

PART ONE

THE CONSPIRACY

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

I



JANUARY 26, 44 B.C.

SEVEN WEEKS BEFORE THE ASSASSINATION

It started with a parade. On a fine winter's day, passing the tombs of wealthy deceased Romans that lined the stone-paved road, a vast cavalcade came up the Appian Way from the direction of the Alban Hills. At the head of that cavalcade rode Gaius Julius Caesar, Dictator of Rome.

Caesar was fifty-four years of age. Tall, well built, with a small chin, sensuous mouth, and large, dark brown eyes, his fair hair now gray, he was a good-looking man, if not handsome.¹ Yet he was vain; because he was balding, “a disfigurement which his enemies harped upon,” according to his biographer Suetonius, Caesar brushed his hair forward to cover a large bald spot. To further hide his baldness, on public occasions he wore the laurel crown to which he was entitled as the winner of a Triumph. According to Suetonius, Caesar’s vanity extended to having his body hair removed with tweezers.²

Riding through the city outskirts toward the gate in the ancient walls built around the old heart of Rome three hundred years earlier, Caesar was wearing a white tunic bordered with the broad purple stripe of the Senatorial Order, to which he had added long, fringed sleeves, contrary to Roman custom—tunics were usually short-sleeved.³ Like all Romans, Caesar rode without stirrups, on an unshod horse and astride a saddle with four horns. Caesar frequently drove a chariot. Occasionally, traveling over long distances with baggage, he used a carriage.

Less often, he was carried in a litter. To ride at the head of the procession returning from the Latin Festival was a privilege bestowed on Caesar by a vote of the Senate.

In the all-male cavalcade behind the Dictator came hundreds of senators and other leading men of Roman society. Chief among them was Marcus Antonius—Mark Antony, as Shakespeare dubbed him. Thirty-seven-year-old Antony was related to Caesar on his mother's side. Serving under Caesar during the latter stages of the Gallic War and during the Civil War, Antony now held one of the two consulships for the year; Caesar held the other. During the Republic, which Caesar had overthrown, the two consuls had been Rome's most senior elected officials. But Caesar held the post of Dictator, officially conferred on him by a compliant Senate, which ranked him above the consuls.

Curly-headed Antony was a powerfully built man. With bulging muscles and a thick neck, he looked like a wrestler. A tough, fearless, no-nonsense soldier who personally led his troops into battle, Antony was Caesar's muscle. But Antony had let himself go over the past few years, eating and drinking to excess, so that his once "wonderful" body had become, in the words of Cassius Dio, "plump and detestable."⁴

Not far behind Caesar in the procession came thin, gangly Marcus Lepidus, who outranked Antony. Lepidus had loyally and efficiently served Caesar during the Civil War. Caesar had made Lepidus a consul for the year 46 B.C., then gave him the governorship of the Roman provinces of Nearer Spain, which took in eastern and northern Spain and Narbon Gaul in southern France. Just a year ago now, Caesar had appointed Lepidus to the post of his Master of Equestrians, in Antony's stead. The man holding this position, which then had nothing to do with horses, was deputy to a dictator.

Down through the 450-year history of the Roman Republic, a dictator had been appointed by the Senate in times of crisis, to act as sole ruler of Rome. Until Sulla made himself dictator for an extended period, it had been a temporary appointment, for a maximum of six months. In 46 B.C., inspired by Sulla's example and in contravention of the intent of the founders of the Republic, a Senate appointed by Caesar had in turn appointed him dictator for ten years. It was the Master of Equestrians' job to take charge at Rome when the dictator was away from the capital. Lepidus, while Master of Equestrians, was permitted by Caesar to continue to administer Nearer Spain and Narbon Gaul from Rome.

Caesar, the members of his Senate, and the magistrates appointed by him had been attending the four-day Latin Festival at the Alban Mount. Near present-day Castel Gondolfo, twelve miles southeast of Rome, the Alban Mount, today's Albano, was the location of the ancient city of Alba Longa. According to legend, Ascanius, son of the Trojan hero Aeneas, had established Alba Longa, which became the founding city of the Latin League. In about 600 B.C., Rome had conquered the city, an event commemorated by the annual Latin Festival.

Caesar would have especially savored the festival this year. Not only was it the first time he presided over it as Rome's indisputable sole ruler and victor in the Civil War, he also would have stayed at the Alba Longa villa previously owned by Pompey the Great, his chief opponent in Rome's bloody, recently terminated civil conflict, which came into his possession following Pompey's death. Pompey had been staying at this villa in January 49 B.C., recovering from a serious illness, when he learned that Caesar had led troops across the Rubicon River in north-eastern Italy. The Rubicon was then the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy, and in crossing the river Caesar had broken Sulla's law that banned provincial governors from leading their troops across provincial boundaries and had consequently been declared an enemy of the state by the Senate. Now, having defeated the old Senate in the Civil War, and with Pompey having been murdered in Egypt, Caesar had taken possession of Pompey's Alban villa.

