


TONY BRADMAN



SECRETS. SACRIFICE. SURVIVAL.

# ROMAN BOY

A decorative sword hilt and pommel is positioned at the bottom of the page, flanking the word 'BOY' in the title.

# ROMAN BOY



TONY BRADMAN has worked in children's books for many years as a writer, reviewer, and editor of anthologies. He is the author of the bestselling Walker historical middle-grade novels, *Viking Boy* and *Anglo-Saxon Boy*, for which he won the Historical Association Young Quills Award 2018. He also wrote the illustrated non-fiction companion title, *Viking Boy: The Real Story*. He has been a judge for the Smarties Book Prize, the Booktrust Teen Awards and was for many years the chair of the Siobhan Dowd Trust, and is an Honorary Fellow of the Historical Association.

About *Roman Boy* Tony says: "I first became enthralled by the amazingly rich and gripping history of Ancient Rome when I studied Latin at school, and for years I've wanted to write a story about the classical world that would fascinate today's young readers too. I hope *Roman Boy* does just that – I certainly enjoyed writing it!"

ALSO BY TONY BRADMAN

*Viking Boy*

*Viking Boy: The Real Story*

*Anglo-Saxon Boy*

# ROMAN BOY



TONY BRADMAN

*Illustrated by Alessandro Valdrighi*



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WALKER  
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FOR DAVID RAEBURN -  
“AVE ATQUE VALE”

*“...tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
... parcere subiectis et debellare superbos...”*

(Roman – remember to use your power to  
rule the peoples of the world ... spare the  
conquered, and crush the proud...)

– Book VI of The Aeneid, by Virgil

*“Vincere est totum”*

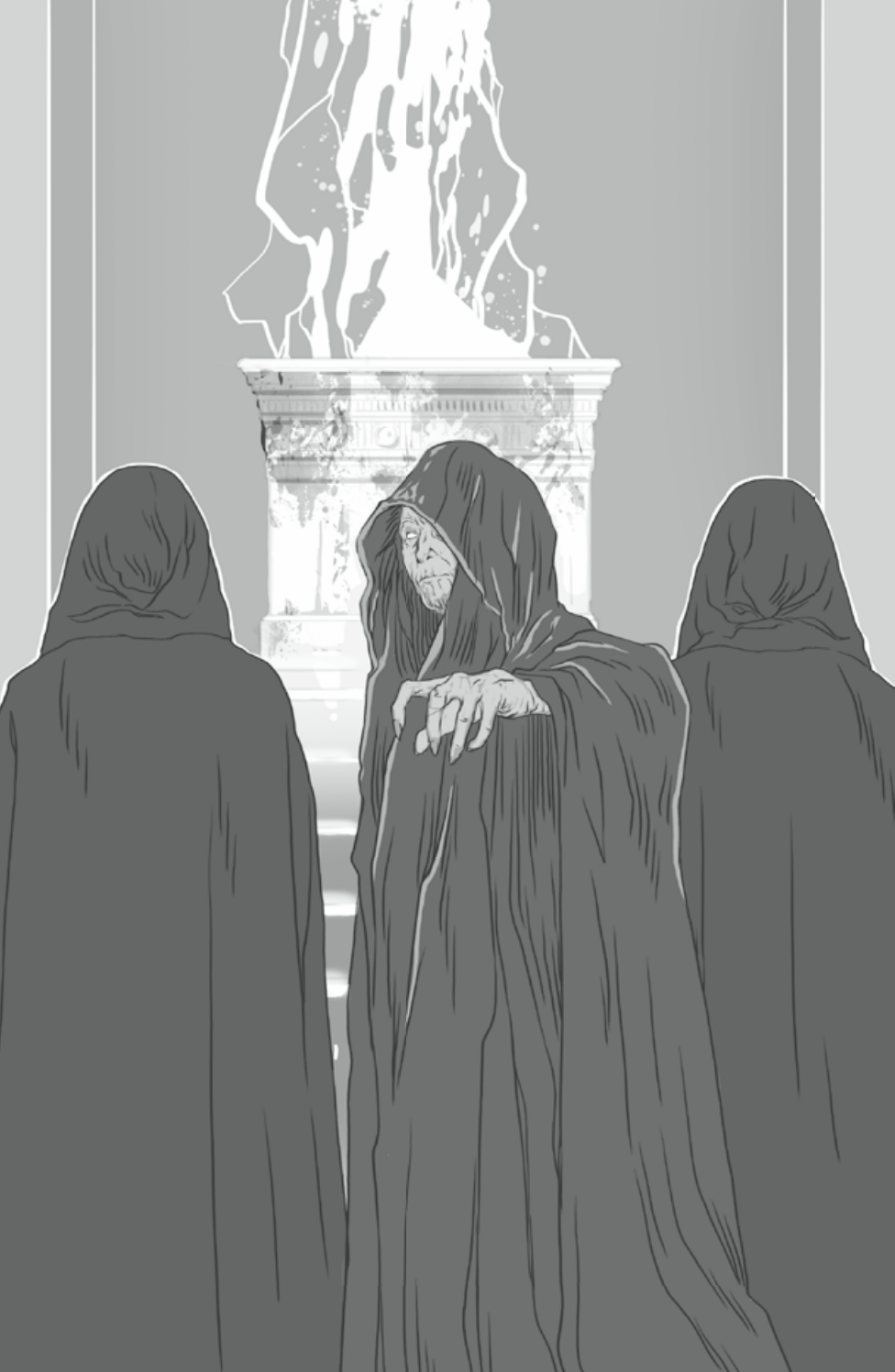
(Winning is all)

