she wore and her dark, tight nipples hardened until they were tiny pebbles, creating an erotic shadow beneath the shift.

He inhaled deep, filling his lungs with the scent of her, all sweet arousal and all for him.

Gaius ached to see her, bared before him, and before either of them could draw in their next breath, his hand snaked out to grip the collar of the linen garment and he tore the shift from her body with one motion.

She cried out in surprise and she moved as if to cover herself, but he shook his head, his steely gaze nailing her to the bed. He pulled the tattered garment from around her body, and with deft movements used the material to secure her hands to the bed.

"G-Gaius, what are you – " She swallowed. "What are you doing?"

He did not answer her immediately, instead he diverted her attention from her bound wrists to the expanse of naked flesh he revealed as he slowly removed his tunic and cast it aside.

A measure of almost boastful pride filled him as her golden gaze darkened with lust while it trailed the length of him. He could feel it upon him as surely as he would have felt her fingertips gliding across his skin, gently teasing his throbbing cock.

"You must trust me," Gaius said finally when her eyes ended their perusal of his naked form to meet his.

"I trust you," she said quietly into the still night.

He smiled. "I know. Or I would not be here."

She looked at him curiously. "And why are you here? Your message said you would not return until the day after the morrow."

He stilled, unprepared for such a direct question, but he should have expected it from Nivea, who was known for being forthright. He hesitated, debating whether to

reveal to her the truth, debating whether it was wise to reveal he was vulnerable to her, but every time he stared into the pools of her eyes he wanted to give her only honesty.

"I thought of you all day," he said quietly, his hands once again gliding across her bare thighs. "I had to see you," he murmured as he shifted his body to cover hers.

She seemed startled by his revelation until she smiled. "I thought of you all day as well, and what we did the night before. I cannot seem to stop thinking of what we did that night."

He could not either, but words escaped him as he settled deep into the spread vee of her thighs. Her heat was welcoming, the tip of his rod mere centimeters from her moist, hot core. A shudder of desire raced through him as he held her open beneath him, poised to accept his swelling cock.

Lust, which had burned in her gaze just moments ago, ignited once again until he swore the fire licking in her eyes would melt him.

He ached to show her the pleasures to be had when experiencing the rough edge of pain, but his control was already threading thin. As he'd snuck into her villa, creeping silently through the empty vestibules, he'd imagined he'd find her asleep within her bed. He'd imagined waking her to kisses upon her body.

What he'd never expected was to enter her chambers to find her legs spread, her fingers spearing her drenched cunt, and his name floating from her lips as she climaxed.

He'd been unprepared for the desire she'd aroused, a desire gone unabated all day so now it beat at him so strongly it was nearly painful.

He would take her now, quickly, roughly, to slake their desires and when they were done, he would do to her what he'd promised, what she'd paid him coins to do and that was bring her body to the heights of pleasure, while experiencing the piercing bite of pain.

But that would all come later.

His gaze found hers again as he hooked his arms beneath her thighs, spreading her wider. Poised at her entrance, he sucked in a breath when her sticky wetness seared him she was so hot.

With a shuddering groan he pushed inside her, a harsh gasp tearing from his lips when her sheath closed around him as tight as a fist. He withdrew and thrust again, going deeper, but still the muscles of her cunt clamped him hard and tight.

It was bliss, her snug wetness surrounding him like warm honey. He fed her his length with achingly slow movements until he was seated fully inside her, his heavy sac pressed tight against her flesh.

"You feel wondrous," he whispered within the crook of her neck, holding himself as still as he could for fear that if he moved too soon he would spurt.

Her only response was a soul-stirring moan as she rocked her hips, causing him to sink even deeper. A lewd curse erupted from him at the pleasure bursting inside his belly and he called her name in warning, a plea for her to stop moving, but she did not and he was forced to seize her hips. But Gaius was no longer in control, it was the urgency of his body directing his movements, so instead of holding her still, he found himself lifting her hips with his hands as he drove into her on a deep, slamming thrust.

She screamed out as more of her juice poured forth and a ragged groan flew from him as he moved in earnest, his hips driving back and forth as he drilled her with hard, pounding thrusts.

He took her roughly and she welcomed the violence of his lovemaking, her body lifting to meet each one of his furious strokes. The posts of the bed scraped against the wall, mingling with their moans and the sounds of skin slapping against skin, flesh meeting flesh.

The musky scent of sweat and lovemaking hung heavy in the air, permeating every corner of the room, filling every space inside him as he breathed it in.

She cried out beneath him, her head falling back, her eyes clenched shut and he knew she was close as her skin flushed hot and red. Her pussy drenched him with her juices, even as it clenched tight all around him.

An arrow of liquid heat pierced his body as he rode her harder, wilder, faster, his fingers digging into the skin of her thighs. Pulling all the way out of her, he slammed back into her sheath, his hips rocking furiously as he did this over and over again, finding that tiny place inside her that could bring a woman immense pleasure with just the tip of his cock.

He scraped across it a few times before she splintered apart in his arms, convulsing beneath him.

"Gaius," she cried out on a long, hoarse moan as she stiffened beneath him and he groaned at the wetness pouring from her, easing his passage inside her.

Her release triggered his own and he pounded inside her once, twice, one last time before he stilled and gave a ragged shout. He ground his hips hard against her as his cock twitched then erupted like a geyser within her sheath, bathing her channel with his seed.

Tremors still rocked her and as he collapsed atop Nivea, her body clenched hard and tight all around him, milking him of his seed.

Their hearts hammered wildly, their breaths coming out as jagged, uneven pants and it was a long while before their breathing was normal and their hearts found a steady rhythm.

When their bodies finally quieted, Gaius pulled out of her, another mingled moan escaping them as their combined juices trickled from her opening.

He rolled to her side and lay on his stomach, his hand splayed across her belly and for a long while Gaius remained there next to her, his hand connecting them.

Only minutes might have passed, though it felt like hours when Gaius finally lifted to release her from her bindings. Nivea watched him in silence as he massaged her wrists where small rings imprinted her flesh from all the tugging she'd done when she'd climaxed.

*It doesn't hurt,* she wanted to tell him but she didn't, as she enjoyed the tender caress of his fingers upon her.

The stark difference that existed within the man before her was almost startling. In one instant, he fucked her as roughly and wildly as an animal, and in the next he was soothing small insignificant marks with gentle hands.

Nivea didn't want to feel anything for this man who was just a lover and a means to an end at that, but she did not mistake, nor did she ignore the slight warmth that encircled her heart when he met her gaze then dipped his head to kiss her softly.

It was not a kiss of passion, but one of intimacy, and when he pulled away, Nivea could feel her body shaking.

She should end this now. She should pay him what he was due and send him away, because the tender feelings gathering inside her for this man were wholly unwelcome.

Maybe Gaius had been right – maybe this was a mistake.

With gentle hands he turned her over so she was braced on her hands and knees.

She did not send him away, even though she knew it was wrong for her to continue their affair, no matter it had only just begun. Gaius offered her something she'd never known, something she'd longed to experience with a man, but never had.

A mistake or not, she could not, she would not deny herself the first taste of passion in this man's arms.

The feather pallet shifted as Gaius moved his body to settle behind her. She shivered as his sleeping cock brushed against the swells of her backside, nestling within her cleft. His hands were gentle upon her flesh, absently roaming across her back, her

shoulders, her arms. Everywhere he touched tingles of pleasure tickled across her until she was trembling in anticipation of what he would do next.

She did not have long to wait when one of the tattered pieces of her shift filled her vision.

"Close your eyes," he whispered, his warm breath brushing across the back of her neck, causing goose bumps to dot her skin.

Nivea let her eyes slip closed at the same time the soft linen came to rest against her lids. Gaius knotted the blindfold so it was secure, but not uncomfortable. With her vision gone, every other sense came alive as she strained to absorb every sound, every touch.

His breathing was as ragged as her own as his hands slowly trailed down her back to caress the swells of her backside. When he dipped a finger into her dripping heat she gasped as a fire ignited inside her belly. He worked another finger inside her, stroking her harder, until she was shuddering with need and pleasure, her wet tunnel clutching at his thrusting fingers.

"You grow wet almost immediately," he rasped, his fingers plowing faster and when more of her juices poured forth he groaned against the back of her neck, his breath warm against her damp skin.

He pulled out of her body abruptly and a cry was wrenched from her lips, but before her growing desire had a moment to ebb, she felt the wet slide of his tongue against her moist slit.

"Gaius," she called his name in shaky voice when he pushed the tip of his tongue inside her, then retreated only to shove it deeper.

Nivea moaned, her head hanging limply from her shoulders. She'd never experienced pleasure this exquisite, this erotic. When he'd made love to her with his mouth before, she'd never imagined –

She gasped when he found that rough patch inside her bursting with sensation.

"Gaius, I-I" m about to -" She could not finish because she could barely speak. He held her by her hips and rocked her back against his mouth so he could fuck her harder with his tongue.

She began to tremble as tiny quakes rolled through her until she knew she would splinter apart within seconds. Gaius knew it as well for her cunt was dripping wet with her honey and her tunnel began to spasm. He groaned low and deep against her spread pussy, and the tiny vibrations set off a maelstrom of pleasure within her as she convulsed against his mouth with a sharp cry, which she was forced to muffle against the bed.

Her climax pounded through her, like wave after wave cresting then breaking against the sand. It would not stop as her pleasure went on for what felt like eternity, even after Gaius tore his mouth from her cunt and once again replaced his tongue with two of his fingers.

It was as if he refused to let her desire subside as he kept her poised upon the precipice, his fingers pounding deep and hard. Her pleasure shifted until it became a sharp twinge, riding the edge of pain.

"Gaius," she bit out, her voice shaking.

"I know what you're feeling," he breathed, "but it will soon ease and then it shall become more pleasure than pain."

She was not so certain, especially when the palm of his hand came down to sharply strike her buttocks.

Nivea yelped out in surprise, her body stiffening as she tried to pull away.

"Do not move, Nivea," Gaius commanded in a tight voice.

She whimpered, resting the side of her face against the bed. "But it hurts," she rasped after several more punishing swats landed upon the cheeks of her ass.

Gaius was behind her now, leaning over her, his cock digging into her flesh, the head of it flirting against the hole of her anus.

"It is you who wishes to wed Flavius who will bring you nothing but pain," he whispered hotly against her ear. "I have not even shown you pain, and yet you deny me when I will soon give you pleasure."

His voice was taunting, daring her to stop, to quit, because they both knew if she did, what it would mean – that she could not wed Flavius.

If she could not endure Gaius' touch, the fleeting measure of pain he allowed her, then she would never enjoy the marriage bed with Flavius.

"D-Do not stop," she managed to force out of trembling lips. She thought her courage would appease him, but it seemed to only anger him as he cursed, his hot breath blasting against her ear.

"Why is it so important for you to wed this man who will only cause you pain?" he demanded. "Why do you seek so desperately to please him when he shall never please you in return?"

His words were harsh, angry, and she stiffened at the derision she did not mistake in his strained voice. He sounded almost –

She gave a mental shake of her head.

He was not, he could not be *envious*?

She was a woman who was well known for her independence, for having a strong will and a mind of her own. She did not easily bend simply to appease others, to placate them. And yet, for some reason she sought to ease Gaius of the burden that seemed to trouble him.

She did not know why she did it, why it was so important to her, but she could not allow Gaius to believe her only reason for lying with him was because of Flavius. At first maybe, but now...

"This is not about Flavius," she shot back, her voice just as vehement as his had been because it was true. What she and Gaius were doing no longer had anything to do with Flavius. That revelation was startling, and it was one she would have to examine later, but for now she could only give Gaius the truth. "This is about me pleasing you. This is about me learning to endure pain in order to know pleasure."

Nivea could not see. She could only hear, could only feel, but she knew the moment the tension drained away from Gaius' body.

She could feel it as easily as she would have been able to see his face relaxing, his eyes softening, his frown easing into a warm grin.

He did not speak, his only response was the resounding smack upon the cheeks of her backside. But this time the strike was different, harder, and yet a jolt of desire shot through her core, stealing her breath and drenching his still-thrusting fingers inside her.

He struck her flesh harder, the swats coming one after the other. Needles of pain pricked her, even as her cunt throbbed and pulsed with heat, her belly clenched with desire.

"You enjoy my hands upon your ass," he taunted, breathing hard against her ear. "I imagine you would enjoy my whip upon your backside. Better still, I think you would love my cock pounding inside your ass."

She moaned out her answer and he chuckled, the deep, throaty sound rumbling out of him until it wrapped around her. Nivea liked the sound of his laugher. It was rich and warm like thick molasses.

"Would you, Nivea?" he whispered between kisses along her neck. "Would you like my cock inside your ass?"

She did not know. She'd never experienced such a thing and she said as much.

"But that is not what I asked you. Do you want me to fuck your ass?" Gaius demanded, his voice harsher this time.

The thought of it was erotic, wicked, and she'd never imagined she would desire a man to thrust his cock into the tight hole of her anus. But when it came to this man...

She could not restrain the shudder that raced through her.

"Yes," she whispered finally.

"Say it then," Gaius groaned. "I want to hear it from your lips."

"I-I want you to fuck me, Gaius," she stuttered. "I want you to fuck me in the ass."

Just to say the lewd words caused her cheeks to boil molten hot, but Gaius rewarded her with just the briefest of kisses against the back of her neck before he pulled away.

He was maybe gone for a moment and the bed dipped at his return. She did not know why he'd left or what he'd done in his absence until he slowly pushed a finger, coated with liquid, inside her anus.

"Olive oil," he answered her silent question. "It will make my passage inside you that much easier."

A shiver trembled through her as she tensed against the invasion of his probing digit.

"Relax," Gaius whispered against the back of her neck, the warmth of his breath tickling her ear. He eased out of her, going slow, then pressed inside once again, stretching her.

He kept a steady, gentle rhythm inside her body, his other hand softly stroking her backside, coaxing her until she was languid and relaxed. This time when he thrust inside her, another tremor rocked her, but it was one of pleasure as he went deeper, and a low moan escaped her lips as a tiny ball of need burst inside her belly.

"You are ready for me, aren't you?" Gaius panted within the crook of her neck as he settled behind her, fitting his body to hers.

