

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

MARK
OF THE
THIEF

BOOK ONE



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A note to readers: Latin words will be italicized upon their first appearance in the text.



*To Mrs. Flores, 1st Grade,
who gave me a love of words*



· ONE ·

In Rome, nothing mattered more than the gods, and nothing mattered less than its slaves. Only a fool of a slave would ever challenge the gods' power.

I was beginning to look like that fool.

I was a slave in the mines south of Rome and, generally speaking, did my job well. I worked hard and kept my head down and even took orders without complaint — unless it was a stupid order, one that risked my life. Then I was just as happy to ignore it.

“You will do as I say, Nic!” Sal’s anger echoed inside this small underground chamber. “I’ve tolerated your disobedience far too long.”

“Tolerated?” I snorted. If near starvation, beatings, and dangerous assignments were tolerance, then yes, Sal had been excessively generous to me.

As part of the grand joke that had become my life, the gods had given me a master with the wit of a withered carrot and compassion of a wasp. He also smelled like toe fungus, though that’s less relevant. More significant is that of the hundreds of

slaves who worked in the mines, Sal hated me the most. This was no great surprise, since Sal had always stood out to me as someone well worth hating back. With his whip and the ever-present chains on my wrists, he held absolute control over my life — or lack of it. So generally speaking, I did as I was told.

But I would not obey his ridiculous order to explore our latest discovery, a cave believed to contain Julius Caesar's lost treasure. The deep shaft that accessed the cave had killed the first miner to enter, and the second man, a friend of mine named Fidelius, was in the corner muttering incoherently and gnawing on his fist like a dog at his bone. Maybe the air was bad, maybe the cave was haunted, or maybe the gods just didn't want us mining there. I didn't know. I didn't care. I wasn't going inside.

Or maybe I was getting what I deserved. Earlier that morning, I had deliberately dropped sand into Sal's drink. He was still coughing up the grains he swallowed. I felt no guilt for what I'd done. Sal was getting what he deserved too.

My only regret was the worry I too often caused my sister, Livia, who also worked here at the mines. She was only a year younger than me, but when our mother was sold away from us, Livia became my responsibility. She wasn't allowed in the mine itself, but since our discovery yesterday, rumors had spread all over camp. She knew this was my work area, and would wonder now whether I was coming back. Actually, I had the same question.

"No, Sal. This is a waste of lives." It wasn't my best argument. Sal cared nothing for anyone's life but his own. Perhaps if I had told him this was a waste of money, I'd have gotten his attention.

"There's gold in that cave," Sal said. "The first man we sent down told us he could see it."

"Before he screamed for help and then died!" I said.

Sal pointed to Fidelius. "That one came back!"

Fidelius looked up, his eyes still as wide and bloodshot as when we'd first pulled him out. His hollow gaze turned to me. "Caesar's ghost walks that cave. It's forbidden earth."

Sal grabbed a fistful of my tunic and yanked me toward him. "Rome already knows about this discovery. General Radulf is on his way now to investigate that cave. If gold is down there, then I want my piece of it first."

"If you want it, you go down there!" He could beat me for refusing him, and he probably would, but that was better than obeying.

Across from me, Fidelius shuddered and mumbled the words, "Caesar. He'll curse you."

This was hardly a new thought. Every miner who worked the South Mountain already figured he was cursed. This mountain was close to Lake Nemi, home to a temple for the goddess Diana, where strange things were said to happen. Whenever a miner disappeared here, we all wondered if it was Diana, demanding another sacrifice.

“Enough disobedience!” Sal shoved me into the arms of his guard. “Toss his body down and get me another slave.”

I heard the slice of a knife being drawn from its sheath, but I had no intention of dying at the hand of this swine. So I spread the chains around my wrists as wide as they’d go, then drove my elbows into the guard’s gut and bolted for the tunnel exit. Sal and the guard collided to chase me, but I had worked this tunnel for five years and knew it better than anyone.

I brushed past a couple of miners as I ran, then, behind me, heard Sal yell for them to get out of the way. I slowed enough for the guard to see me take a sharp left down a dark corridor, then ducked into an even darker crevice, pressing tightly against the wall. The guard ran right past me, with Sal on his heels.

I wasn’t free yet, not even close. I still had to make my way through the rest of the tunnel, and then find Livia in the camp. I always knew we’d eventually escape this place; today seemed as good a day for freedom as any other.

Just as I was ready to dart out from the crevice, the shadows of two men entered the main tunnel, their voices low. They ducked into the smaller tunnel, only inches from me. The men were Roman soldiers — that was obvious from their red cloaks and the leather boots — and likely the more decorated one was General Radulf. He had come earlier than expected.

Inside the crevice, I grinned. This was exactly what I needed. Radulf would distract Sal, giving me the chance to get away.

A man with a deep voice spoke first. “You’ll wait here at the entrance. I don’t want anyone in these tunnels until I’m finished.”

“Yes, General Radulf. Are you sure about this? Emperor Tacitus will have your head if he finds out.”

Radulf’s laugh felt as dark as this tunnel. “The emperor fears me more than I do him. Besides, he won’t know about any of this until I’m ready, and by then, it’ll be too late for anyone to stop me. I will crush this empire in my fist.”

“Assuming this cave has what you’ve been looking for,” his companion added.

Radulf’s boots stepped even closer to where I hid, and though he lowered his voice, I heard every traitorous word. “I can feel the magic here, just as Rome must feel its last gasps of breath. The discovery of Caesar’s cave is going to change my life.”

Magic? Nothing I’d felt in my years here could be described that way. Even still, though I closed my eyes and tried to disappear into the cracks of this crevice, somehow I knew my life was about to change too.