– Roman proverb

# CONTENTS

PROLOGUE – PREPARE THE SACRIFICE	9
ONE – AN IMPORTANT MAN	15
TWO – DEATH OR GLORY	25
THREE – THE TEMPLE OF APOLLO	35
FOUR – WAVE OF ANGER	46
FIVE – DAGGER IN THE DARK	56
SIX – A LUCKY BLOW	66
SEVEN – ONE SHALL FALL	77
EIGHT – CLASH OF BLADES	87
NINE – SECRET OF THE LEGIONS	98
TEN – TEST OF COURAGE	108
ELEVEN – THE SACRED OATH	120
TWELVE – LIKE A GHOST	130
THIRTEEN – KING OF BATTLES	140
FOURTEEN – DEADLY ARROWHEADS	150
FIFTEEN – CHAOS AND CONFUSION	160
SIXTEEN – SURROUNDED BY BARBARIANS	170
SEVENTEEN – UNFINISHED BUSINESS	180
EIGHTEEN – EYES OF A WOLF	190
NINETEEN – MOMENT OF TRUTH	200
TWENTY – PLAYTHINGS OF THE GODS	210
TWENTY-ONE – FOLLOWING THE EAGLES	222
HISTORICAL NOTES	233





# PROLOGUE PREPARE THE SACRIFICE

*THE BOY WALKED through the darkness, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls that ran along both sides of the street. There were doors here and there, yet somehow he knew they were locked against him. He peered into the gloom ahead, straining to see where he might be going. But it was a moonless night, the only light coming from the few stars sprinkled across the sky like tiny, glittering pieces of ice.*

*After a while the boy reached the end of the street and found himself standing before an open space. The darkness there was even deeper, so although he sensed a large building ahead, he couldn't make out its shape clearly. A cold breeze was blowing, making him shiver, and he pulled his*

*woollen cloak round his shoulders. The wind seemed to see that as a challenge, and blew harder, tugging at him.*

*Questions began to fill the boy's mind. Where had he come from? Why had he been drawn to this place? What was he supposed to be doing here? There must be a reason, he thought, so why didn't he know what it was? He had a feeling it was very important, and that made him uneasy. And why was he alone? The streets of Rome were usually full of people, day or night, so where had everybody gone?*