Fear and anticipation pulsed through her at the feel of his cock, hard as iron, poised at the entrance of her hole. She did not know if she truly was ready, but then he pushed the head of his manhood inside her and Nivea knew the moment for hesitation had passed. Although he'd stretched her, the feeling of fullness overwhelmed her and she tried to pull away, but he held her securely, and she gasped when without warning, the palm of his hand struck her buttocks.

"Do not pull away from me," he commanded, forcing her to swallow her whimper of pain.

It began as one strike, but then another came, and yet another. He would smack her flesh then soothe it with his hands across her backside as he murmured tender words to her.

A violent maelstrom of sensations pounded through her as the stinging of her flesh blurred everything for her—the pleasure, the pain. It wasn't until he smacked her flesh again that she realized what he was doing. With each strike he fed her more of his length.

When he pushed into her one last time, his cock buried all the way inside her, a soft sigh tumbled from her lips. He continued to palm her backside, but this time the strikes were lighter, teasing almost.

As he moved within her, his pulsing cock hot and thick inside her, Nivea bit back a moan as sensations she'd never felt bombarded her, as pleasure she'd never imagined gathered at her core until her channel was drenched with her arousal.

As she relaxed around his thrusting length, Gaius moved harder and faster into her, his sac smacking against her pussy, his flesh pounding hers. Their moans mingled to echo off the walls, the scent of their desire joining the perfumed musk of sweat.

Gaius snaked one hand around her body to cup her breast and massage the full weight of her mound, while his other hand settled between her thighs as he rode her body. His fingers easily found that tiny jewel at the center of her core and he stroked it furiously until an explosion of pleasure erupted inside her, sweeping through her like a violent sand storm.

She cried out, stunned by how quickly and suddenly she'd found release, her body quaking as her cunt gushed with wetness.

Gaius groaned against her neck and she felt his cock twitch then swell. On a lewd curse, he erupted inside her seconds later and she moaned as the warmth of his seed stirred within the tunnel of her anus.

Together they collapsed upon the bed, their breaths coming in rough pants. When their breathing finally eased, Gaius pulled out of her and settled her within his arms until her head was resting against his sweat-slick chest.

After several long minutes passed he left the bed to cleanse his body with a cloth in the basin of water atop her table, and Nivea rose to do the same. When their bodies were clean, she returned to bed, expecting Gaius would dress then and leave. But instead of departing, he slipped into bed beside her and once again pulled her into his arms.

That was how they fell asleep, nestled within each other's arms. And Nivea swore as she closed her eyes and settled into the peaceful rhythm of sleep that Gaius held her as if they were more than lovers, as if this was more than an affair of convenience. She knew with a certainty what she was starting to feel had less to do with the business arrangement they'd made and more to do with the warm stirrings of tenderness inside her heart for the man who now slept soundly beneath her.

# **Chapter Five**

Gaius woke to the feel of silken skin wrapped around his body.

With his hand curled around the soft, pliable flesh of a woman's breast, his manhood instantly awakened, pressing within the cleft of Nivea's buttocks.

The tiny tremor that pulsed through her told him she was awake, and with a small smile he rolled her beneath him, his body pressing her deep into the bed.

"Well, good morn to you." She smiled lazily, her eyes still heavy with sleep. A small ball of heat furled within his gut as she lifted her thighs to wrap around his hips at the same time her arms clasped around his neck.

The way she enveloped him, her body surrounding him, warmed him from the inside out. It was a pleasant feeling waking up to Nivea, with her beside him, with her body nestled within his arms.

Gaius' heart skipped a beat when he realized what was happening, what this all meant and before he could stop himself he dipped his head to capture her lips in a gentle, probing kiss that was as passionate as it was tender.

As he claimed her with his mouth, he shifted his hips, spreading her thighs wider. The head of his cock found her opening and he gasped at the hot wetness that greeted him. With a groan he surged forward, filling her in one smooth thrust.

She gasped and he swallowed the tiny sound as he powered into her over and over again.

He pinned her down with his body, his hips, as he pumped inside her on slow, rocking strokes, filling her completely before pulling all the way out of her tight sheath, only to thrust deep once again.

Gaius made love to Nivea, even though he knew he shouldn't have, even though he knew it to be a mistake. At the first light of dawn he should have risen and left her bed immediately. But he hadn't, and now he found himself within her arms, between her parted thighs locked in an intimate embrace, making love to a woman who did not belong to him. And yet he still wanted her; her passion, her fire, her innocence—he wanted all of her though he knew he could never have her.

He thrust harder as if he could brand her with his cock alone. Nivea must have sensed the changes within him, the jealousy and frustration that now drove him, because she tore her lips from his, her hand tugging at his hair until he met her gaze.

"Love me, Gaius," she begged. "Make love to me as you did before." Her words pierced him and her golden eyes flayed him until his thrusts slowed and he once again rocked into her with languid strokes.

He closed his eyes then, desperately trying to shut her out as he lowered his head, his face settling against her neck. Hooking her legs with his arms he held her wider, his hips grinding against her with each thrust.

He needed this to be over so he could retreat from her and bury the feelings she'd aroused inside him. If anything, Gaius knew how to hasten her release, for he knew Nivea's body as intimately as he knew his own, and he pummeled inside her wet channel, his pelvis brushing against her nub until she erupted beneath him.

On a strangled cry, her release pounded through her and he plowed his cock inside her on thrust after thrust, powering through her release as her cunt clenched around him like a tight fist. The evidence of her arousal coated him, drenched him with warm, sticky heat and Gaius found himself drowning within her pussy as he surrendered to the snug wetness engulfing him.

He groaned out her name against her neck as he poured his seed into her, his body shaking with convulsions until he was spent, until he collapsed atop her in a heap.

Unlike the night before, Gaius did not linger. As soon as he recovered, he pulled out of her and quickly dressed.

She sat up, clutching one of the woolen blankets to her chest. The early-morning rays were just starting to pierce the darkness and Gaius almost faltered as the light spilled in to cast a golden halo around her unruly, unbound locks and sparkle off her bronze skin.

Nivea was beautiful in the morning light and his gut twisted into an iron knot at the knowledge that when their arrangement came to an end he would never gaze upon her in this manner ever again.

"Must you leave already?"

He nodded, struggling to ignore the longing in her voice and the disappointment that filled her eyes. "It is almost fully past dawn. I need to return to my post before my soldiers waken." He gestured toward her closed door. "And it would be best if I am gone before your household awakens as well."

Her smile was slight. "I understand. When will you come to me again?"

He wanted to tell her that her instructions were at an end, but that would be a lie. Truly, if he was to prepare her for Flavius, they were not yet done.

"On the morrow," he answered finally.

The wrinkling of her brow caused him to still as he was jerking on his sandals. "What is it?"

"It is nothing." She waved a hand dismissively. "Just that tomorrow eve is my engagement feast."

Gaius' body, which had already frozen, grew ever more rigid with tension and the silence that hovered between them was so thick it was palpable.

Nivea's engagement feast...

If for a moment Gaius could somehow forget she was to be wed soon, and that his only purpose was to prepare her for her future husband's marriage bed, then her words served as an instant reminder.

"When I return is your decision then," Gaius said, breaking through the uneasy silence. If she did not wish to gaze upon the face of her lover on the same night as she celebrated her impending union with her soon-to-be husband, then that was her choice, her decision, and she would have to be the one to make it.

"Tomorrow eve is fine," she replied, her expression placid, revealing nothing. Gaius wondered, did it bother her, what they were doing. Was she starting to feel even the tiniest hint of emotion for him, or was he alone in the intimacy growing between them?

Giving a slight shake of his head, he fought to bury such thoughts. It did not matter what she was feeling. She was contracted to wed Flavius and that would not change. He would do well to remember that the next time he returned and felt the urge to make love to her as if they were more than lovers, as if they were not two people engaged in a business arrangement and nothing more.

"Very well. I will return to you tomorrow eve." With a curt nod, Gaius slipped from Nivea's chambers and then from her villa to return to his post where he immersed himself in a number of duties as he desperately fought to ignore what he knew was happening between him and Nivea and what would inevitably come of them both when their ill-fated arrangement finally came to an end.

# \* \* \* \* \*

"You look well. It is as if you are glowing," Flavius whispered, his warm breath laced with wine brushing across her ear while his hand curled suggestively at her hip.

Nivea smiled as she touched his forearm gently. Both gestures were those of a polite acquaintance and not of a betrothed woman eagerly awaiting the start of a passionate union.

Flavius was too overspent to recognize the difference, but Nivea was well aware of the glaring contradiction.

She stared up at Flavius, swallowing back a sigh. Indeed he was a handsome man, with powerful shoulders, his entire body honed with dense muscle. His hair was

graying but it suited him. He was older than she, but he was robust and healthy, still young enough to get her with child. Beyond that he was fit and handsome. Flavius had also done quite well for himself since leaving the army as his estate was quite prosperous. He was a more-than-ideal match, but with a heavy inward sigh, she finally acknowledged to herself he was not well suited to her because he simply was not Gaius.

A hot spark of anger and frustration lanced through her just to admit such a thing. Truly, what did she know of the man who now shared her bed? Yes, she knew all of the pertinent information of his family, his military career, but what of his needs, his desires? She was woefully ignorant of those things.

From his very lips he'd admitted he'd been without a woman for some time, but that had not kept him from finding pleasure. Here she was debating the wisdom of wedding a good match in Flavius, all for what? Because Gaius had given her pleasure, because he'd listened to her yearnings and fulfilled them. She deflated instantly because that was far from the truth. How Nivea wished it was only those things because she could have brushed them aside as purely physical longings to be justifiably ignored.

But it was more than that, and she knew it.

Gaius stirred her. And not just in a sexual manner, but when he gazed upon her, when he kissed her, even when he held her as she slept. It was always with tenderness, and his gentleness toward her spoke of a growing intimacy they did not yet share, but promised to grow the more time they spent together.

It was a dangerous liaison, a dangerous game she was playing with Gaius because she could ill afford to nurture tender feelings for a man who she could not have, a man who could offer her nothing save the pleasures of the flesh, which sadly was not enough for Nivea.

"I must depart," Flavius said, breaking through her thoughts.

Nivea looked around. All but a few guests still milled about, having joined her and Flavius to celebrate their upcoming union. The expansive dining hall was mostly empty, and already the servants were removing what was left of the food and wine.

Nivea smiled into the handsome face of her intended. "Help me remove the last of our guests and I will see you out."

Flavius did just that and after the last of the guests were gone, Flavius left soon after. It did not escape her notice that he did not press her to linger, but his actions were not wholly unexpected.

Nivea was supposed to be a proper Roman matron—dalliances before a wedding were frowned upon. Whatever Flavius' desires, he would assuage them elsewhere until their wedding night.

After returning her dining hall to order, Nivea dismissed the servants to their chambers and once again instructed her guards to patrol her estate. When her villa was finally quiet, Nivea headed to her bathing chambers.

Once inside, she removed the laurel wreath that was customary for young women to wear at their engagement feasts. Setting it aside, she stepped out of the shimmering white *stola* that clung seductively to the curves of her body.

Fully nude, she eased into the crystalline waters that warmed her skin, her eyes closing as she let the gentle lapping waves soothe her body. She quickly bathed, cleansing herself, and when she was done Nivea settled against the edge of the bathing pool, the back of her head resting atop the mosaic tiles.

With her eyes closed, her arms stretched across the edge and her breasts bobbing gently along the surface of the waters was how Gaius found her moments later.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaius trailed Nivea with his steady gaze from his position within the shadowed alcove of her *triclinieum*.

As he'd left his post and traveled to her home much earlier than he was expected, he debated the wisdom of his actions, many times considering if the woman who held his attentions so fiercely was actually driving him mad.

Quite possibly, he acknowledged, but what propelled him to her villa many hours before he was to arrive was an ancient, primitive emotion as old as time.

# Jealousy.

Pure, unfettered, unabated jealousy.

It twisted his gut and clenched his fists as he followed the path of Flavius' hand, watching in mute anger as it curled seductively at Nivea's hip. When Flavius leaned into her, his lips teasing across her ear, Gaius nearly revealed himself.

Drawing in a thick, heavy breath, he stilled his racing heart and eased the churning within his belly.

Truly, was he mad? Demented? Deranged?

His presence at her engagement feast would ruin Nivea and she would never forgive him. It was the latter that forced Gaius to shrink deeper into the shadows and restrain himself before he did something foolish.

He was blessedly thankful when soon after the remaining guests departed, and with them so did Flavius.

It was some time before Nivea left the dining hall as she worked alongside her servants to restore it to order.

Gaius had to smile at that. Nivea was not a pampered widow who idled about her days. She saw to every detail of her estate personally, from the greatest of tasks to the most insignificant.

Thus, it was some time before she dismissed her servants and guards and retreated to her private chambers. Gaius waited for several moments before following her.

When she entered the baths, he hovered just beyond the entrance, still shrouded within the shadows. From where he stood she could not see him, but he was able to catch brief glimpses of her every time she waded in his direction.

He held himself still, his breaths shallow as he watched her. Gaius didn't want to disturb her, not just yet.

For some reason he could not explain he enjoyed these stolen moments of watching her when she did not know he was there. He imagined it was because she was most vulnerable then, her expression not guarded. The only other times he caught sight of her unguarded expression were in those moments just before she climaxed.

It was a beautiful sight—Nivea's eyes wide, then darkening with desire, her lips parted slightly, her cheeks blooming red. In those moments, much like now, she was relaxed, carefree, unburdened by the troubling thoughts of wedding a man she did not love. That revelation slammed into Gaius and for a scant second it stole his breath, but the silent admission was not a surprise, only that he'd actually acknowledged it.

As he'd spied upon her earlier with Flavius, he'd recognized the polite distance in her eyes, her smile. Nivea did not love Flavius. Her heart did not beat for him. Her body did not awaken with passion for him. Not as it did with Gaius. She knew this, Gaius did as well, and yet, such knowledge did not stop her. Nivea was still determined to wed Flavius, where she would suffer a loveless, passionless marriage, all because Flavius would give her what Gaius could not – security, children.

