

Between the  
**Forest** and  
**the Hills**  
Ann Lawrence

RULE BRITANNICUS  
CESAR RULE



AMO  
LALA  
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IT'S ALL  
GREAT  
TO ME

A HISTORICAL FANTASY

Between the  
**Forest** and  
the **Hills**  
Ann Lawrence



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## **Also by Ann Lawrence**

*The Half-Brothers*  
*Tom Ass, or The Second Gift*

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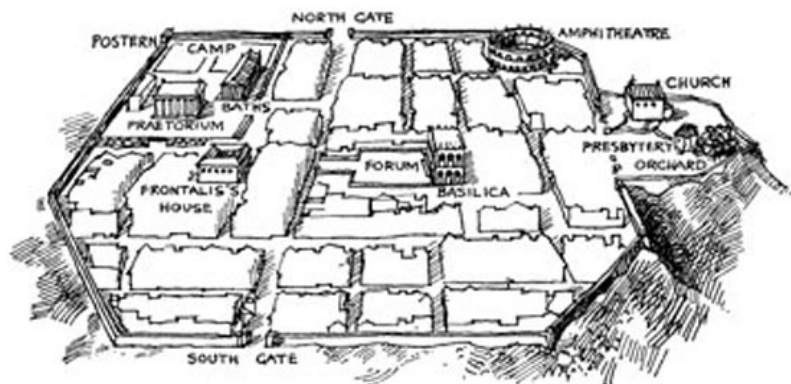
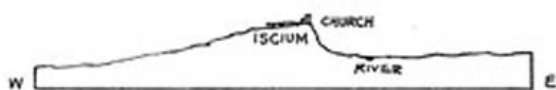
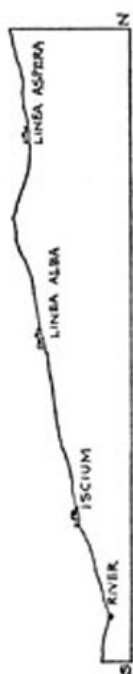
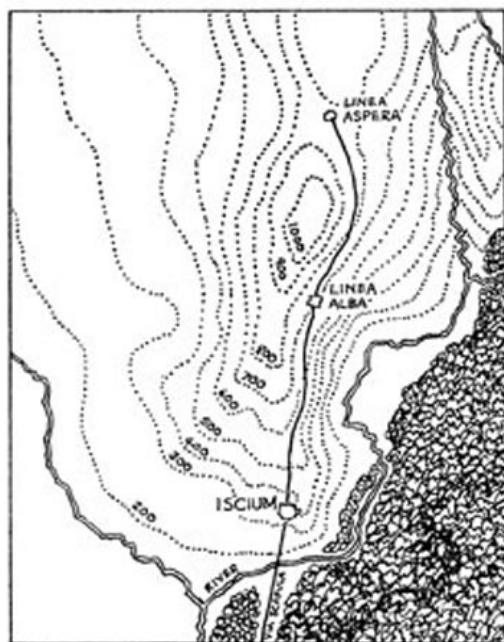
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*Next I'll consider honey, the gift of heaven: look favourably on this part also, Maecenas. All in due order I'll unfold a spectacle which will astonish you: a small republic, high-minded leaders and a whole nation its customs and pursuits, its tribes and its wars. A slight work . . .*

VIRGIL: *Georgics Book IV*

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# CONCERNING THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CITY AND PROVINCE OF ISCIUM

*By Sextus Julius Frontalis*

THE CITY OF ISCIUM is situated at the northern end of the Via Scapula, in the western marches of civilized Britain. The name was first given to a temporary fort erected by Suetonius Paulinus during his campaign against the Druids, and this later became a permanent military post, around which grew a civil settlement. In time the area of occupation and cultivation spread, the name with it, until Iscium came to signify not the city only, but also the whole of a small canton or sub-province, contained by mountains to the west and broad forestlands to the east.

The other principal topographical feature of the district is the river, which descends from the highlands to the north and falls into the valley on the eastern side of Iscium, running through the edge of the forest and then bending westward round the southern end of the ridge upon which the city stands. The Via Scapula crosses it by a ford only half a mile below the South Gate. A few miles further south, however, the mountains and the forest draw together, and road and river go side by side through a narrow corridor, until they emerge into the lands beyond.

