



# Lady of the Eternal City (Empress of Rome)

By Kate Quinn

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Empress and Emperor, father and son will spin in a deadly dance of passion, betrayal, conspiracy, and war. As tragedy sends Hadrian spiraling into madness, Vix and Sabina form a last desperate pact to save the Empire. But ultimately, the fate of Rome lies with an untried girl, a spirited redhead who may just be the next Lady of the Eternal City . . .

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## Editorial Review

Review

**Kate Quinn's Empress of Rome saga is...**

"Gorgeously wrought."—C. W. Gortner, author of *The Queen's Vow*

"Deeply passionate."—Kate Furnivall, author of *Shadows on the Nile*

"[An] epic, sexy romp."—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

About the Author

**Kate Quinn** is a native of Southern California. She attended Boston University, where she earned a bachelor's and master's degree in classical voice. A lifelong history buff, she first got hooked on ancient Rome while watching *I, Claudius* at the age of eight. Her first three novels, *Mistress of Rome*, *Daughters of Rome*, and *Empress of the Seven Hills*, have been translated into multiple languages. She is also the author of two novels about the Borgia family, *The Serpent and the Pearl* and *The Lion and the Rose*. Kate lives in Maryland with her husband and is currently at work on her next novel.

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## CHAPTER 1

### VIX

Women. Hell's gates, but they ruin everything!

I'm called Vercingetorix the Red, and not for my reddish hair. I've traveled the length and breadth of the Empire, and I've traveled much of it gloved in blood: the men I killed as a desperate boy fighting for his life in the Colosseum, and the men I killed as a steel-clad legionary standing shield-to-shield against the Empire's enemies. My story should be all blood and battle, swords clashing and shields creaking, full of warrior splendor like I'd dreamed as a foolish youth.

So how in the name of all the gods did my gore-and-glory tale get so thoroughly taken over by *women*?

Perhaps all men's stories are overtaken by women. I'm a man of Rome, with all that entails—a citizen, a soldier, a paterfamilias—and all men of Rome think they stride the earth and make it tremble. We make the laws and then punish the lawless; we make the borders and then punish the border-breakers; we record our own glory and then demand our names be remembered—all over the Empire we stride and we bellow, we make and we break. But if men are the makers and breakers of empires, then women are the makers and breakers of men.

This tale of mine isn't the story of Vercingetorix the Red anymore, or even of the Emperor who hated me. That sounds like a good story, I know, but it's not this story. This story belongs to the women—the women in blue, as I like to think of them. So many: the blue-veiled girl who broke my heart and married my enemy, the blue-scarfed girl whose heart I broke and who became *my* enemy, the blue-jeweled girl who married my dearest friend and harbored more than enough reasons to fear me . . .

And the girl who stood before me now in the blue tunic, wide-eyed and bloody-kneed and so young, whom I was sending to her death. Her, most of all.

“*Annia*,” I roared, and her eyes flickered over the blood on my hands, the body lying limp at my feet.

“*Annia, run!*”

And *Annia* runs. So fast, just a streak of blue fading away from me, and I wonder, *Can she outrun death?* Because if she can’t, an empire falls. You’d think the fate of the Eternal City would depend on someone like me, a warrior with bloody hands and a bloody sword. But it will rise or fall on a woman—and maybe it always does.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m Vercingetorix: “Vix” to my friends, “the Red” to my men, and “that pleb bastard” to my enemies. I’ve been a slave and a guard, a gladiator and a legionary, a centurion and a legion commander. I’ve served (in various ways) three emperors, and I’ve loved (in even more various ways) three blue-eyed women. I’m Vercingetorix the Red, and this is *their* story.

*A.D. 118, Summer*

As I came striding out of the Imperial palace at dawn, I had three causes to be furious and one to be sick and scared. I hated admitting I was scared, so I focused on the rage instead, and all the reasons for it. For one thing, I was wearing the full, ridiculous parade armor of my rank as tribune in the Praetorian Guard, from the absurd plumed helmet to the ridiculous muscled cuirass, and I hated that armor with every drop of blood in me. Give me a plain legionary breastplate any day. For a second reason, the day was already sweltering hot although the sun had barely risen over the rooftops, and sweat collected where the battered lion skin lapped my neck—the lion skin I’d won when I was promoted for courageous action in Dacia a long time ago, a lion skin I wasn’t supposed to wear as a Praetorian, but wore anyway because it meant I was more than a pretty palace guard.