*I would give you those things,* Gaius wanted to tell her. If it was in his power he would do that so she would not suffer with Flavius, but it was not within his power. He would not take a wife and give her his child without the means to provide for them as he wished, and right now he did not possess those means.

As his gaze traveled over Nivea's languid form, her eyes closed, her head resting against the tiles, he finally acknowledged to himself that as much as he wanted to claim he was a better man for Nivea than Flavius, truly he was not.

Nivea deserved a man who would also love her, and Gaius knew with a certainty that he could not. He'd vowed never to give his heart to a woman again, and he'd gone so long without loving another he wasn't even sure he knew how to anymore, he wasn't even sure he could.

Gaius decided then only a coward was not strong enough to love again, and Nivea was too courageous of a woman to settle for a coward.

As he stepped from the shadows, Gaius accepted that he was in fact no better than Flavius.

Neither of them deserved her.

Hearing the heavy, swaggering footsteps of a man's gate, Nivea lifted her head and opened her eyes with a slight gasp.

"My apologies. I did not mean to startle you," Gaius murmured, his eyes wandering lazily over her nude figure, the waves gently rolling across her skin.

"No need to apologize." She smiled, even as she fought to suppress the shudder of pleasure as his gaze devoured her. "It is only that I did not expect you until much later. If you give me a moment I shall prepare myself."

Nivea lifted herself from the pool, but the swift shake of Gaius' head stilled her.

"Do not interrupt your bath on my account." At the desire flashing in his eyes, another tremor pulsed through her. "I am enjoying myself quite thoroughly."

She returned his teasing glint and settled beneath the surface of the pool, her hand absently sloshing rivulets of water along her arms. Nivea watched him curiously as he removed his armor then his sandals before approaching the edge of the pool where she sat.

As he closed the distance between them, she caught a glimpse of a small object within his hand. Lowering himself to the edge of the pool, he slipped his legs into the water, sitting off to her left.

Her eyebrows lifted when he held out his hand to offer her the small package she'd glimpsed only moments before.

"What is this?" she asked as her hand closed around the fine spun silk tied into a knot.

"It is a small gift. To celebrate your betrothal feast," he added when her eyes widened as she opened the silk package to reveal an exquisite comb.

"I have noticed you favor lapis lazuli," Gaius offered. "But I shall return it if you do not find it to your liking—"

"No. It is beautiful. I love it." He seemed uncertain, as if he did not quite believe her. Nivea understood why that was. Undoubtedly, he'd not missed the moisture that filled her eyes, or the silence that had stretched between them for long moments as she'd stared numbly at the beautiful adornment. And it was beautiful, almost identical to the lapis lazuli pearl comb, which she often wore within her hair. This one was much larger, to be used to comb the tangles from one's locks.

"No really, I love it," she said firmly when Gaius' expression grew distant. "It is just that no man has ever given me such a gift before. I guess I was surprised." Her eyes searched his face. "And touched. Thank you," she said softly. Nivea's words seemed to resonate with him because he relaxed – somewhat.

"What do you mean no man has ever given you such a gift? What of your husband? What of Flavius?"

When she shook her head, her ears almost burned at the curse that rent the air.

"Why ever not?" he demanded.

She shrugged as if his question did not bother her, but it did, a great deal so. Nivea had been forced to swallow the bitterness at hearing tales from other wives, those who were happily married, of how their husbands would purchase them lovely gifts when hers did not. She'd thought Flavius would be different, but not even for their engagement feast had he brought her a gift. Instead he'd blustered with embarrassment when she'd handed him a bronze cast ring engraved with his initials, and he'd offered her nothing in turn. It had been humiliating, but not wholly unexpected, even though she'd hoped things would be different with Flavius.

"What does one purchase for the woman he believes has everything?"

He frowned. "That is no excuse. You deserve to be lavished with fine gifts. If not from your husband than from whom?"

Her smile was teasing. "Apparently from you, it would seem."

Gaius flushed darkly. "It was a gift for your engagement." His voice was harsher than necessary, and for some reason, which she did not wish to examine too closely, both his sharp tone and his words ignited her temper.

"Be honest, was this a present for me to wed another or was it simply a gift?"

He didn't answer. Instead he removed his tunic and in a single motion he slipped into the pool with her and plucked the comb from her tense fingers. She didn't protest as he settled behind her, pulling her body against his, but even as every part of her began to vibrate with awareness, in no way did her ire with him just simply vanish.

She started when she felt the teeth of the comb raking through the tangles of her hair. Nivea did not want to release her anger, but it was impossible to hold onto at the pleasure of his hands within her hair, gently working through the knots.

"You were right. It is a simply a gift for you," Gaius murmured softly after several minutes of silence passed between them.

She'd not expected him to ever answer her so she was surprised by his candidness, his honesty, what he'd revealed with his admission.

"You should not have spent so much on a gift for me. I know that every coin you have is pledged to your own plot of land."

The hand combing her hair faltered and then with two fingers he tilted her chin so she had no choice but to meet his gaze from over her shoulder.

"You are worth every expense."

He released her chin and she turned back around before he had the chance to glimpse the blush heating her face. She did not know what to say to that. She did not know how to even begin to dissect the meaning of his words, so she didn't. Remaining silent, Nivea emptied her mind as she succumbed to the bliss of his hands weaving through her hair.

"I watched you earlier with Flavius."

Nivea stilled. "You were here? For how long? How did you enter without being discovered?"

"I am a soldier." She could almost hear the grin in his voice. "I can assure you I have entered enemy camps far more treacherous and deadly than your villa."

Nivea smiled because she did not doubt his words in the least.

"I arrived after the meal had ended, so I was not here long. I hid within the alcove-"

"And then you watched me." She bristled.

"I was curious."

She twisted around to nail him with her narrowed gaze. "About what?"

He shrugged, seemingly unperturbed by the anger seething from her. "About what it is you see in Flavius."

"And? After spying upon us, what did you determine?"

"That you don't appear to be in love with him at all."

She glanced away as she turned from him. "Love is not always necessary to have a happy union."

He set the comb aside, but she didn't look at him, for she did not wish Gaius to see her face, because he would know the truth—that she believed no such thing at all.

"True. But you deserve love, Nivea." As he spoke, he swept her hair to one side, her unbound locks tumbling over one shoulder so the other side of her neck was bare. At the first brush of his lips against her skin, she shivered, her nipples tightening, her pussy throbbing with wetness as he wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

"You deserve a man who will love and cherish you all the days you are wed," Gaius whispered against her flesh as he nipped at it, his hand now gently cupping her breast to knead the soft mound within his palm.

For once, his lovemaking did not rob her of all thought. As she settled against his body, her arm winding behind her so she could cup the back of his head and hold his lips pressed to her neck, his words still nagged at her.

It had not escaped her notice that he'd proclaimed she deserved a man who would love her, but at no point had he revealed he was that man.

Irrational as it was, disappointment filled her. No man had ever shown her such passion, such tenderness. No man had ever taken notice of her needs, her wants, and done something simply for the joy of pleasing her.

No man but Gaius.

Irrational as it was, she wanted this man's love, but instinctively she knew she would never have it, just as she knew she would be forced to reject him if he ever gave it to her.

# But what of your heart? Would you ever give this man your love?

Nivea found she could not answer such questions. Truly, Gaius already had a piece of her heart, but all of it? She could not say, because she did not know herself, and that was because she did not truly know him.

"I can hear your thoughts you are thinking so loud," Gaius complained as he wrenched his lips from her throat. He lifted her off him and shifted their bodies so her hands were flat against the edge of the pool and her ass high in the air.

Whipping her head around, she looked at him over her shoulder. "If that is true then what do they say?" Nivea teased, happy to leave behind her serious musings to banter with him.

"They're begging me to fuck you."

"Hmmm, is that so?"

"Very much so." She noticed his lids were heavy, his voice strained and hoarse. He settled behind her, his cock hard as iron and pulsing red as it swelled before her eyes.

"Turn around," he commanded in a soft voice and Nivea complied. She stared at the flowery, pastel frescos which adorned the walls of her private bathing chambers.

The pretty tiles disappeared when she shut her eyes at the stinging slap upon her ass. She moaned, a sound melding pleasure and pain as he struck her backside until her pussy was gushing wet, the folds of her womanhood glistening with her arousal.

With his feet, he spread her legs farther apart and before she could take her next breath, she felt the tip of his pulsing, hard shaft dip into her wetness.

Gaius hovered there at the opening of her slit, giving her tiny, shallow strokes until she was desperate and panting.

"Please, Gaius. Please do not tease me."

"Beg me," he whispered hotly against her ear. "Beg me to fill your channel with my cock."

She moaned at the lewdness of his words, the image they created, as she did just that.

"Please, Gaius, fuck me. Please fill my channel with your *cock*." She screamed out the last word because before she could even finish he surged forward, plowing through tight, clenching muscles to fill her channel full of his cock.

But he did not stay there as he pulled all the way out then slammed home again.

Over and over he fucked her with deep, driving thrusts. Filling her with his ruddy shaft, stretching her with the thick meat of his cock. He pounded her pussy until she was drowning in her wetness and sobbing with pleasure.

"Gaius," she panted, calling his name as he reached around their bodies with one hand to grope her breast, plucking at the tender peak of her nipple. When he twisted it slightly, pain shot through her, straight from her nipple to her pussy. But it was a pleasurable pain and she convulsed.

Before Nivea realized it she was climaxing, her pussy tightening around his thrusting cock as her juices flowed endlessly from her. She screamed out his name, ragged and needy.

Seconds later she heard her own coming out as a harsh, masculine groan.

"Nivea," he breathed against her ear. "Niveaaaa."

She felt his seed blasting against the hot walls of her cunt and then she felt the spray of droplets across her back.

Twisting her head around, she watched in rapt fascination as he pumped his cock with his hand, his face twisted in pleasurable agony, the muscles in his torso flexing and pulsing. She gasped at the eroticism of the moment when several droplets of his warm semen landed upon her breasts, while the rest were swallowed up by the waters of her bathing pool.

It seemed like an eternity passed before his turgid length grew soft and his entire body relaxed. Without a word he bathed them both in silence, washing away all traces of their lovemaking. When he was done, he lifted her from the pool and carried her to her private chambers where he set her down to dry her body with a thick woolen swath, before drying his own.

Casting the cloth aside, he instructed her to get into the bed, which she did, fully expecting him to join her, where he would fall asleep beside her.

But Gaius did not join her.

And he did not fall asleep.

Nivea soon discovered the night she'd assumed was coming to an end was only just beginning.

# **Chapter Six**

Gaius did not explain himself as he walked from each end of the bed, securing Nivea's wrists and ankles to the wooden posts. Her gaze shadowed his every move and he knew she was nervous. He could feel her heart pounding when he touched the tiny vein at her wrist.

He glanced at her as he tightened the last knot around her wrist. She was nervous, anxious, but he was pleased to see she was not frightened.

It was actually the opposite.

Her eyes darkened with anticipation and she ran her tongue across her full lips, in an erotic, tantalizing gesture leaving them glistening wet. Far from being scared, every part of her pulsed with seductive need.

She was beautiful in her passion as she awakened before his eyes to her dark, sensual nature – a nature that revealed Nivea yearned to be dominated, to be mastered. As his gaze lightly roamed her naked figure, something gnawed in his belly at the thought that Flavius would soon have her, that he would soon touch her like this.

It was getting worse – this jealousy of his.

And Gaius had no idea what he could do to stop it.

Crossing the room, he shook his head as if he could cast the disturbing thoughts from his mind. This eve he could, and any eve he was near her, within her bed, inside her, pounding between her thighs, pumping her full of his seed.

But when he was away from her, when he was alone upon his weathered pallet, staring at the calendar resting on his desk and the impending date of her wedding, his dark thoughts would return, and with them a foreboding sense of disquiet would settle within him, so deep he could feel the chill of it all the way to his bones.

A sudden, soft intake of breath drew his attention and Gaius looked over at Nivea. He followed her riveted gaze to the object within his hand. Flashing her an encouraging smile, he stood from where he'd hunched down in the corner to retrieve the item he'd stashed within her room when he'd first arrived, before making his way to her dining hall where he'd spent the rest of his time spying on her and Flavius.

He'd been so deep in thought he hadn't realized he even held the stiff, unyielding leather within his hand, and that he was supposed to warn her first, so she would not look at him the way she was now – with uncertainty in her eyes.

"Do not be alarmed. It is a simple horse whip -"

She cut him off with her strangled cry.

"That has been altered to use upon the body of a woman," he continued.

Nivea did not appear reassured by his words, so he trudged ahead, cursing himself for not doing what he should have done, and that was prepare her so she would not be shocked.

"It will sting at first, but not overly so. Remember when I spanked you?"

She nodded.

"It will feel like that. Pain at first, then pleasure."

She looked at him curiously. "And Flavius does this to women?"

Gaius wasn't certain of how his jaw didn't break given how hard he gnashed his teeth together. He wanted to shout at her – *Fuck Flavius. He is an unimportant imbecile who doesn't deserve you.* 

Gaius said none of those things as he bit out a curt, "Yes."

He wanted to add *and men as well*, but he cared too much for her to allow his bitterness toward Flavius to make him cruel toward her.

Gaius decided then that he was too possessive of a man to allow Nivea to speak of another when it was he who was inside her body. Because for her to talk of Flavius

meant she also thought of him and he would never abide by that, not when it was his hands upon her skin, his cock pounding within her channel.

"No more discussion of Flavius, understood?"

Her eyes widened in surprise and he cursed himself yet again at the brusqueness of his tone. He tried to lessen the bite of his words by gently caressing the soft skin of her inner thigh with his hand.

She relaxed under his tender ministrations and her eyes clouded with lust as she finally murmured, "Understood," in a breathy, choppy voice.

He continued to stroke her flesh, teasing her every so often as his finger grazed the tight bud at the center of her thighs. When the lips of her pussy were wet and swollen, glistening pink with the evidence of her desire, he knew then she was ready.

Nivea was so drunk with lust she did not notice the change in Gaius—his dark possessive stare, the tightly coiled domineering beast which he barely leashed as his entire body pulsed with tension.

Even when his hand ceased to caress her thighs, she did not realize what was to come next. But even if she had, there would have been nothing she could have done to prepare herself.