*Suddenly there was a colossal flash of lightning directly above him. It split the sky from the heavens to the Earth, and was followed by a deafening crack of thunder. Now the boy saw that he was standing at the bottom of a familiar flight of wide stone steps. They led up to the massive temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the Best and Greatest, Lord of the Sky, the most important divine being of them all.*

*Eight columns stood in a row across the front of the temple, each taller and thicker than the trunks of the oldest oak trees. They were painted dark red and gold, and topped with a marble panel carved with the figures of Jupiter and the other Gods and Goddesses. They too were*

*painted, in gold and silver. Statues of Rome's heroes stood in a line along the edge of the roof, staring down at the boy, or so he felt.*

*He was even more uneasy now. The temple of Jupiter covered the summit of the Capitoline Hill, at the very heart of the city. It was a sacred place, full of holy power and magic, a dangerous portal between the world where mortals lived and the realm of the deathless Gods. A place where humans spoke to the Gods, and sometimes the Gods answered, though often in ways that might be hard to understand.*

*Thunder rumbled above him once more, louder this time, and was swiftly followed by a bigger flash of lightning. Then, somehow, he was at the top of the steps, with no memory of walking up them. He looked back over the city, at the fine temples, the great palaces, the narrow streets of filthy slums, all spread out over Rome's seven hills beside the River Tiber and somehow visible despite the darkness.*

*The boy heard a grinding sound behind him, and the hairs rose on the back of his neck. He turned, and saw that beyond the columns the temple's huge bronze doors were*

*slowly opening inwards. Soon he had passed between them, again with no memory of moving. Even more strangely, his sandals seemed to be barely touching the floor. It was almost as if he were floating, gliding along above it...*

*He came to a halt in the middle of the temple's interior. The ceiling was dizzily high above him, and there were more columns along each side. At the far end was the altar, a huge block of white stone, its top stained dark by the blood of sacrifices. Beyond it stood an immense statue of Jupiter, the height of twenty men, the greatest God in all his glory, poised to throw the golden lightning bolt in his right hand.*

*"Hear us, O Mighty Father!" someone said. "Accept our offering to you!"*

*The boy was confused, and shook his head to clear it. He had thought he was alone in the temple, but now he saw that three priests in long black robes were standing before the altar, their heads covered by hoods. The one in the middle turned slowly. He had a face paler than a corpse's, and his eyes were a solid black. He pointed a bony finger at the boy, the nail sharp like the claw of some hideous beast.*

*"Prepare the sacrifice!" said the priest. The other two*

*sprang forward to grab the boy, and he was quickly stretched out on the altar, the stone hard and rough against his back. He struggled, but it was no use. The priests held him down, the one who had spoken pressing a knife to his throat, the blade cold, the point pricking into his soft skin. The boy looked up – and saw something that made his blood freeze.*

*The statue of Jupiter was moving, leaning down, reaching out an enormous hand. The God's giant eyes were as blue as the summer sky, and fixed on the boy's.*

*“So, greatness awaits you,” said the God, his voice a deep rumble of thunder inside the boy's head. “But tell me – are you willing to give your life for Rome...?”*

The boy woke with a gasp and sat upright in bed, his heart pounding.

He was still half in the dream world, the things he had seen clinging to him like spectres reluctant to let him go. He shivered, remembering the God's question.

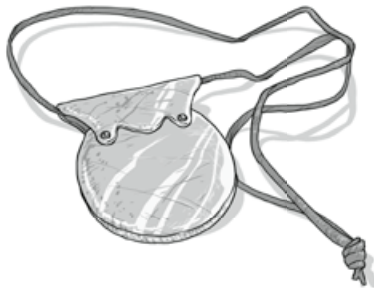
If only he had an answer...



# ONE

## AN IMPORTANT MAN

THE ESQUILINE HILL IN ROME, 125 CE



LUCIUS WAS KNEELING before the shrine in his room when he finally decided he would have to speak to his stepfather, even though the thought of it really scared him.