The third reason I was furious? Because on this summer day, I’d have to watch my greatest enemy march through the Eternal City’s gates for the first time as Emperor of Rome.

As for why I felt cold and scared, well, I refused to think about that.

I came out into the full glare of sunlight and stopped. My guardsmen were lined up in immaculate red-and-gold rows—Praetorians were good at looking immaculate—and below was the bustle of the Imperial court, chamberlains trying to organize us all for the Emperor’s arrival. One of them leeches onto my elbow droning, but I didn’t hear a word because I was looking down the marble steps at a woman in Imperial purple who stared past me as though I were not there. I immediately added her to the list of reasons why this was a black, black day. Empress Vibia Sabina had spent the last year ignoring me, and I didn’t like being ignored.

“Lady,” I greeted her.

“Tribune,” she returned coolly.

I felt my jaw jut. People assumed the Empress and I didn’t like each other, and that was a reasonable assumption. I didn’t get along at all with the old Empress, a rancid Imperial bitch who couldn’t lay eyes on me without sniffing like she smelled a drain. But Empress Sabina was a different matter. I’d known her since she was a senator’s barefoot daughter and I’d been a lanky young guard in her father’s pay. We’d been friends, we’d been enemies, we’d been too many things to count. Now we were an empress and a guard, and if it was my job to keep her alive, I’d be damned if I’d be looked through like I was a window.

Sabina extended a hand to the chamberlain for assistance into her curtained litter. Maybe it was petty, but I brushed the man aside and offered my hand instead, not letting her dismiss me like a slave. Her fingers were narrow and smooth in my big rough paw, and her blue eyes flicked over me once as she settled among the cushions. A supple, sinuous woman maybe a year younger than my thirty-five: a little three-cornered face like a shield, a draped *stola* of Imperial purple, and wide beaten-silver cuffs adorning her wrists and ankles. She looked regal and shackled, and I saw she had her statue face on. When she wore that face you'd never in a thousand years know what she was thinking. Empress Sabina had Imperial purple in her veins as well as on her back: oceans of patrician-cool self-possession all the way down to the deep and hidden center of her.

But maybe it was a good thing. Of the two of us, Sabina would at least have the self-control to look the Emperor of Rome in the eye and lie like a Greek. I wasn't sure I had the self-control to keep myself from hitting the bastard the moment I saw his smug, bearded face.

We were to greet him at the gates of the city, and the moment was almost here. The air hung like a warm wet cloak as the Imperial procession creaked off into the twisting streets. Rome: that old whore of a city with her overflowing gutters and feral dogs; the plump, brisk housewives with baskets over their arms and vendors crying wares on corners. My city. I hadn't been born here; I hadn't even loved my time here—I'd started out as a slave and a gladiator, and Rome would've been happy to chew me up and spit out my bones on the sand of the arena. But I'd gotten out at the expense of some blood and a few deaths, and then this fickle bitch of a city kissed me instead, sent me vaulting up the ladder in the legions under Emperor Trajan. Trajan came before Hadrian, and Trajan I had loved—but there was no Trajan anymore. Just Rome, and she owned me. Everyone in the city from the idle drunks to the idle rich was pressing along the streets for a look at their new Emperor.

Well, not quite new. Hadrian had put on the purple a full year ago, but he'd learned his lesson from Emperors who celebrated their glory before solidifying it—no one ever said the bastard was stupid. He spent his first year making the rounds of the eastern legions, promising, cajoling, bribing. It wasn't till he was sure of his position that he returned to Rome itself, and he'd sent me instructions for his triumphal entry:

*Pomp, Hadrian had written in his terse script. Sacrifices. Gladiatorial games. Rose petals. Cheering crowds. Oh, and let's take care of the executions on that list I gave you.*

That's why people weren't inclined to cheer. From the back of my ill-tempered gelding I had a fine view over the procession of senators in their snowy rows, and they were a grim, unsmiling lot. A frightened lot, too. They knew the names on that list; Hadrian had had those names rammed down the Senate's collective throat in open session. Men of note; men who should have been safe; senators and former consuls and war heroes who considered themselves untouchable. But no one was safe when Hadrian looked at you—and he made sure we all knew it.