The first strike of the hide leather lashed one of her nipples and she cried out in surprise as pain burst in her chest, robbing her of breath.

He'd lied. It was far worse than any spanking she'd ever had.

And before her body could absorb the first strike, another one came, and then another. One strike after the other against the tight, aching buds of her breasts.

"Gaius," she sobbed, begging him to stop, but he didn't.

Instead he whispered encouragements to her, as if she were a petulant child.

"Soon it will change. Very soon."

Nivea had no idea what he meant by that until it happened.

When the end of the whip lashed across the hot, sensitive nub between her spread legs, pleasure lanced through her, so hot and fierce she could not even speak, she could barely breathe.

She climaxed with his second strike as she cried out on a broken sob, tears leaking from her clenched eyes. Nivea was barely aware of her body thrashing wildly against the bed as convulsions racked every part of her until she was spent, until she was thoroughly wrung out.

When her eyes finally fluttered open, she found herself staring up into Gaius' handsome face, which wore a decidedly arrogant grin. He hovered above her and that was when she noticed he was now stretched out atop her, his cock poised at her dripping slit.

"How are you?"

Still in the foggy haze of bliss, Nivea answered him truthfully. "I-I have never felt anything like that before. It has never been so intense." She smiled, almost at a loss for words. "It was wonderful."

His grin melted into a genuine smile, full of tenderness and when he pushed inside her body, it was slow, gentle, almost reverent.

He held her gaze prisoner with his as he thrust, then pulled out, then thrust again.

Holding himself up, his weight braced on his elbows, he pounded inside her wet cunt, the sounds of her pussy sucking him in and desperately trying to hold him there echoed off the walls, making her blush.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of. It is your body's way of saying you desire me just as fiercely as I desire you."

Locked within his steady gaze, Nivea had never felt such closeness with another as she did in that moment with Gaius.

Their lovemaking was different this time, and somehow she knew from this moment on everything would change between them.

Cupping her breast, he lowered his head and captured her lips. He kept up his slow rhythm, rocking his hips as he stroked within her on languid, sensual thrusts. He probed her mouth, his tongue thrusting deep in time to the rocking of his hips, building a steady, sharp ache inside her wet passage until something burst inside her.

A tremor rocked her and she drenched his pistoning shaft at the same time Gaius groaned into her mouth, filling her with his warm breath. She felt his cock twitch then swell inside her. In the next instant he flooded her with his release, his body shaking and shuddering against hers until he stilled.

It was some time before he moved, and when he did only enough to undo her binding before he flopped back down upon the bed and pulled her within his arms.

Nivea wasn't aware of how much time passed before they both drifted off to sleep, but she was certain it couldn't have been more than a matter of seconds before they both succumbed to exhaustion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaius awoke early the next morning to the smell of savory roasted meat and a warm, soft thigh draped over his. His eyes fluttered open and he lifted up from the bed to see that Nivea sat beside him, her head bent over several pieces of parchment and an open *tabulae* in her lap, while on the table beside her was a platter of food, overflowing with lamb and goat cheese, along with a few figs and a loaf of bread.

"I thought you might be hungry," Nivea said with a sheepish smile.

He tensed immediately, but she shook her head, easily following the direction of her thoughts.

"I brought it from the kitchen myself. I dismissed my servants. No one knows you are here, Gaius."

He relaxed, helping himself to some of the lamb and bread spread before him. "Good. That is for the best." Gaius could not read her expression when Nivea looked away, but he sensed his words upset her and he had an idea as to why, but he refused to broach this subject with her.

No matter the intimacy and the closeness growing between them, they were not lovers, and would never be anything more than what they were—business acquaintances. Nivea may have forgotten that, but he had not. After she was wed, she would thank him for his discretion.

"What is that there?" he asked, glancing over her shoulder as he swallowed his last bite.

She lifted the *tabulae*. "The ledger for my holdings. I'm trying to take stock of our harvest inventory so I'll know what we need to purchase before the next seeding."

Gaius sat up straighter. "You do not have your argentarii do that?"

She looked at him with an expression he could not discern until she spoke. "Does your father have an *argentarii* balance his ledger?"

"No, of course not, he..." His voice trailed off when he realized what he'd been on the verge of saying. A rueful smile curled his lips.

Nivea returned his smile. "As you were saying, your father does not hire a person to do his ledger because he is the owner and should do these things himself, but more importantly because he is a *man*. Do not trouble yourself, you are not the first to suggest I should turn over such arduous tasks for my feeble brain—"

"Careful," he warned, a teasing glint to his eyes. "I said no such thing."

"True, but you thought it." Gaius did not argue because on that point she was correct.

"Nonetheless, I am still impressed. There are many widows who would not be equipped for such a task."

She shrugged. "Well I am well equipped to see to my holdings and run an estate and I have been doing so for many years. If I don't even do this, then what else should I fill my days with?"

He had an idea as the vision of her playing with a handful of golden-eyed children flickered before him, but he kept his thoughts to himself and said, "Would you like some help?"

The suspicious look she shot him forced him to add, "It is obvious you can handle this task and have been doing this on your own for some time, but I am here and my assistance may help you finish faster. Besides, I do not have to return to my post until tomorrow eve so helping you is far preferable to doing nothing until then."

Her eyes twinkled. "Oh I imagine you would find something to occupy yourself with."

"Or someone," he murmured seductively, moving closer. "But then it would be some time before she finished her ledger."

Her eyes clouded, but then she shook her head as if coming out of a trance. "No, I need to finish this."

"Then let me help you," he coaxed.

This time she only hesitated for a few seconds before handing over several pieces of parchment, which he studied closely before setting out to balance the figures.

What would have taken most of the day, together they finished within a couple of hours. With a triumphant smile, Nivea shut the *tabulae* and set it aside.

"Now I must say I am impressed. Unlike me, you did not even need to use the *abacus* I gave you. You managed to count everything in your head and you made not one mistake."

Her praise washed over him, but Gaius shrugged it off. "I've been helping my father for many years. It's second nature."

"Possibly, but I think it's because you have a head for such things." Her smile was warm, gentle. "I imagine your estate will prove to be quite prosperous."

He returned her smile, and he noticed her faith in him filled him with a measure of pride he'd not felt since joining the military. She hardly knew him, and yet he could see within her eyes that she believed her words just as surely as she believed the sun would set at the first blush of eve. It was humbling, and it warmed him in the deepest regions of his soul.

Yet almost as soon as that thought filled his mind, another revelation hit him squarely in the chest, exposing him for the fool he was.

For the first time in a long time, he allowed himself to peel away the layers of his past and stared at memories he'd buried so deep and for so long.

Nivea was nothing like Arianna, but the circumstances he found himself in were nearly identical. He'd known almost from the beginning his arrangement with Nivea was a mistake, but naively he'd told himself he'd hardened his heart long ago, that he was immune to her.

But he wasn't, and this time promised to wound him far worse, far deeper, leaving him ravaged and suffering from the kind of pain one never recovered from.

"You know after you're wed, Flavius will not allow you to see to these tasks any longer," Gaius blurted, trying to distract himself from his inner turmoil.

At Gaius' words Nivea shot him a hard glare. "Flavius has assured me that he will not interfere with my pursuits, especially those pertaining to my holdings."

"That is what he says now, until he comes to realize your pursuits will take you away from him and his household more than he cares to allow. And then everything will change."

Nivea's expression hardened. She sensed Gaius' mood had changed, that he was simply lashing out from some unknown hurt she'd not caused, but she had no idea what, and that he'd made her his innocent target only incensed her further.

"Just because you would confine and restrict your wife in order to preserve your ego does not mean Flavius shall do the same."

Nivea had barely gotten the words out before he jerked her by the arms and pulled her against him until only a hairsbreadth separated their noses.

"Do not compare me to your cruel and deviant intended. I would never deny my wife anything, especially something that pleases her."

Despite herself, a shudder raced through Nivea, mostly of desire, but a small measure of it was filled with *jealousy*? She examined the unfamiliar emotion and knew that was exactly what it was.

Some woman would be denied nothing by this man. Every night she would know passion, and every day he would show her tenderness and respect, then pamper her with special gifts. Some woman would be loved and cherished by Gaius, but that woman would not be her and it made her heart ache. And that ache was so painful she could not even look at him as moisture burned within her eyes.

"Flavius is a good match," she said helplessly, not knowing what else to say.

He gave her a subtle shake, forcing her gaze back to him. "Do you even hear yourself? You sound as if you believe that even less than I do." Nivea stared into eyes filled with incredulity, but there was something else within their stormy depths she could not name, but made her belly clench in response.

"Tell me honestly, Nivea, why are you wedding this man when you do not have to? It is not his wealth, nor his prestige, because you have that in abundance, far exceeding his own. And we both know you do not love him. So what is it? Why are you so desperate to learn how to please a man within his bed, when I am not even convinced you wish to share it?" His words scalded her as effectively as a cauldron of boiling water. She fought to wrench herself free of his iron grasp, but he held fast. Then she fought to deny him the truth, but when he snared her with his hard, blue stare, she found she could not even tell him this one lie.

"My late husband barely touched me, so it was no surprise that I never got with child, even though I know our union would have been so much more bearable if I'd had a babe to dote on, to love. But I had no one—" She looked away. "And I just remember feeling so alone."

Gaius' eyes sharpened on her. "You want a child."

She nodded. "And Flavius wants the same. It is a good match because he will give me the children I have long desired."

"Any man could give you a child. Why Flavius?"

For the second time in as many days, disappointment settled within the pit of her belly, because for the second time in as many days, Gaius told her again of how some other man could give her what Flavius could not, but never did he say that man was *him* and it was her anger with him that caused her to lash out.

"As you pointed out, I have my wealth and status to consider. Not any man would do to father my child."

Right before his eyes Nivea became a woman he'd never seen and one he did not know, and yet, she was familiar to him.

Cold and haughty and arrogant—Nivea was none of those things, and she'd never been so with him, until now.

But Arianna...

Arianna had been cruel and cold, selfish and manipulative, and he'd been too foolish and in love to see the truth until it was too late.

Nivea's words dredged up old hurts, old bitterness, even as he knew she spoke the truth.

Nivea could not bear the child of just any man, least of all some common soldier, a second son who owned nothing. For many reasons he refused to wed, but the chief reason was because he had nothing to offer a wife and children.

But as he stared into guileless eyes that now barred him from her deeper emotions, an invisible, crushing weight slammed into his chest at the realization Nivea's cold words suggested she truly believed he was good enough to fuck in the dark, but not good enough to father her child.

He released her from his grasp and climbed off the bed. Gaius knew he had nothing to offer her, just as he knew he carried around demons from his past. But if he ever wed, he would always strive to make the days of his wife and children ones filled with love and happiness. He would strive to be the father and husband Claudius had been while his mother had lived, and valiantly tried to be even after she died.

Nivea thought Flavius was a good match and deep down he knew she thought him a better man than Gaius. Disgust filled him at the thought. He was a man of honor and principle and maybe as a soldier Flavius had been one of honor and principle as well, every testament suggested as much, but he was woefully lacking as a man, and it was time Nivea realized this.

"Where are you going?" she asked when he was fully clad in his armor and tunic.

"I need to run some errands so we have everything we need for this eve."

"This eve? What is to happen this eve?"

He smiled at her, giving her the same arrogant, haughty look she'd treated him to only moments before.

"At our first meeting, you asked me what was The Cave. Well this eve, you shall find out for yourself. I shall return at dusk with everything we will need. But prepare yourself." His eyes held hers. "You may regret what you discover." \* \* \* \* \*

As promised, Gaius returned at dusk. All day her mind had wandered aimlessly, contriving all sorts of things—the erotic costumes he was purchasing, the pleasures to be found in this place called The Cave.

Nivea's mind had done nothing but fabricate a host of forbidden and tantalizing fantasies, so she was quite disappointed when he returned at dusk and handed her a golden mask.

"You will need it once inside," he explained at the same time he tied a linen cloth around her eyes. "But until we arrive there, you must wear this."

"Why?"

"Because you are my guest and only members of The Cave are allowed to know its location. It is to protect all who enter. That you are with me suggests I trust you not to reveal who or what you see there. And the mask protects your reputation, just as it tells others you are not a member."

"Oh," was all Nivea said, even though she didn't fully understand, but she surmised she understood enough.

They left soon after and Nivea found herself blindfolded and on horseback, her back pressed to Gaius' chest. Air whipped through her *stola*, across her bare legs as they rode swiftly to their destination.

The journey passed quickly and before she was able to gather her bearings, Gaius lifted her off his horse and carefully ushered her down a series of steps. They stopped before what she presumed to be a door because she heard a knock. Whoever opened the door spoke with Gaius in hushed tones, because Nivea could not make out the words flowing between them.

Whatever Gaius had told the person was enough to gain them both entrance and upon entering, the first thing she noticed was the sudden onslaught of sounds.

Moans of pleasure.

Soft music floating from a string instrument.

The low cacophony of hushed voices.

Where the night had been still and quiet, this place was bursting with people and a tapestry of voices and noises.

Nivea blinked when suddenly the blindfold was removed. Gaius stood before her, and behind him was an empty wall.

He thrust the mask at her. "Once you put this on, you may turn around."

Yes, right, once the sanctity of her reputation was assured. She wanted to roll her eyes. Who was he trying to protect? Her or himself? Because if it was her, then he need not go to such lengths. She'd told him from the very beginning her reputation was her concern, not his.

"Your eyes mock me, but I would not have you ruined when it could have been so easily avoided."

Her eyes, now framed by the golden mask, snapped to his face, but he spun her around before she could question him, although, there really was no need. He'd said it himself. Her expression had mocked him, she just wondered how it was that he was able to read her so easily.

"Because your face is so expressive," he whispered against her ear from over her shoulder.

"But this time I was not even looking at you."

He chuckled at her surprise. "It is because I know you so well."

She considered that. "I would like to believe it is because you are a sorcerer of some kind."

This time he laughed in earnest as he took her hand to lead her through the chambers. Hidden behind her mask, Nivea was able to look her fill without reproach, without embarrassment shadowing her every glance.

And yet, what she saw still filled her cheeks with heat.

