

Chapter 2

The will

*Rome, the Forum – 20 March 44 BC
(Five days after the assassination of Julius Caesar)*

Rome smelled of smoke, hard living, and oxidised copper.

March had not yet decided whether it wished to be winter or spring. At times a pale sun slid across the paving stones of the Forum, making them gleam like still water; at others, a cold gust forced passers-by to draw their cloaks tight beneath their chins. Beneath the columns of the Temple of the Dioscuri—Castor and Pollux—merchants shouted as if nothing at all had happened in the past forty-eight hours.

And so—as the living often do when the world begins to waver—Rome insisted on pretending it was still the same. Those who sold wine shouted louder. Those who sold olives reached out more insistently. Those who prayed to the gods did so with greater display.

But this was not an ordinary day. It could not be.

Within the dense murmur of the crowd there was a different vibration, like distant thunder that never quite decides to break. It was not chaos: it was ordered fear. A fear that

mimicked daily routine so as not to confess to itself that something immense had just collapsed.

Through that restless mass moved a boy. His short, ash-coloured cloak sat awkwardly on his narrow shoulders. His face was thin, sharply cut like the profile of a newly struck coin, yet lacking the pride of heroes. An old woman glanced at him without interest. His name was Gaius Octavius. He was eighteen years old. And no one would have suspected that he carried with him a truth capable of setting the world ablaze.

The will

The Roman Forum was crowded as it rarely was. Not for elections, nor for trials—but to hear the voice of a dead man.

Caesar's body had already been burned, his ashes still warm in the Campus Martius, and the air tasted of smoke, sweat, and restrained anger. The rostra, blackened by time and civil war, had been cleared. Mark Antony, consul of the year, climbed the steps slowly. He wore the consular toga, without ornament. His face was drawn, hollowed by sleepless nights. He knew Rome stood before him. And Rome did not forget.

Among the crowd, wrapped in a plain toga, Marcus Tullius Cicero watched in silence. He did not applaud. He did not murmur. His eyes followed Antony with cold attention, as one watches an armed man.

Beside the consul, standing slightly apart, a public scribe held a wax tablet in his hands. He was a man trained to read without trembling. The knot of red wax bearing the dictator's seal had been broken with almost ritual slowness. No one spoke. Men who never kept silent—senators, officers, officials—had turned to stone, though a low murmur spread through the gathering.

Antony raised a hand. The noise died away.

'Citizens of Rome,' Mark Antony began. 'The will of Gaius Julius Caesar, dictator for life, has been kept in accordance with the law, in the custody of the Vestal Virgins. It was opened in their presence, with the seals intact and the witnesses in due legal form.'

A murmur ran through the crowd. The Vestals: no one could doubt that. Antony stepped back. He was not to read it himself. It had to appear an act of law, not of power.

The scribe began, his voice clear: 'In the name of the *Manes*. I, Gaius Julius Caesar, being of sound mind and body, do hereby decree the following.'

The Forum held its breath. A short distance from the rostra, Gaius Octavius listened. Beside him stood Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa—broader, more solid—just behind him. He said nothing, but studied the crowd as a soldier studies the ground.

'I name as my primary heir,' the scribe read, 'Gaius Octavius, son of Gaius, whom I adopt by testament and who shall assume my name...'

For an instant, the world seemed to stop. Octavius lowered his gaze, but his face remained still. Not from modesty—from control. Agrippa inhaled slowly, as if he had just realised that their lives were changing direction.

'...and who shall be called Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus.'

From that day on, for Rome, he was no longer Octavius. He was Octavian, the adopted son of Caesar.

The name echoed from the columns, from the temples, from the faces of the senators. Cicero pressed his lips together. Not in surprise, but in calculation. A boy adopted. An immense name. A vacuum of power.

A little further off, Lucius Munatius Plancus inclined his head towards a colleague and whispered, 'Antony did not kill Caesar. But today he is using him.'

Antony remained motionless. Only his hands betrayed the strain.

'To each Roman citizen I leave seventy-five denarii,' the scribe concluded. 'My gardens beyond the Tiber are to be opened to the people, in perpetuity.'

The crowd erupted—not in orderly shouts, but in a visceral roar. A veteran of the Tenth Legion turned to his son: 'You see? Even in death, Caesar remembers his own.'