The chamberlains fussed again at the city gates, babbling protocols, but I just swung off my horse and ignored them. So did Empress Sabina; she sat reading a scroll and ignoring the Imperial steward flapping at her. "Lady, the Empress must be first to greet her husband upon his return to hearth and home; if you will array yourself *here*—"

"I will be first," a woman's deep, loud voice intoned. It was that rancid old bitch Plotina, widow to the previous Emperor. "If anyone is to welcome Dear Publius home to the Eternal City, it will be his mother."

Empress Sabina spoke, still reading. "His mother is dead, Plotina."

The old empress in her dark purple silks gave a patronizing smile. "Mother in all but name, Vibia Sabina."

God, but she was insufferable. How a man like the late Emperor Trajan—straightforward, vigorous, with a love of common soldiers and dirty jokes—had ended up with that straitlaced cow of a wife, I had no idea. Politics, I suppose. I was a gutter-born bastard free to marry the girl I loved, and I had, but those of the senatorial class married for power. I'm not sure if any power would've been worth wedding Plotina, with her graying wings of hair and the way she mouthed her words like pronouncements carried down from the gods. She was mouthing more pronouncements at Sabina—the unsatisfactory daughter-in-law who'd taken her place as Empress of Rome.

"You may be Empress, my girl." Plotina lowered her voice, but guards like me always have an excuse to hover. "But only because I made Dear Publius Emperor. Remember that. He certainly will."

"Of course, because we all know he's just aching to see you again." Sabina tossed her scroll aside, swinging out of the curtained litter. "How many letters did my husband write you while he was away, for all those long screeds of advice you sent him every other day?"

A sniff from the old Empress, and then we all took our places. I held my post at Sabina's elbow, watching a drop of sweat ease down the long ribbon of her neck from under her plaited wig. She'd never been a woman to fuss with her hair; she'd shorn it clean off at some point so it covered her head in a silky cap of light brown. But she was Empress now, so someone had jammed a wig over that shocking shorn head. Probably Empress Plotina, who waited with her whole body quivering like a horse at the starting line of the Circus Maximus. Her eyes gleamed fever-bright as she remarked to the air, "Dear Publius keeps us waiting, but that is a god's prerogative. He is a god incarnate, you know."

"Have you been inhaling too much of that Imperial purple dye?" Sabina asked conversationally. "Sometimes I wonder."

I almost laughed, but then the cry went up.

"He comes!"

I looked beyond the gates to see dust, billowing like a storm cloud on the road approaching the city. A great roar went up from the waiting crowd, and Sabina spoke softly. "Are they so eager to see him?"

"They want the largesse they'll get if they cheer, Lady."

"How do you know?"

"Because I made a formal announcement that they'd get largesse if they cheered."

Sabina smiled, her Imperial mask cracking briefly to show the girl who had cantered around the Empire in search of adventure. It was hard not to smile at that girl, even if you sometimes wanted to put a leash on her.

She studied me a moment, and her serious expression returned. "What's wrong, Vix? You're smiling, but you've been coiled tight as a rope all morning. Are you dreading something? Besides *that*," she added with a glance at the approaching storm of dust that was her husband.

*I'm dreading a death*, I almost said. Five executions were coming, but one would be worse than all the others combined. I'd dreaded it during this whole past year like a leaden weight in my stomach. And it was coming, once this rose-petaled pomp was done. The Emperor had ordered those deaths, and just because he'd changed his mind after the arrests were made—"Leave them alive in their cells till I return," he'd written me, "I will see the executions myself"—didn't mean blood wasn't still going to be spilled.

Empress Sabina knew whose death I dreaded. She dreaded it, too. I saw her hesitate as though hunting for words, but then the trumpets blared, and she remembered to ignore me. I had a moment to resent that, even over the sick swoop in my stomach, but she was right to do it. We were safer that way, both of us. We turned away from each other at the same instant—immaculate Empress, stone-visaged guard; nothing but cool, impersonal space between us—to face the Emperor.

Publius Aelius Hadrian.

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