Gaius led her down a long hallway where on either side were several rooms, the entrances to which were draped by thin veils of silk. One could easily see into each chamber, and Nivea noticed every room was dimly lit by oil lamps and contained a single bed. She also noticed almost all of the rooms were occupied with couples, but many held more than *just* couples—two men and two women, two women and one man.

There were many variations and Nivea's eyes widened as the sounds and scents of lust and lovemaking filtered through the room, permeating every centimeter of it.

Gaius seemed unperturbed by any of it, but then she reminded herself, why would he be? This place was where he indulged in the pleasures of the flesh, it was where he had every single desire catered to and fulfilled.

Jealousy coiled tight in the pit of her stomach at how easy it would be for Gaius to dismiss what they'd shared once their affair came to an end. What they'd done was probably nothing to him, another dalliance that paled in comparison to the pleasures he found within these walls.

"Are you nervous?" Gaius inquired as he led her into one of the main rooms found at the end of the hall that held three beds, each covered in a curtain of silk, giving the occupants a measure of privacy.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because your hold upon my hand is so tight that I fear you are trying to crush my bones."

"Oh." She released him. "I am sorry."

His smile was gentle. "I know this must all be a bit shocking for you."

She wanted to tell him that still wasn't the reason why she'd gripped his hand so tightly, but if she did, then she gathered she would have to tell him the true reason, and she was not prepared to reveal her inner emotions, so she silently nodded.

Pulling back the curtain, he gestured for her to climb atop the bed where he joined her. The other two beds were on either side of them, and from their position in the center, Nivea could see all the way down the vestibule as people entered and left the private rooms.

A flash of movement from the corner of her eye drew her gaze, and she looked over to see two men, one as fair as the other was dark, climbing off the bed to her left. Well actually they stumbled, as they drunkenly clutched at each other with one hand, while still holding on to a goblet of wine in their other hand.

Nivea watched as they stumbled again, before stopping completely, and the fairhaired man who was the larger of the two pushed the other against a nearby wall and kissed him deeply, passionately. His lover clung to him and Nivea lost herself in their embrace until she felt Gaius shift beside her.

She turned to look at him, studying him closely as her gaze darted between him and the entwined lovers.

"Does the sight of them arouse you?" she asked.

"Does it not arouse you?"

It did, but he had not answered her question, and it was an important one.

"Are you still drawn to men?" she tried again.

He narrowed his eyes. "What are you really trying to ask me?"

Her belly fluttered at his harsh scrutiny, but she refused to be deterred as she pondered his words before she answered. "My question was as direct as I can make it, but if you do not wish to answer..."

Gaius studied Nivea beneath hooded eyes. Her question had caught him unawares, but now that he faced it, he wasn't certain how to answer. He glanced back over at the two men who were no longer humping and groping each other against the wall and had begun making their way down the narrow corridor. Was he still drawn to men?

He let his gaze whisper across the taut, naked buttocks of the men walking way and recalled the heavy, bobbing weight of their stiff shafts as they swung proudly through the air before they'd turned from him.

He'd been aroused as he watched the two men, was *still* aroused as he felt the steady, undeniable throb of desire pulsing through him, but he searched until he found the source. "I have never been drawn to men exclusively. At least I do not favor men over women. I have only ever been drawn to a person, whether that be a man or woman."

"And what of your heart? Have you ever loved a man?"

How had they gotten to this point? He'd brought her there to fuck her, and then to show her the truth. This entire venture was about her. It should have had nothing to do with him, and yet he found himself uttering softly, "Never."

"Have you ever loved a woman?"

He glared at her. "Nivea," he growled her name in warning, but she did not cower, nor did she retreat. Gaius could not fathom why she was determined but he knew she would have her answers.

"You demanded to know why I decided to wed Flavius, but you will not even answer me this?" Her golden eyes speared him and he could already feel himself caving. Who was practicing sorcery now?

"Once," he gritted out.

She rested her palm flat over the space where his heart beat in his chest, and she might as well have flayed him alive at the tenderness of her touch, the gentleness of her eyes and the softness of her voice when she whispered, "But never again."

He jerked away from her touch.

"You lie with men who you are drawn to, but you can never love them. And yet, you refuse to lie with a woman who you could love, if you would allow yourself."

Gaius' heart pounded faster and his brow beaded with moisture. How did she know such things? No one would have told her, because no one, not even his father knew the truth.

"It is because I know you so well." She smiled, repeating the words he'd spoken to her earlier.

Her hand cupped his cheek in a gentle caress as if he was a newborn colt, skittish and afraid. He fought the urge to pull away from her, mostly because as much as he feared her probing questions, her direct insight that seared his soul, it was her delicate touch that calmed him, that eased the storm raging inside him and scared him more than anything else could.

Nivea did not know why this was so important to her — she could never have Gaius, she could never be the one he gave his love to, even though she yearned to be the one to heal his heart. But it was impossible.

And yet she needed to know that if Gaius formed a union with a woman, he would love her and only her, that he would desire her and only her. Instinctively, she knew Gaius would be faithful to his wife, but would he always yearn for another?

Now she had her answer, but it had come at a cost.

Gaius' normally sparkling blue eyes that reminded her of rare sapphire jewels were now haunted and he stared at her from a dull gaze flickering with pain.

She lifted her other hand and weaved it through his hair. He hesitated for a moment before he allowed her to pull him close and press her lips to his. Again, he resisted, his mouth closed firmly as if he did not know what to do with it, but with the teasing of her tongue along the seam, he soon parted his lips and she joined their mouths.

Her tongue dipped inside the warm, hot cavern of his mouth, then retreated. She devoured him with a hot, opened-mouth kiss that was wet and deep, while holding him tight as she began to rub her body against his in a slow, undulating rocking motion.

She sat atop his lap, her thighs straddling his hips, with one hand tugging at his locks and the other holding his cheek as she seduced him with hot, deep slides of her tongue.

Never before had she taken control and Nivea savored the feeling, enjoying the pulsing hardness of Gaius' powerful body throbbing beneath hers. She finally pulled her lips from his when she felt Gaius' hands clutching her hips, his nails digging through the thin fabric of her garment to press into her skin.

"You drive me mad," Gaius whispered against her lips. Nivea did not have a moment to study his face in order to discern whether or not driving him mad was a good thing or bad.

She reasoned some of it had to be good, because his every movement was wild and frenzied as if he truly was mad and could not wait to be inside her.

With shaky fingers, he pulled his cock from his *bracca* and brushed aside the draping layers of her *stola* to settle her atop the head of his pulsing cock. "Ride me," he groaned as he dragged her down atop him, stuffing her full of his hot shaft. "Ride my cock and make me come."

His hands still gripped her hips, but as she braced against his shoulders she began to move along his shaft, her wet pussy gliding over him. Through the mask she wore, she met his lust-filled gaze and could not stop herself from brushing her lips against his.

He wound his arms around her, pulling her closer, deeper into his embrace as her tongue meshed with his on deep, wet strokes. She moved faster, he surged harder, and their bodies collided together in unison, in perfect harmony. He groaned against her lips, into her mouth, and the deep sound whispered through her with need and hunger.

Nivea clung to Gaius, sinking down onto his cock, the walls of her wet sheath drenching him with her arousal until he pushed deep and hard into her and she splintered apart all around him, an eruption of delicious pleasure and wanton need bursting from inside her. Tearing her lips from his, she buried her face against his neck, savoring the rich, masculine scent of his skin as she trembled in his arms.

The sound of a harsh grunt, panting and needy, beside her ear told her he too had found that blissful place of completion and she gasped at the warmth pooling within her core, his shaft swelling and pulsing against her tight walls as he came deep inside her.

Boneless and languid, Nivea could barely move as every part of her melted against Gaius' hard strength. Long after her heartbeat slowed and her breathing evened, Gaius shifted their bodies so he sat up against the back of the bed and she lay on her side, her body draped over his.

Together they lay in contented silence, surrounded by the sounds of decadence and desire, the perfumed musk of frenzied lovemaking lingering in the air.

Nivea could already feel her body responding once again to the hedonism of the moment, this hidden, secluded place known only as The Cave, where pleasure and passion reigned. The tender folds of her womanhood grew swollen and slick with desire and she hitched her thigh higher, gently brushing against Gaius' burgeoning cock.

Lifting her head from his chest, she cupped his cheek and kissed his lips, but something drew his attention over her shoulder and he stiffened. His entire body was as cold and hard as a marble statue, and she followed his gaze at the same time a familiar sound of boisterous, masculine laughter echoed in her ears.

Her eyes narrowed behind her mask.

Flavius.

Draped in an elegant white toga, he stood with his arms wrapped around the waists of his two companions. A man and woman, their young, nubile flesh puckered with red welts, crisscrossing their backs, their thighs, their chests.

Nivea gasped and as if Flavius heard the sound, he turned. Their gazes clashed and she turned her head, burying her face against Gaius' shoulder before he had a chance to recognize her behind the mask.

"He is gone," Gaius whispered after a brief moment.

She looked up. "Do you think he recognized me?"

Gaius shook his head. "I do not believe so. He and I exchanged a brief glance, but in that moment I did not glimpse any knowing in his eyes."

Nivea relaxed into Gaius, settling deeper into his embrace.

"Do you still think he is such a good man? Do you still think he is such a good match that you would wish to bear his children?" Gaius' voice was low and harsh and it raked against her ears. She tensed against him, her head lifting so she could pin him with her gaze.

Now she understood why, without prompting, he'd been determined to bring her to this place. He'd known Flavius would be there this night, and what she would see. He thought to dissuade her, but all he'd done was incur her anger toward *him*. She did not appreciate being manipulated, being used to make a point.

"I am here with you, does that mean I am not a good woman?"

Gaius pulled away from her and stood. "You and Flavius are nothing alike."

The vision of Flavius' two companions flickered before her. She gathered Gaius brought her there to see what her intended had done so she would be repulsed, but she was not repulsed, only intrigued. Gaius had lashed her with his whip and brought her to the most shattering climax she'd ever known. Maybe Gaius was wrong, maybe she would welcome the pain of Flavius' touch.

"You are wrong, Gaius. I imagine Flavius and I are more alike than you think."

His gaze pierced her. "If that is true then you are not the woman I thought you were."

Nivea did not visibly react to his cutting words, but she felt the sharp edge of them to the core of her. He was angry with her and so he lashed out in the only way he knew how, with harsh words. With a sigh, Nivea decided she was far too tired to quarrel with him so she climbed off the bed, knowing their time in this pleasure paradise had come to an end.

They left The Cave in silence and rode home to the sounds of horse hooves striking the earthen road and the stillness of the dark night.

Not even when they returned to her villa did they speak, and they fell asleep in her bed, resting beside one another, but not touching, not uttering a word.

And in the morning when Nivea rose, her bed was empty and even though Gaius didn't need to return to his post until later that eve, with a sinking feeling, Nivea knew he would not return to her home this day.

Gaius was gone.

Possibly for good.

# **Chapter Seven**

With angry steps, Gaius stalked away from the training grounds back to his tent, his hand curled around his sword. Rivulets of sweat ran down his bare chest, across his brow, plastering his dark hair to his forehead. He flung the flap aside and entered his tent, his eyes blinking, slowly adjusting to the absence of sunlight. Walking over to the chest in the corner, he dropped his sword atop the pile of weaponry he kept there.

By eve his body would ache from the exertion of overtraining, but his mind had needed the distraction—anything to keep it from returning to his tumultuous thoughts of Nivea. The woman he'd left alone and asleep in her bed almost a fortnight ago because his pride would not allow him to accept that he wanted a woman who would give herself to a man who did not deserve her, one she did not share passion with, one she did not love.

The air shifted around him and Gaius stilled, his hand already going for the small knife at his hip. He'd been so deep in thought he'd grown careless. How could he have not felt the shadow heavy upon his back?

He spun around, his hand withdrawing the knife, ready to strike. He lunged forward, but at the last moment he stopped when he recognized the figure before him.

"Whatever is on your mind must be plaguing you greatly, because the soldier I remember would have known I was here immediately."

Flavius smiled, but Gaius noticed it did not reach his eyes. "Maybe it is time for you to retire after all."

Gaius relaxed his arm and set his knife on the table beside him. With a nod of greeting, he kept his gaze steady upon Flavius. Gaius was not in the mood for company, especially the company of this man.

"Greetings, General. What has brought you to my humble quarters at this hour?"

The older man did not answer him straightaway. Instead he turned from Gaius, as if perusing his small tent and Gaius forced himself not to cast Flavius a baleful glare at the way the general studied his space as if he found it lacking.

"I will not insult you with feigned pretenses." Flavius turned his hard gaze on Gaius then. "I saw you at The Cave several eves ago—"

"Yes, and what of it?" Gaius shrugged. "That was not the first time either one of us has been spotted there."

"No, but that was the first time I saw my intended there."

Every muscle in Gaius' body tensed at the sharp edge to Flavius' voice, but he did not even part his lips to explain. He would not utter a word because anything he said would compromise Nivea, so Gaius remained silent.

"As you well know, Nivea and I are set to wed on the morrow." Gaius' body hardened into cold ice as Flavius began to close the distance between them. Nivea's upcoming wedding was *all* he thought about, Gaius reflected as Flavius continued to draw closer.

Their frames were evenly matched, so when Flavius finally came to a halt before him the older general looked him full in the eye, his expression hard. "You will stay away from her here on out."

Gaius bristled and his ire did not go unnoticed to Flavius who lifted one brow. Even though he was a soldier, Gaius did not take well to the order he'd just been issued. He did not take well to it at all.

"Are you threatening me?"

"I am merely suggesting that if you do not stay away from her, you may find yourself discharged and without honor, and without your pension." Flavius' smile was smug. "Everyone knows you stand to inherit nothing, but you wish for land of your own. Is your trifle affair with Nivea worth losing what little you already have?"

The threat of Flavius' words was as heavy as an iron weight in his gut. Flavius knew he could ill afford to lose his pension if he hoped to own his own plot. And yet Gaius could not deny the truth, no matter what it cost him.

"Nivea is worth everything I own and more."

Flavius' laughter grated on his ears and Gaius forced himself to clench his fists so he did not strike the bastard across his jaw.

"Since you own nothing then that says a great deal." Flavius smirked. "She is having a last affair before she weds. I of all people understand that. But you are pathetic if you believe you mean anything to her. A woman of her status would die before she would ever sacrifice everything for *you*. You have nothing to offer her."