It being a public holiday, a vast crowd of Roman residents had flooded out of the city to line the Appian Way to watch the famous and the feted pass by on their return from Alba. As Caesar, leading the concourse, approached the Porta Capena, the Appian Way gate in the city's Servian Walls, not far from the Circus Maximus, people in the crowd cheered, waved, and called out to him.

"Long live the king!" several men yelled together.⁵

But people all around them showed their disapproval of Caesar being called king. Hundreds of years ago, before the Republic, Rome had been ruled for 240 years by seven kings, the last few of whom had been thorough despots. The very thought of Rome again being ruled by a king was abhorrent to many Romans. There was more to this than just a title. Not only was a king a sole ruler, he also ruled for life, and his descendants could rule after him. If Caesar were to become king of the Romans, then the Romans could be saddled with Caesar and his family for generations to come.

Caesar heard the men call out. He also saw the unimpressed reaction of those around them, and heard their immediate boos.⁶ He called back, "My name is Caesar, not king." As the Dictator rode into the city, looking both displeased and discomforted, the crowd fell strangely silent.⁷

Later that day, once he was back at his residence on the Sacred Way in the heart of Rome, it was reported to Caesar that laurel wreaths had been placed on the heads of two statues of him that had recently been installed on the Rostra, in the Forum. The wreaths were bound with white ribbon. White was traditionally a color associated with Roman royalty, in the same way that purple had become exclusively the senatorial color. These wreaths had the appearance of royal crowns.

It also was reported to Caesar that two of the ten tribunes of the plebeians, Gaius Epidius Marullus and Lucius Caesetius Flavus, had ordered the immediate removal of these "royal diadems" and the arrest and imprisonment of the men who had hailed Caesar king earlier that day. This action won much public acclaim for the two tribunes, who were followed home by the people "with shouts and applause."⁸ Caesar, however, was made "violently angry" by this.⁹ He ordered the two tribunes to present themselves before him.

When they soon after appeared, the pair stood before the Dictator in probable expectation of praise and reward from Caesar—for when they had ordered the crowns removed they had "praised him before the populace as not wanting anything of the sort."¹⁰ To the tribunes' surprise, "he accused Marullus and his friends of laying an elaborate plot to misrepresent him as aiming at despotism, and concluded that they deserved death." But Caesar spared the quaking pair from the executioner's blade, instead stripping them of their posts as tribunes.¹¹

On the motion of another tribune, Helvius Cinna, the Senate subsequently erased the pair's names from the senatorial rolls, and they were banned from ever setting foot inside the Senate House again.¹² Caesar subsequently had the pair exiled from Italy.¹³

Suetonius described Caesar's reaction to this affair as an "example of his arrogance."¹⁴ On the other hand, Velleius Paterculus, a sycophantic supporter of the imperial house, wrote seventy-three years after the event that the tribunes had brought Caesar's wrath down on their own heads through an "intemperate and untimely display of independence."¹⁵ Caesar himself later excused his own action by saying that the two tribunes had acted in haste, and in doing so had prevented

him from rejecting the royal wreaths and title of king and subsequently receiving public credit for doing so. Suetonius was to suggest that in reality Caesar was peeved “because the suggestion that he should be crowned king had been so rudely rejected.”¹⁶

Whatever the cause of Caesar’s swift punishment of Marullus and Flavus, the summary removal of the pair from an office to which they had been elected to protect the interests of the common people of Rome—tribunes of the plebs had the power of veto over acts of the Senate—was not well received by many Romans, of all classes. “The office of tribune was sacred and inviolate by ancient law and oath,” wrote Appian. To Appian’s mind, Caesar had made a major blunder, for “this episode particularly blackened him, as people thought he wanted the title, was responsible for the attempts to get it, and had become totally despotic.”¹⁷ With Caesar’s “affront to the tribunes,” said Plutarch, “he gave a fresh occasion for resentment.”¹⁸

A ripple of anti-Caesar feeling ran through the city. But for the moment, few dared voice discontent publicly. Marcus Tullius Cicero, highly respected senator, orator, author, defense advocate, and former consul, was considered “the man of greatest influence in Rome” at this time.¹⁹ He was one of the few to speak out, although he did it by making a jest of his criticism, poking fun at Caesar’s autocratic rule by decree.

Caesar soon realized he had erred. “He noticed this himself and regretted what he had done,” said Appian. Caesar said to friends, “This was the first occasion in time of peace, when I was not commanding in the field, that I have taken severe and unpalatable action.”²⁰ Caesar seemed to be excusing the severity of his reaction by suggesting that, like many a general who becomes a civil ruler, autocratic habits died hard.

But the damage had been done. Caesar had scratched an ancient Roman wound. “From that day forward,” said Suetonius, “he lay under the odious suspicion of having revived the title of king.”²¹ Yet, without further incitement, these events might have soon passed from memory. Unfortunately for Caesar, there would more reason for complaint before long, and again it would stem from the Dictator’s own actions.