The shrine was a simple, small table in the corner. A tiny bronze amulet of the God Jupiter stood on it, the one Lucius usually kept in his *bullā*, the gold locket he wore on a chain around his neck. Like all Roman boys, he had been given it at birth for luck, and to protect him from evil spirits. An incense stick smouldered in a stone bowl behind the God, its perfumed smoke filling Lucius's nostrils.

“Hear me, Great Father Jupiter, I beg you,” he said, closing his eyes. “Give me the courage I need, and I promise I will make a fine sacrifice to you in return.”

He waited, hoping for a sign. But there was only one way to find out if the God had listened. Lucius opened his eyes and returned the amulet to his *bullā*, tucking it inside his tunic. Then he set off to find his stepfather, wherever he was in the house.

Lucius still struggled to think of it as his home. He and his mother Cornelia had lived in a smaller house until quite recently, the home where he had been born fifteen years ago. But the winter before last, his father Drusus Caecina Placidus had died of

a wasting sickness, and after the usual year of mourning, Lucius's mother had married again. So they had come to live in the house of her new husband.

His name was Gaius Metellus Corbulo, and he was an important man, which meant he could afford a big house on the Esquiline Hill. Lucius's room, his *cubiculum*, was next to the *atrium*, the entrance to the house, a space open to the sky with a pond in the middle. A display of wax faces covered one wall of the *atrium*, the death masks of Gaius's ancestors, and beside that was the shrine to the household Gods, the *Lares* and *Penates*. Lucius went through the *atrium* and past the *tablinium*, the study where Gaius spoke to his many followers, the people who depended on him. Beyond that was the *triclinium*, the dining room, its walls covered in pictures of the Gods.

Gaius was in none of those rooms, so Lucius made for the *peristylum*, the garden at the heart of the house. It was open to the sky like the *atrium*, but it was larger, with a much bigger pond, and was filled with flowers and plants in terracotta pots.

On the far side was a wide terrace that looked down on the city below. Gaius was sitting there on a wooden bench, talking quietly to Lucius's mother. It was the early evening of a late summer day that had been very hot, but high on the Esquiline Hill a cool breeze brought some relief. Lucius could hear a faint buzzing in the distance, the city's constant background noise. As always, two slave girls stood in the shadows at the end of the terrace, waiting to do the bidding of their master and mistress.

Lucius stopped at a respectful distance. "Please, sir ... may I speak with you about something?" he said, the words he had practised tumbling from his lips.

"Oh really, Lucius," his mother said crossly. "You mustn't bother Gaius."

Lucius glanced at her. She was wearing a gown of green silk, and her long dark hair was plaited and piled on her head in the fashionable style. There were gold rings on her fingers and a fine gold chain around her slender neck. Like most Roman women, Lucius's mother had married young, becoming the wife of Lucius's father at the age of thirteen – he had been

twenty-eight. She was thirty now, and still lovely, tall and slim with pale skin and brown eyes. People said Lucius looked like his mother. He did have her eyes and dark hair, and was quite tall for his age.

Lucius often thought the marriage must have seemed a good match. Both husband and wife were of old noble families, and Lucius's father was doing well in his career. But things had gone wrong. His father had turned out to be a drinker and gambler, and he had lost most of his money. There had been bitter arguments, and Lucius knew his mother wasn't unhappy when his father died, mourning him only because it was expected. Lucius couldn't blame her. He hadn't been close to his father either.

"Peace, Cornelia," said Gaius. "Let the boy speak. It seems important."

She lowered her eyes in obedience, and Lucius turned to his stepfather. Gaius was in his fifties, but he was fit and lean, his hair still mostly black. His nose was large and bony, his eyes hazel, his gaze watchful – Lucius sometimes thought he looked like a hawk. Gaius rarely smiled, and when he did there

was no joy in it. He had spent the day at the Forum, talking to other important men, all wearing their white togas folded in the traditional way. Now he had changed into a blue tunic.