Rage tore through Gaius, twisting his gut into knots and clouding his gaze with a crimson veil, but he was powerless to deny Flavius' words, because Gaius knew every word the man spoke was true, and the general knew it as well.

But Flavius had underestimated him if he thought Gaius could be cowered and threatened into submission. He was not one of Flavius' playthings. Gaius was intelligent and discerning and he knew the true motivations behind Flavius' chilling words.

"If you believe I mean nothing to Nivea and she is having nothing more than a frivolous affair, then why are you here?" Gaius stepped closer, his expression hard and cold as a freezing wind. "You can command me to stay away from Nivea, but what of her? I think when you looked into her eyes that eve at The Cave you saw the truth, just as you see it now in my own eyes."

Flavius snorted, but Gaius noticed a tiny muscle twitched in his jaw.

"Stay away from her," Flavius finally responded, his voice deadly quiet. "Stay away from her or I will ruin you, and then you shall have nothing."

Flavius stalked out of Gaius' tent without another word or a glance back at him to be sure he fully understood his threat.

But Gaius understood, and he understood well.

If Gaius did not keep his distance from Nivea, Flavius would take everything from him – his pension, his dreams of owning his own estate, but worst of all, he would take Nivea.

And there would be nothing and no one to stop him.

Even though he detested the man and his highhanded orders, to honor Flavius' request, Gaius simply had to do as he'd been doing—remain on his post for one more day and avoid Nivea at all costs, lest he make a fool of himself. He had already gone two weeks without seeing her and she was set to wed on the morrow...

Yet Gaius longed to see her one last time, to touch her silken skin, to brush his lips against hers in a tender kiss. He was wise enough to recognize the truth. Flavius had mocked him but he'd not spoken false. He would give up everything for Nivea—but then, he had little to lose. He doubted Nivea would do the same for him in turn. The risk was too great and he did not blame her.

In her eyes, he represented nothing, for he had nothing to offer her.

Gaius could have lived with himself and that knowledge, he may have even managed to stay away from her, had a messenger not arrived just past noon with a package accompanied by a curt note.

Gaius was many things, but a coward he was not, and Nivea's note suggested that indeed he was, and he could not abide by that. Thus, heeding Flavius' words was the last thing on his mind as he set out for Nivea's villa at dusk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nivea was miserable and wise enough to understand that was the last emotion a bride should feel the eve before her wedding.

She missed Gaius terribly, and every night she waited in anticipation that he would come to her, and every dawn she awoke to an empty bed and the wretched feeling that he would never return.

She was set to wed on the morrow, so she was forced to face the truth—he was not coming back and that thought caused a hard lump to form in her throat.

The sounds of soft laughter floated around her and she stopped to stare out at the dining hall filled with her family and closest of friends. It was customary the eve before a couple was to form a union for the bride's father to host a celebration within his home. Since her father was no longer living, and she was a widow, it fell upon her.

Nivea smiled as the drummers began to drum out a soft, provocative beat, and one of her young cousins passed by her. The young girl's face was ebullient as she laughed, her festive *stola* twisting around her bare ankles. Aresia would soon wed, and her cousin found all of the festivities exciting.

Nivea turned from the sight, a frown marring her face as she let the curtain obscure her presence in the shadowed alcove just off the dining hall. She remembered when she'd been as carefree and exuberant as Aresia, looking forward to her wedding day. But soon after her wedding everything had changed. Her laughter, her smiles, they had become rare as she took on the responsibilities of a sick husband and a floundering estate.

She reasoned it had been many years since she'd been truly happy. An unbidden thought found its way into her head, and as much as she wanted to cast it aside, she could not. She had found laughter and joy in Gaius' arms, a peace she hadn't known in some time, and one it was doubtful she would know again if she wed Flavius.

A figure shifted in the darkness and she backed away, a gasp tearing from her lips when it threatened to draw closer.

"It is me, Nivea," said Gaius, forcing her to halt where she stood.

Her eyes narrowed into the darkness until she could make out the broad shoulders and wide gate that had become all too familiar to her.

"Gaius? What are you doing here?" she whispered, even though it wasn't really necessary. The heavy draperies hid them from view and none would be able to hear them over the music and laughter.

An oil lamp against the wall flickered with a tiny fire, allowing her to see the harsh planes of Gaius' face when he closed the distance between them, towering over her. Without a word, he grasped her wrist and lifted her hand to drop a heavy pouch into her palm.

She frowned as her hand closed around the weight. "What is this?"

"The coins you sent round by messenger." His glower was dark and inscrutable. "I do not want your *denarii* – "

Her eyes widened. "But why? We had an arrangement – "

"I know that is what you think, you said as much in your feeble note."

She shook her head. "I-I do not understand."

"I know your pride is too great to return, but here is your due for I shall honor our agreement."

She twisted her lips into a scowl at the mocking tone of his voice as he repeated the words she'd written. "There is no need to mock me. I knew you would not return, so it is as I said, I have honored our agreement -"

"When I would not?" He glared at her. "You think I have not honored our agreement – "

"I did not say that."

He ignored her. "You think I am such a coward that I cannot face you."

A cry of surprise tore from her lips when he twisted her around and pressed her back against the hard, stone walls. His anger was alarming, but what was even more startling was that her body tingled at the fury pouring off him. Maybe it was because she knew instinctively he would never hurt her, so she was not afraid, only aroused.

"Gaius," she said, trying to question him again so she could understand what she'd done to incur his anger. "I do not understand what has upset you so. You have taught me passion as I requested, but I feared you would not return to receive your due. I only wished for you to be paid for -"

"My services," he sneered.

She did not rise to his challenge. "For your lessons."

He blinked as if he'd not expected she would perceive their arrangement in such a manner. Truly, she'd forgotten all about their arrangement. Truly, she'd believed they had found something far greater, but now she was not so certain.

"I do not want your coins," he said finally, his voice soft, his warm breath whispering across her cheeks and he lowered his face closer.

"What? But I-I do not understand," she stammered, the desire thrumming through her made it difficult to speak, to think, to do anything else but twist her arms behind his neck and pull him close.

"I do not want your coins, Nivea. What I want is you."

She gasped, but he swallowed up her short exhalation of breath as he covered her mouth with his. His lips were strong and firm, his tongue boldly sweeping inside her mouth, the slide of it silky and warm as he tasted her.

With his mouth fused to hers, his hands began a slow trek along her bare thighs, pushing her garment out of the way until it was bunched at the hip. Nivea only had a moment to realize what she and Gaius were doing was dangerous.

If anyone found them it would create a scandal that would ruin all of them—her, Gaius, Flavius as well.

To protect his reputation, Flavius would have no choice but to end their engagement. As Nivea wrapped her legs around Gaius' waist, she could not muster up any feelings of regret or sadness if that were to happen.

Without warning, Gaius wrenched his lips from hers. His hands braced her hips against the wall as she clung to him, her legs wide and spread, a tempting invitation for him to thrust inside her.

She stared up into Gaius' face. His eyes were haunted, but the emotions revealed in his stormy blue gaze caused her heart to skip a beat and her breath to catch in her throat.

"You are mine," he said at the same time he surged forward, burying his cock so deep inside her that she swore she could feel him all the way inside her womb.

He pulled out of her slippery, wet cunt and drove in again all the way up to his heavy sac, grinding against her, the nest of hair at his groin rasping across her sensitive nub.

She jerked in his arms as he slammed into her flesh, her nails scraping his back as she held tight to him.

This was not lovemaking, this was not even fucking, and this had gone well past the point of branding. Gaius drilled her with violent, primal thrusts that would leave her sore long after. As his choppy breaths blasted hot against her throat, she knew he wanted her to feel him on the morrow when she took her vows. With every step toward Flavius, she would have no choice but to remember this moment, every detail of it. He wanted her to taste him on her lips, when she sealed her union to Flavius with a kiss. And he wanted her to recall the scent of him when she stood beside her intended and his smell tickled her nose.

Gaius knew well what he was doing, and she could not bring herself to stop him.

"You are mine," he groaned, his thrusts growing harder, going deeper as he pummeled inside her pussy, damp skin meeting soft flesh. Their bodies were wild and primitive, coming together almost desperately, as if they knew this would be their last time.

And with every hard thrust, she took him deep inside her body, cushioning him against her dewy nest until the muscles of her pussy pulsed then trembled as she climaxed all around his pounding cock. She buried her face against his neck to smother the sharp cry tearing out of her. Her spasming sheath grasped desperately at his engorged shaft, and seconds later she felt his seed exploding deep within her cunt, blasting wet and hot, filling her up until she overflowed with their combined release.

Convulsions rocked their entwined bodies, and when the trembling finally ceased, somehow she managed to unwind her legs from around him, while he managed to pull out of her.

They groaned simultaneously as he slipped from her body and their juices, the glaring evidence of their rough coupling, trickled down her legs. She wiped most of it away with the inside of her *stola* and was grateful the heavy material was thick enough so their liquids did not stain through.

"I must get back before they wonder where I have disappeared to," she said finally in a voice that was far from steady.

"Do not wed him, Nivea."

Her gaze snapped to his face, in surprise, in shock, in horror. His expression was earnest. He was serious.

"You are serious," she said aloud.

He gripped her arms. "Of course I am. Do not wed him, Nivea. You shall be miserable if you do."

She knew all too well Gaius' words were true, but a combination of anger, frustration and helplessness all found purchase inside her at the notion he would come to her on the eve before her wedding and say such things, while offering her nothing else.

"And what would you have me do? End my engagement this very moment? You would have me walk out there on the eve of my wedding and announce to all of my family and friends that I have changed my mind?"

"Yes."

Her eyes widened at how quickly he spoke, how sincere he sounded. His eyes were unflinching and she knew without doubt he was deadly serious.

"Why ever would I do that?" she shot back at him.

"Because I love you."

Her heart stopped. She was certain of it because she could not breathe, and every muscle inside her felt as if it lacked substance.

How many nights had she lain in her bed wishing Gaius would return to her, that he would gather her in his arms and say these very words. But the sinking, crushing truth was he hadn't. Because he didn't feel the emotions behind his words. He was only there this eve because he could not stand to lose. He could not see her give herself to a man he thought less than himself, one he thought unworthy of her. This was about victory to him. This was not about love.

She shook her head. "If I am not to wed Flavius, then what would you have me do? Would you have me wed you? Would you give me the children I so desire?"

Nivea knew his answer before he even spoke, and the guilt that darkened his eyes made her heart ache.

"You know I cannot," he confessed quietly. "Without my own holdings, I have nothing to offer a wife, and I would not have her bear my child when I have nothing to give either of them."

"That is what I thought," she said, already lifting her *stola* to brush past him, but he would not let her simply walk away from him. H grasped her by the arms and pulled her against his body, her back flush with his hard torso.

"I may not be able to wed you just yet, but I would love you, Nivea, with my whole heart." His lips moved against her ear and her traitorous body responded instantly to his nearness, to the silken caress of his breath. "You know that I would treat you better than he ever could. You know that I would never lie to you, as Flavius has done. You know that I would never take another to our bed, as Flavius will do."

His pretty words were just that, *pretty*, but without action they held no meaning to her. She wrenched out of his grasp and spun around, her eyes flashing dangerously at him.

"You dare a lot coming here the eve of my wedding, spouting declarations and telling me to end my engagement." She lifted her finger, jabbing it into his chest with each word she spoke. "You would not even tell me why you cannot love a woman, why you have shunned the touch of a woman for so many years, and yet you come here expecting me to believe your words."

She shook her head, silencing him when he parted his lips to protest.

"You would have me cast Flavius aside for you. But I cannot trust you, any more than I can trust him—"

"Nivea – "

She drew away from him, refusing to meet his searching gaze. "You do not belong here," she said quietly. "You should leave."

Although she did not look into his face, she knew it was mottled red with fury, she could almost feel the rage pouring off him in waves.

"You will regret this," he blasted against her ear as he brushed past her to the back of the alcove where he would slip out the way he came.

"The only thing I would regret is leaving Flavius for you," she shot back. Her words were brash, but they were a lie, and before he disappeared into the empty, dark vestibule, he stopped to pin her with knowing sapphire eyes that glittered with pain and frustration and anger over her decision.

"You tell yourself that when your bed is cold and your cunt is empty," he retorted in a low voice strained with emotion while she flushed hotly at the vision he described. "You tell yourself that you have made the right decision when you realize your intended would have you suffer the pain of his lash without ever bringing you pleasure. When you wake one day after years spent as his wife and realize you have never been showered with thoughtful gifts, and you have no tender moments or joyful memories to show for your union, I do hope the knowledge that you made the right decision in choosing Flavius over me brings you some comfort because I fear for you that nothing else shall."

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Nivea had been miserable before, but now – now – she could barely suffer through the polite smiles, the empty laughter that did not bring her amusement. When she could not take it any longer, she feigned a headache and disappeared to her chambers.

Sitting on her bed, staring at nothing and seeing nothing in return was how Flavius found her minutes after she took her leave from the night's festivities.

"I just came to see how you fared," he said in answer to the question that must have been brimming in her gaze.

"It is a mild headache." Her smile was weak, at best. "I am sure it will pass by dawn, but thank you for your concern."

His face twisted into a frown as he sat down beside her. "Are you sure it is nothing more?"

As he spoke, his hand lifted to cup the back of her head and he pulled her close, his lips gentle as they pressed firmly to hers. His tongue sought for entrance inside her mouth and she parted her lips, letting him in. She had kissed Flavius before, and just like all those other times, she did not feel the slightest stirring in any region of her body. It was as if she was numb to him.

Before Gaius, she'd simply thought herself a passionless woman, for she'd not felt desire for her first husband, and believed it had something to do with her. Now she realized it was not that at all. Nothing was wrong with any of them. It would seem her body was meant to respond to Gaius, and him alone.

She pulled away, bringing an end to their kiss. How would she do this? How would she wed a man she didn't love and felt no passion for?

With his hand still tangled in her hair, he held her close, his lips brushing against her ear. His grip was tight, too tight, and when she tried to pull away, he stilled her with his words.

"I know you and Gaius Ovidius are lovers."

Despite his vise grip, she jerked away.