At last, Octavian raised his eyes. He was not seeking applause. He was seeking faces—allies, enemies, opportunists. He was learning them one by one.

The scribe concluded with the ritual formulae. The will was now irrevocable. Antony stepped forward once more.

'You have heard the words of Caesar,' Mark Antony cried. 'You have heard his will. Now know this: those who struck his body believed they struck a man. But Caesar lives on in his deeds. And in his heirs.'

A swift glance, barely perceptible, slid towards Octavian. Cicero caught it. And for the first time, he thought that the boy might be more dangerous than Antony.

Octavian did not react. No gesture. No word. But he understood.

The Forum did not disperse at once. In that moment, Rome understood that Caesar's death had not closed a story. It had only just opened it. And in those moments, Octavian grasped the first truth of his future life: Mark Antony would never allow that pale boy to take from him what he believed was his by right.

Octavian felt eyes upon him that he had never known before. Eyes that did not look at a boy, but at a problem. Senators, equestrians, men of power weighed him as one weighs an obstacle before breaking it. No one saw an adopted son. Everyone saw an impediment.

The boy walks

Now, in the flickering light of the Forum, Octavian walked. He had no escort. No friends. No protection. He had only that secret beneath his tunic. He could feel the copy of the will pressing against his chest. With every step the parchment shifted, brushing against the fabric with a faint rustle—an unsettling whisper: *They are watching you.*

He stopped before a fruit stall. The vendor, grey-bearded with knotted hands, lifted a ripe fig. 'Would you like one?'

For a moment Octavian hesitated. His mind was so full that even a simple gesture seemed excessive. 'No, thank you.' His voice came out sharper than he intended.

The vendor watched him walk away, then spat on the ground. 'Young people don't eat any more. They'll all end up in the stomachs of the gods.'

Octavian did not turn back.

The weight of the name

He stopped before the statue of Caesar. The dark bronze towered above him; for an instant, it seemed larger than the sky itself. Rome had loved Caesar as one loves a father—and feared him as one fears a tyrant. A man who had broken the Republic. Who had bent the legions to his name. Who had

ruled like a king without ever calling himself one. And now, that name was his.

A gift to the veterans. A weapon for his enemies.

People passed by. Some glanced at the statue, but few looked at the boy at its base. Octavian laid his hand upon the pedestal. The marble was icy, cold as the knot of fear biting at the nape of his neck.

'Father...'

The word lingered on his lips, fragile, almost false. Caesar had never been a father to him. But now he was. And there was no escape.

A child ran past him. A dog barked. A soldier shouted orders to a patrol. Rome was alive. And he would have to learn to be more alive than she was.

The veteran

Behind him, a low voice said, 'You resemble him very little.'

Octavian turned. The man who stared at him was of indeterminate age, carved by years of campaigning. His face bore scars like ancient maps. His tunic was worn, and his right arm carried the marks of leather bound tight for years beneath armour. A veteran.

'Too fragile,' the man added. 'Too... clean.'

Octavian dipped his chin slightly, accepting the remark like a blow taken. 'Caesar was strong when he needed to be,' he said. 'And clean when he wished to be.'

The veteran burst out laughing—a full, unrestrained roar. 'Then you have his tongue. Good. Romans do not follow those who cannot speak.' Then his expression grew serious. 'Who protects you, boy?'

Octavian met his gaze without lowering his eyes. 'No one.'

The veteran nodded slowly, as if that were the only right answer. 'Then you have already learned the first law of this city: power is always held alone.' He turned his back and vanished into the crowd.

Octavian followed him with his eyes until he lost sight of him. That man did not know him, and yet he had seen more than many others. He was not protected. He was not ready. But he had been chosen.

The thought that changes everything

The afternoon light slanted low. The shadow of Caesar's statue cut across the Forum like a long wound. Octavian stood still.

From time to time someone passed close by. Some whispered his name. Others shook their heads. Others smiled with thin condescension. He had the clear sensation that Rome was weighing him, like a cruel balance.

And then a thought—simple and devastating—crossed his mind: *I did not choose this path. But I can choose how to walk it.*

He inhaled slowly, then turned towards the height of the Capitoline Hill. He began to walk. His steps were slow, measured, but they were no longer the same as before. They were the first steps of a man beginning to become himself.

Not Caesar. Not an heir. Not a shadow.
Octavian. The boy who would one day turn a Republic into an Empire.