Lucius knew Gaius had married his mother for more than just her beauty. Gaius was ambitious, but his family was neither as old nor as noble as Cornelia's, and such things counted in Rome. Money was important, and Gaius had plenty – his family owned lots of land, and they had made a fortune in their business dealings as traders. Yet none of that was enough. If you wanted to reach the top in Rome, you had to be connected to one of the ancient families – by birth, or at least by marriage.

“It *is* important,” said Lucius, looking into his eyes. “Well, it is for me, at least. I’ve been, er ... wondering if ... well, if I could ... ask you to adopt me as your son.”

Lucius saw his mother's eyes widen, but she said nothing. Gaius tipped his head to one side, studying him as a hawk might examine its prey before swooping.

“I see...” said Gaius. “You do realize that would involve certain ... obligations on my part? Besides, I already have three living sons. Why do I need another?”

Gaius had been married twice before, and Lucius knew he had divorced his last wife so he could marry Cornelia. Gaius’s sons were grown men, and as things stood, they would inherit his wealth. But if Lucius were adopted, he would have the rights of a son too. Till then he was little more than a lodger in his stepfather’s house.

“Most people think a man can never have too many sons,” said Lucius.

“And some people might think that far too clever an answer.” Gaius slowly leaned forward, his hard eyes fastening on Lucius’s. “Now let us be completely honest with each other, shall we, Lucius? Tell me, what is it that you *really* want?”

Lucius had been expecting Gaius to need some persuading, and he had prepared many things to say. But he hadn’t expected Gaius to ask him that. Suddenly he sensed his whole life might hinge on

this moment, on what he said next. He touched his *bullā* and sent a silent prayer to Jupiter – *Lord of the Sky, I beg you, help me choose the right words* – and then it was as if the God spoke through his mouth.

“I want to be like you,” Lucius said, holding Gaius’s gaze. “I want to be rich and powerful. I don’t want a life like my father’s, one that ends with nothing.”

“A much better answer.” Gaius gave him one of those rare, wintry smiles of his. “And of course you will need my help to make your way in the world.”

“That is all I am asking of you, sir,” said Lucius. “I have no other male relatives on either side of my family to set me on the right path. You are my only hope.”

Such was the custom for the boys of Rome’s noble families, as it always had been. In Rome, men held all the power – their wives and children had to obey. But both Lucius’s grandfathers had long since died, and he had no living uncles, no older brothers who could give him advice or introductions to men who might help him. There were not even any male friends of the family. His father had seen to that.

“You should be proud of your boy, Cornelia,” Gaius said at last. “It is good to see ambition in one so young. He reminds me of myself when I was his age.”

“There can be no higher praise,” Lucius’s mother said quickly. She was smiling happily, her face lit up with relief that her son had not made Gaius angry.

“I cannot promise to adopt you, Lucius,” Gaius said. “But I will promise to think about it. I will also take you with me sometimes when I go on business to the Forum. Doing so will help me get to know you better. Now how does that sound?”

“It sounds perfect, sir,” said Lucius. “I can never thank you enough.”

Lucius also had someone else to thank. He rose from his bed at dawn the next morning and slipped out of the house. The sun’s golden rays were touching the city’s roofs when he reached a temple a few streets away. A hooded priest sold him a lamb for a small coin, a silver *sestertius*, then sacrificed it on the altar for him, slitting the animal’s throat with a knife and



collecting the warm, dark blood in a wooden bowl.

“Thus I fulfil my holy vow to you, great Father Jupiter,” said Lucius.

The streets were growing busy as he walked back. For some reason a faint memory of a strange, disturbing dream came to him... But he pushed it from his mind.

He was happy, and sure at last that he had a lot to look forward to.

# SECRETS. SACRIFICE. SURVIVAL.

Banished from Rome by his jealous stepfather, Lucius finds himself alone in Londinium and pursued by a ruthless assassin. He joins the brutal ranks of the Eagles under a false name and excels as a Roman legionary – but he longs to reclaim his true identity.

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**Gods, gladiators and the Roman legions in Britannia – this is one Roman boy's journey from exile to glory.**

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