"Do not look so surprised or so distraught. I understand well the need to enjoy the company of another before one is to be wed." Even though she knew Flavius still kept lovers, she did not like what he suggested. Gaius had not been some passing affair, as if she were having one final celebration before her union. She had invited Gaius into her bed in order to learn how to please *Flavius*. That it had grown into something more had been wholly unexpected. But it would seem Flavius took lovers because *he* believed a marriage was an arduous chore, one he did not appear to be looking forward to at all.

"Your dalliances have been acceptable up until now, but after we are wed there shall be no more. The child you bear, I must know it is mine and mine alone."

"Of course." She nodded because that was something expected, and a reasonable request. "I would have you certain you are the father of any child I bear, just as I would want to be certain another woman does not bear yours in turn."

He blinked at her, as if she'd startled him, before a smile spread across his face. He patted her knee as if she were a child and then stood.

"Ahh, Nivea, you must know things are different for a man of my status."

"Different?" She cocked her head to the side. "In what way?"

He must have heard the gravel in her voice because he stilled, his eyes flashing hard as granite. "What lies has Gaius Ovidius told you? That he would never take lovers to his marriage bed -"

"This has *nothing* to do with Gaius –"

He snarled at her. "This has everything to do with that man. Before you met him, you were content to be my wife, but now I see the turmoil that brews in your eyes. Did you not think I would notice the changes in you? What lies and fabrications has he told you?" His laugh was bitter, mocking. "Let me guess. That he loves you, that he would never lie or be unfaithful to you." Flavius snorted, his eyes full of derision. "Gaius Ovidius is nothing but a poor soldier. He is a status seeker who would tell you anything to get his hands on your wealth."

Her sharp intake of breath was audible, but Flavius was relentless.

"You are naïve and foolish to believe a word that man says."

Her glare was so sharp it could have cut through iron and Flavius must have realized he'd overstepped his bounds. She did not take well to anyone hurling insults at her and calling her names. And as she thought back to Gaius, whose anger was just as great as Flavius', she recalled not once had he ever lashed out and called her names. If anything, he'd done all but rail at her of how special she was and deserving of love and happiness.

"Quarreling will not solve a thing," Flavius relented. "I shall return to *our* guests. You should get some rest so that you are well for tomorrow."

With that, he slipped quietly from her chambers and she flopped down upon her bed. Stretching out across it, Nivea closed her eyes, but sleep was slow to come.

She'd never expected both men would wage a campaign for her heart. No, she corrected. Only one man sought her heart, but he had nothing to offer her and he refused to give her the one thing the other promised.

No matter what Gaius proclaimed, long ago she'd made her choice.

Flavius may not love her but he offered her the security of marriage and children, while Gaius did not. For a man who claimed to love her, a man who had nothing by way of wealth or status to offer her, if Gaius truly loved her as he said, he would give her what her heart desired, something that would cost him nothing to give.

That's how Nivea knew he did not love her as he said he did.

That's why Nivea knew her decision was made and it was final.

# **Chapter Eight**

It was her wedding day.

Nivea stared at the beautiful garment draped across her bed. Made of delicate silk, the soft opal *stola* was adorned with golden clasps at the shoulders and shimmering iridescent pearls ran along the draped neckline and across the hem. Her wedding attire was elegant and lovely, but the beauty of it was lost upon her as her gaze remained fixed on the golden braid twisted around the waist. The knot of Hercules – to bless the union of man and wife. It was on their wedding night when the bride's husband would untie the knot. And the thought of Flavius removing the golden rope from her body left her feeling nothing but cold and empty inside. Certainly it wasn't an emotion a bride should feel for her intended on their wedding day.

Upon waking, Nivea had opened the small window in her room to let in the morning air and now copper rays streamed into her chambers, reminding her dawn was nearly past. She would be late for her own wedding if she did not hurry.

She reached for her comb to begin working through the tangled mass of her hair, but when her fingers glided across the intricate lapis lazuli design, the even staccato of her beating heart shifted into a thunderous pounding.

### Gaius.

Her hand trembled as she lifted the gift he'd once given her that held more meaning to her than almost everything else she owned. It was because he'd given her something simply to make her happy, to make her smile, asking of nothing in return.

Nivea did not think it was possible, but that thought only made her sadder. She'd done nothing but try *not* to think of Gaius, but everywhere she turned, everywhere she looked, she saw him, felt him. She swore she could even smell him, the heady combination of grassy fields and warm masculine leather.

"A bride should not look so sad on her wedding day."

Nivea closed her eyes, wondering if she had gone so mad that her mind was now conjuring him. But the fingers brushing across her jaw were no fictitious creation, and she opened her eyes on a soft sigh, losing herself in pools of sapphire blue.

"Gaius." She said his name on a voice that trembled with all of the emotions she could not bring herself to voice.

He smiled at her, but it did not light up his eyes as he took the comb from her shaky fingers and began to run it through her hair.

There were no sounds to be heard within her chambers, save the constant rhythm of their breaths, and even those dulcet sounds seem to reverberate against her ears. It was torture, having him near, although an almost insurmountable distance still stretched between them.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she asked him after a long while, when her strained nerves would no longer allow her to endure the quiet.

His hands stilled and she glanced up at him. Unease stole over her when she stared into his face, but could not read his expression. It was as if he was closed off to her, where before he'd never been.

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"To stop me from wedding Flavius of course –"

His harsh frown twisted his features. "Your tone is one of a woman who believes my only reason for being here is to stop you from wedding Flavius out of some competition with the man." If it was possible his frown grew darker. "Indeed you are a prize to be fought over and I will not lie and tell you I would be fine with you wedding him, because I would not be. But it is because you do not love him, Nivea, because he does not love you, that I am here."

His eyes were intense as they bore into her, as if trying to catch a glimpse of her soul.

"I love you, Nivea, and I am here begging you not to marry that man."

Dueling emotions bombarded her at once and she withdrew from his touch to rise to her feet, refusing to look at him. Nivea did not want to give credence to Flavius' words from the eve before, but she could not escape them as they echoed in her ears, repeating themselves over and over again.

"You do not love me, Gaius."

Her voice was quiet, so low the tiniest sound could have muffled her declaration, but she knew he heard every word, and each one of them must have incensed him, because in the next breath he bit out, "You know nothing of my feelings for you."

His expression was harsh and his anger ignited her own.

"Don't I?" She shot back, fury coursing through her entire body. "You would not have even come to my bed had I not offered you the coins I did. And while you may have come to enjoy the pleasures we found there, I think you enjoy taking Flavius' prize from him that much more."

If she'd struck him across the face, Gaius was certain that would have been far kinder than the gut-wrenching pain of her words.

Against his better judgment he'd come to her, knowing he'd face rejection, but he would not have been able to live with himself had he not.

She was making a tremendous mistake, and they both knew it. And yet she stood there, her eyes cold, devoid of the passion he'd glimpsed in their golden depths so many times before, and she hurled words at him she knew to be a lie.

"Look me in the eye and tell me you believe your own words." He closed the distance between them, crowding out all space until he stood before her, daring her to look him in the eye. "Look at me and convince me you believe your lies any more than I do."

Gaius nailed her with his direct gaze but Nivea managed to look in every other direction but his.

"I did not think so -"

Her eyes raked him. "Until just a short while ago, you did not even lie with women. How do you expect me to believe you now love one? That you now love *me*?"

His heart constricted as the meaning of her statement settled over him. If he had been in her place, he would have felt the same, he would have doubted himself and his feelings as well.

Running a hand through his hair, his eyes closed shut as he blew out a sharp, jagged breath. His heart thumped harder in his chest and all of a sudden knots twisted and clenched tight within his gut.

"I see it on your face, even you doubt yourself." She spoke so quietly he had to strain to hear her. "You want me to turn my back on Flavius, but you do not offer for my hand, or the children I desire. That is not love, Gaius."

No that wasn't love, at least not when she said it in that manner. How did he even begin to convince Nivea his feelings for her were real, when he'd never experienced such emotions before? Not even with Arianna, and not since.

And he'd believed himself deeply in love with Arianna, so in love that he'd risked everything to be with her. He'd defied his father's wishes and almost deserted his post to be with her. In her own way, Nivea was asking him to risk everything for her, as Arianna had once demanded of him. Didn't she see he had nothing to offer her? Tying herself to him when he had nothing, she would only come to despise him, and herself. Why couldn't his love for her be enough?

Without hesitation, he knew why. Because Nivea did not feel she could trust his love, because he'd not exorcised those demons from his past that still haunted him. A lump formed in his throat and his hands curled into tight fists, but he blew out a long breath, quieting his racing mind.

#### Centurion's Vow

"I imagine you are correct, that asking you to turn your back on Flavius when I offer you nothing in return is not love at all, but that is because until you I had no experience in the ways of love. You once asked me had I ever been in love and I told you once, but that was a lie."

His gaze found hers and her expression was open, patiently waiting for him to continue.

"Arianna Cornelian was as beautiful as she was pampered and spoiled, but I was young and foolish and could not see past her beauty. We met when I was on my first assignment to Capua, and we fell in love from the moment our eyes landed upon each other. Her father was the provincial governor and I was a lowly centurion, but none of that mattered. We were blissfully happy, or so I believed."

He absently fingered the comb he'd gifted to Nivea that was still twisted in his hand as he recalled the day everything had changed for him and Arianna.

"Everything moved very quickly for us and I am ashamed to say we did not talk often of the important matters, so later when I realized we knew nothing of one another, I should not have been surprised. It was when my father came to visit that everything changed for us, and naturally I blamed him, but it was not his fault. He tried to warn me. He saw what she was and he forbade me to wed her, but I refused and after he left we did not speak for a long time."

His gaze upon her was direct as he recounted a past he'd only discussed with one other—Leviticus, and not even with him had Gaius shared the full story. "You see, I had just proposed when Father arrived. And soon after his arrival, Arianna learned I stood to inherit nothing, that I envisioned remaining in the military for some time and desired to postpone having a family as well. It was not long before she realized I was not the man she'd imagined me to be."

"So what happened?" Nivea asked softly, when it was evident he did not intend to finish.

Gaius looked at her, his smile faint as he shrugged. He gave the appearance that none of it mattered anymore, but he realized then that it did. No longer did he feel the pain and the shame he'd once felt, but he also acknowledged how important it was for him to purge himself of something he'd trapped inside for so long – for too long.

"Soon after my father's visit I was sent on a six-month campaign to Gaul. When I returned from hellish months of war expecting to soothe myself within the arms of my beloved, she was wed to another, a senator's son, a proper man from an esteemed patrician family. She did not even send a note. And I had no idea, not even a clue. I was not even permitted to speak to her, not even long enough to question her decision. It was as if I did not exist anymore."

"Oh, Gaius. I am so sorry."

Anger and sadness shimmered in her sparkling eyes and he smiled at that. Nivea hurt for him, she was furious on his behalf. It was touching, and it revealed even if she did not love him, she cared enough to have compassion for him. He reasoned that would have to be enough, that he would have to find comfort in knowing that at the least she cared, because the look upon her face told him that his confession, his visit there, had all been for naught.

"I am sorry for what this Arianna did to you. Truly I am. But this changes nothing, Gaius. I am not Arianna."

"I know this."

"Which means I would be no better than she if I did to Flavius what was done to you."

He scowled at her, angry once again at how she'd managed to twist everything. "These situations are not the same."

"How are they not?"

"I was infatuated with Arianna, and she with me, but I never had her heart and I knew it."

#### Centurion's Vow

She lowered her lashes so he could not see her eyes when she asked in a quiet voice, "And what of me? What do you know of my heart, Gaius?"

He knew much of her heart; her tenderness, her compassion, her gentleness and generosity. She was everything that Arianna was not, she was goodness, kindness, possessed of a beautiful heart.

Gaius could have said all of those things, all of which were true, but he didn't. Instead he fought for her one last time.

"What I know of your heart is that I desire to have it, as you now have mine."

She shook her head and he longed to reach out to soothe the turmoil in her eyes when moisture shimmered in their tawny depths, but he balled his fists, refusing to touch her. She knew he loved her, if that could not sway her then there was nothing left to say, and soothing her with his touch would not change a thing.

"I am sorry, Gaius. I just cannot do this to my family, to my friends, to his. I cannot do this to Flavius."

Anger swelled in his chest, making it nearly impossible to breathe. Of all the reasons to give, hurting Flavius should have been the *last* one."

"So you can hurt a man who loves you, but not the one who doesn't?"

When she stood there, riveted in place and steadfast in her silence, Gaius turned to leave. For if she could not even find one word to say, then there truly was nothing left for them *to* say.

This conversation was at an end. *They* were at an end.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week had passed since Gaius had last seen Nivea. And he'd purposely stayed on at his post, deciding it was best not to venture into the center of Siga so he would not be bombarded by any of the heralds that came with celebrated unions.

Flavius' and Nivea's wedding would be the source of endless gossip for some time, and Gaius could do without the banal chatter of how perfectly suited the two of them were.

He could do without chatter of any kind, period.

Thus, in addition to keeping to his post, Gaius had also done his best to keep to himself so as not to have to speak or be spoken to. When not required to fulfill the duties of his position, he remained within his quarters, stretched out across his pallet, imbibing as much wine as he could until his body finally found rest.

It was a great irony—his body might find rest, but his mind could not seem to find peace. He'd thought to escape Nivea in his dreams, but even there she would find him, taunting him, torturing him, haunting him.

When a stream of light shattered the darkness of his tent, Gaius squinted against the bright rays, peeking out around the arm draped over his face at who dared enter his quarters without permission.

"Remove yourself," he barked at the intruder, his hand already reaching for the knife at his hip.

"I am afraid I cannot do that. You see I have come all this way to speak to you and I refuse to leave until I do."

Gaius was drunk. He assured himself he'd imbibed too many spirits. That could be the only explanation as to why he heard *her* voice ringing in his ears, why he imagined she now stood within his tent.

He closed his eyes, willing this dream to end. How much more would he be forced to endure? Was it not enough that he thought of her every waking moment of the day, that she invaded his dreams at night? Must she find her way into his wine-induced madness as well?

"Gaius, please wake up, you do not look well." The soft touch of a woman's fingertips along his stubbled jaw was what told him she was not a shade come to haunt him.

His eyes snapped open and his hand shot out to grip her wrist. Sitting up, he glowered at her before flinging her hand away.

"As if you care that I do not look well."

She frowned at him. "Of course I care." Nivea attempted to sit down beside him but the sharp warning in his eyes must have been enough to advise her against coming near him so she smoothed her hands down her hooded traveling cape and remained standing.

"What are you doing here, Nivea?"

There was a moment's hesitation before she said in a quiet voice, "I came to apologize."

He shrugged. "I accept. You're forgiven. Now leave." Gaius tried to lie back down but he could not when she spoke again, saying, "But you do not even know what I am apologizing for."

A bitter chuckle rose up and out of him. "Oh, I have a pretty good idea. You wed a man you neither share love nor passion with, and now you feel bad for hurting me to have your heart's desire." He reached for his goblet of wine, earning him a scowl of disapproval, which he ignored. "Do not trouble yourself, I shall recover. Actually, I feel better already." He lifted his goblet as if making a toast before tipping the cup and downing the contents in a single gulp. With a rude belch, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and dropped the empty cup to the floor. "Tell me, how does it feel to be Flavius Cicero's wife? Are you as happy as you thought you would be?"

Nivea scowled at Gaius and his mocking tone. He was purposely being churlish.

"You're drunk," she said flatly.

"Good of you to notice," he said with a smirk, flopping to the bed where he folded his hands behind his head and stared up at her through hooded eyes.

"I should not even speak to you in such a state."

"You should not even speak to me at all, but since you are here, I do wish to hear of how much you are enjoying your wedded bliss."

The bite in his voice was unmistakable, no matter how flippant his words. Sometimes he could make her so angry and Nivea had half a nerve to make him suffer, but she could not. He looked haggard and his eyes were shadowed with pain. It was apparent he'd suffered enough and it was all her fault.

Ignoring the deadly, steely look in his eyes she braved the worst of his gaze to sit beside him, her fingers briefly grazing his cheek before he flung them aside.

"Being wed to Flavius is good, I suppose." Despite his attempt at appearing unaffected, she noticed he flinched at the mention of wedding Flavius, and she gave an inward smile. As much as he tried to feign nonchalance, he wasn't impervious at all. "I mean I'm assuming it would be good, if I were wed to him, but since I am not, I can only suppose, really."

She watched him for any sign he was pleased by her words, but there was none. Not a flickering in his eyes, not even the barest hint of a smile. She'd known before she set out to his post she would have much work to do. Gaius' experiences in love had been nothing but painful and she'd hurt him the most. He would not so easily forgive her.

"What? Has he cast you aside for one of his lovers already? Is it even possible to divorce a woman within a week of their wedding?"

She frowned at him, wondering if his brain was addled by all the wine, or if he was deliberately being obtuse. Nivea decided it was probably both. This was going to be more difficult than she'd imagined, she thought with a small sigh.

"No, Gaius, he did not cast me aside. I did not wed him. I ended our engagement and told him I could not marry him."

Gaius looked at her briefly before turning his blank gaze back to the ceiling of his tent. "Why?"

"Because of everything you said. I did not love him. He did not love me. I wasted so much of my life in a loveless union, I did not wish to make that same mistake again."

"And what brought about this change of heart?"

His voice dripped with cynicism and she worried if she should even tell him the truth because she knew he would instantly think the worst of her, but before the thought even formed in her head, she knew she had to. If she had any hope of convincing him, she could not tell him a lie.

"There are many reasons, of course, the most important being that I realized how much I love you." Gaius gave a derisive snort as if to suggest he did not believe she loved him, which brought a frown to her lips, but she refused to be deterred. Gaius loved her, if he didn't he wouldn't be in so much pain.

"There was also that Flavius revealed he had no intention of giving up his other lovers. Knowing how important this was to me, it was as if he'd not even considered a monogamous union, as if it was a laborious chore to imagine such a thing, which made me wonder what would be the purpose of him wedding if he was not even willing to consider it. He didn't even seem inclined to try."

"And how did he take the news of your change of heart?" Nivea pretended to ignore Gaius' sneer.

"Not well, which further convinced me that I'd made the right decision." For the first time Gaius looked at her without eyes that oscillated wildly between vacant stares and derisive glares.

"How so?" he inquired.

"Almost immediately he became vicious." Gaius' curling fist told her what he wrongly assumed, and she touched the knotted muscle in his arm, shaking her head. "He did not hurt me. It was what he said. He revealed he had no intention of fathering more than one child with me, although I wished to have many. And he seemed almost disgusted at that. It soon became evident he was only wedding me for my wealth and status."

She snorted as she remembered his face, mottled red with rage as he'd lashed out at her with cruel words. "To think, he'd tried to convince me that it was you who did not love me, that you only claimed you did in order to get your hands on the things that *he* sought. I realize now that of course he would believe my only value was in my wealth and family status, because that was all he valued in me. But I am still incensed that he sought to malign you in my eyes.

"Truly, I knew he would not take the news well, and I offered him a great deal of *denarii* for all that I had cost him in time and expense. I was not surprised that he took it because it was only fair, and in no way did that excuse my actions, but he accepted my offering and that should have been enough. But when he revealed he'd threatened you I lost my patience with him."

Gaius sat up straight and looked at her with clear eyes as if her words had dissipated his drunken haze, but before he could say a word she said, "Why did you not tell me he threatened you?"

Nivea did not stop long enough to allow him to answer. "I was furious with him. I reminded him that my influence in Rome is vast and powerful and that I would not hesitate to use it if anything untoward happened to you. I made him promise me that he would not harm you, although I am sure he was motivated more by my threat than any inner goodwill."

Gaius peered at her, but she could not discern any of his inner emotions from the expression on his face, and when he finally spoke, she felt the first twinge of defeat.

"Why are you telling me all of this, Nivea?"

She was incredulous. "Because I love you, Gaius. Because you lo-"

He cut off her next words with his bitter laugh. "You love me? And so soon after you were set to wed another." He sneered at her. "How do you even know you're in love, Nivea? What has you so convinced that you're in love with me?"

#### Centurion's Vow

As he spoke, he stumbled to his feet and she stood as well on the other side of the sleeping pallet which lay between them – a small obstacle it was, but it could have been an insurmountable mountain pass given the distance that still separated them.

"I am not wealthy. I have nothing to offer you," he argued.

"That is not true. You offer me more than I have ever known and more than I deserve given how I have treated you. You offer me everything because you once offered me your love, your tenderness, and that means more to me than anything else. I have long known that wealth is not important for I have known money and have never been happy. Now I want to know love. I have only ever been happy with you, Gaius, and I want to have that all the days of my life, if you would only forgive me."

Gaius' eyes were pained. "I wish I could believe you, Nivea." His lips twisted into a sardonic smile as if he regretted what he would have to say next. "But I fear the only reason you are here is because you realize just how unhappy you would be with Flavius, and you have somehow convinced yourself that I am now the better choice, but you and I both know that I am not."

"I know no such thing," she replied hotly. She could see deep into his eyes, past all the hurt, the pain, the bitterness that there was love there, genuine love, love that could last a lifetime, and her heart broke for him, for them both, that he was too afraid to risk himself just this once to have a lifetime of happiness with *her*.

"I cast aside a man who offered me everything I wished for, for the chance to have an eternity filled with love and happiness with you." A sob caught in her throat when Gaius stood there in silence, his face placid as if he could not even remember the feelings he'd once had for her, as if they no longer existed. "But I see now that I was wrong to come here. I was wrong about you, because the man I fell in love with could not have stood there and watched me in pain and done nothing," she rasped bitterly and turned to leave, needing to escape this place before the tears that burned her throat began to fall.

"And what if you were wrong? What shall you do now?"

She stilled, her hand on the flap to his tent, but she did not turn around. Moisture threatened to spill over her lids at any moment.

"What shall I do?" she croaked, not fully understanding his question.

"Will you go back to him?"

The anger coursing through her must have made her brave because she did not care if he saw her tears as she spun around to face him, her gaze nailing him.

"Of course not. I love you, Gaius, and that shall never change, because I know you love me too. You're just too afraid to believe my love will not change as Arianna's once did. I can swear to you on my life that it shall not, if anything it shall grow stronger, not weaker, but if you do not believe this, then there is nothing else I can do."

This time when she turned to leave, she did not look back, even though her heart was breaking with every step she took.

She lifted the flap and was almost out of tent when two hands seized her by the shoulders and pulled her back inside. Nivea gave a startled yelp at the same time her back collided with the hard muscled wall of Gaius' chest.

Strong arms encircled her and she could feel the desperation in his grip as he held her tight, as he held her close, clinging to her as if she were his anchor. His chin settled against her shoulder, his every breath whispering across her neck.

"I do not deserve you, no more than Flavius. Your heart is open and you are tender and kind and passionate." He released her long enough to spin her around and clamp her face with his hands so she had no choice but to meet his earnest gaze.

"I love you, Nivea and I swear I will never take another to our bed. I swear my heart will always belong to you and only you. I do not have much to give you by way of wealth, but what I do have I will pour into my farm and into making it profitable so that as my wife you shall want for nothing, so that you shall never regret wedding me and bearing my children."

#### Centurion's Vow

A shiver of heat climbed along her spine at the vision of her carrying his child and the nights they would spend, their limbs entwined, creating a babe born out of their mutual love. As much pleasure as that brought her, she reined it in, because she knew how much he now risked for her.

"Gaius, you do not – "

He silenced her with a single finger against her lips. "You turned your back on a wealthy, influential man who offered you marriage and children, for me, a man with nothing, who offered you only his love, and not even that -"

She shook her head. "But you offered me your love."

"But not fully. I realized after I left you the morning of your wedding day that I'd offered you a conditional love, which you had no choice but to reject. If I had been in your place, I would have done the same.

"How could I claim to love you fully when it was my pride that kept me from giving you what you truly needed the most—and that was the security of marriage and the promise of children. I did not wish to wed and father children until my pride was assuaged and I was secure in the knowledge that I could provide *all* for you. But that is not what you asked of me, and what you asked of me I did not offer because of my foolish pride—and that is not love."

Nivea could see upon his face that the bitter journey to this realization had tortured him, but she did not wish for Gaius to torment himself any longer, not when everything promised to be well, now that they had overcome the obstacles which had once stood between them.

Before he could say another word, Nivea lifted onto her toes and kissed him, pouring every bit of herself into him as he embraced her. Desire flared molten hot within her belly at the wet glide of his tongue inside her mouth as he held her tighter, the evidence of his arousal pressing deep into her stomach.

When their lips finally parted, she cupped his cheek, her eyes watery as she smiled. "I learned from my father that it is not wealth that defines a man," she said quietly. "But how he treats those whom he loves."

He gathered her closer, his hands plunging into her hair. "I swear to you, Nivea, you shall always be loved and cherished by me. That is my eternal vow to you." His expression grew serious. "And while I know it does not matter to you, it matters to me, and I promise you, soon I shall provide all for you."

"You are right. That does not matter." But she knew providing for her was important to him so she continued to smile, her expression gentle.

"Gaius, you have given me your love." She twisted her arms tighter around him. "In my eyes you have already provided for me—in abundance."

Nivea did not miss the flicker of pride in his eyes, eyes that shimmered with the promise of a lifelong love. "I love you," he whispered and with his hands still in her hair, Gaius brought his lips to hers in a searing kiss, a melting melding of mouths and tongues.

Passion ignited like a raging wildfire between them, and within moments they fell upon his pallet in a twisted, wild heap of garments and limbs, where desire flared hot. Sounds of skin upon skin floated on the wind from Gaius' tent. And as his soldiers passed by every so often, the flap would rustle in the breeze revealing two nude forms writhing together as Gaius surged between Nivea's thighs, branding her, claiming her for all to see.

And that was how the day passed for the two of them, desperately, hungrily making love until the sun disappeared from the sky.

As tiny slivers of moonlight filtered through the tent flap, Nivea rested her head atop Gaius' chest that was now dotted with sweat, listening to the even rhythm of his heart beating strong and true. He'd fallen asleep only moments before and she now lifted her head to study his handsome features in the still quiet of the night.

Delicately tracing every detail of his sculpted face with the tip of her finger, she recalled his words from earlier that had nagged at her from the deepest regions of her mind.

Gaius had given her everything, he'd offered her all he had and then he'd offered himself. He'd braved his fears and insecurities and stared into his past in order to give Nivea her heart's desire. He'd made a vow to love her for all his days, even though she'd glimpsed in his eyes the fear that he might one day fail her by not providing for her. No matter how many times she said his means to provide for her did not matter, she knew Gaius would worry for some time that she would leave him because of it. That like Arianna his love would not be enough for her.

Nivea was not disheartened by this—to know he still doubted her. Their love was still new and Gaius had much to learn of the strength of her heart.

So on that night beneath nothing else but the heavens and the stars, Nivea was compelled to make a vow, a silent one, to Gaius, from her — that her love for him would remain true, growing stronger with the passing of time so that not one moment of their lives would he ever believe she regretted her decision, because she knew she never would. Gaius was her very heart beating inside her breast and one day soon she vowed he would know this just as surely as he knew the sun would rise.

A feeling of serenity filled every space within her knowing she'd made this vow to her centurion, one she would honor all the days of her life. With her mind finally quiet, and her heart at peace, Nivea rested her head once again atop his chest and with her palm over his heart, she closed her eyes and finally joined Gaius in sleep.

## About the Author

Nadia Aidan is a multi-published author who writes interracial and multicultural erotic romance across all genres. She lives, works and writes on the West Coast of the United States. Under her real name, Nadia holds a Ph.D in Political Science and by day she works as an Assistant Professor.

In addition to writing erotic and sensual romances, Nadia enjoys reading other authors, playing flag football, studying muay thai, working out, listening to music, scuba diving and target shooting. Her other interests include collecting Top Cow comics, especially *Witchblade* and *Tomb Raider*. She loves professional football and soccer. Her favorite teams are the Washington Redskins and Manchester United, respectively.

Nadia loves strong, assertive heroines, which is why she's an enduring fan of Fight Girls, Xena, Buffy, American Gladiators (new and old) and Le Femme Nikita!

Nadia welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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