Throughout the years of Roman rule in Britain Iscium prospered, benefiting as much from Rome's distance as from her influence, for though in its isolation the district was always behind the fashions, yet it also escaped the effects of civil disturbances which convulsed the rest of the Empire. Indeed, the Iscians seldom heard of such things until they were long past.

However, it is a common observation that no state of human affairs may last forever. As the power of Rome waned, so the repercussions of that waning were felt even in the remotest parts of the Empire. Year by year troops were withdrawn from outlying provinces to meet attacks at the heart of the Empire itself, until, in the reign of the Emperor Honorius, when all Roman troops were withdrawn from Britain, the garrison of the fort in Iscium was withdrawn also.



Although at this time the countryside around Iscium had been untouched by strife for several generations, the departure of the soldiers and the news of defeat and ruin, which came intermittently from Rome, threw the population into a panic. Some fled to Gaul, others to the stronghold of the nearest British chieftain, named Brachioradialis: an energetic bandit, who sought to make himself a petty king in the west. Few stayed in the city, and for some considerable time the civil government was managed by a young Christian priest and a junior civil servant, being the only representatives of Roman authority to remain at their posts in this crisis.

This lowest ebb in the fortunes of the city was not to be final, however. Only half a dozen years after they had been withdrawn, apparently forever, the legions returned to Britain. To Iscium the Imperial power came back in the form of a cohort of auxiliaries, commanded by Rutilius Claudius Astragalus, a veteran of the wars against the barbarians in Gaul. When the news spread that the military were once more present in Iscium, many who had left the city in fear returned with relief and gratitude, for those who had sought the protection of Brachioradialis had found in his tribal centre a nationalism and cultivated primitivism, which was trying to anyone accustomed to Roman life and thought, while those whose flight had carried them as far as Gaul, returned with the news that every other place was worse off than their own. All, therefore, resolved in future to stand fast, whatever happened or was rumoured to be happening.

The soldiers, having renovated the fort and put it again in fighting order, lent invaluable assistance with the various public works which were necessary for the recovery of normal life in the city, as for example clearing the drains, rebuilding the aqueducts and repairing the civic buildings. The people settled down, believing that all alarms were past, and that the world had returned to peace and stability, though years passed without bringing any further word from the central government. At last, fifteen years after the garrison had returned, orders came saying that it was to evacuate the fort once more and proceed to a part on the south coast.

The soldiers marched out in the spring, but were back in time to take in the harvest, saying that they had been sent back to help Iscium to organize her own defence against the barbarians, since Rome was withdrawing from Britain altogether, and could never again send military aid to the Province.

During the years which followed this final separation of Britain from the body of the Empire, news came from time to time to Iscium, suggesting that the barbarian invaders had begun to settle in other parts of the Province, but as yet the peace of the west was untroubled. The problems which beset Iscium were of another kind. The district was growing ever more isolated, not only from Rome, but even from the rest of Britain, and it became apparent to the Senate that it must devise a form of government, which would render the city self-sufficient in its administration, both secular and religious, as well as in its defence . . .

**PART ONE**

**THE VILLA**



ON THE EVENING of his daughter's wedding day Julius Frontalis, Prefect of the Province of Iscium, sat at the open window of his study with the recently appointed Bishop Malleus. The room occupied the upper floor of a squat tower at one corner of the Prefect's town house, the window on its west side looking out over the jumbled planes of red tiled roofs, that stepped and jostled down the hillside below, and the white stubble fields beyond the city walls, towards the mountains—the edge of the wilderness. The two men sat together in the companionable silence of thirty years' friendship (and disagreement), watching the dusty gold fade from the sky over the rim of the western hills, while the room darkened behind them, and the heat and excitement of the day ebbed with the light.

"The harvest safely home and my only daughter off my hands," said the Prefect complacently. "A man might well feel it was time to put his feet up."

"There's still the fruit to come," said the priest.

Frontalis chuckled.

"Are you speaking literally or metaphorically?" he asked.

His friend smiled and shook his head.

"I doubt whether there's ever an end to worrying either for the farmer or the parent," he said.

Frontalis raised his hands in a mock defensive gesture.

"Spare me the parables this once," he begged, "and let me enjoy my smugness."

"Just this once, then," said Malleus. "I must say, you've some reason to be satisfied. I was never happier to marry two people in my life."

The Prefect nodded sagely.

"I'm a firm believer in arranged matches," he said.

Malleus frowned.

"I got the impression that Thena and Axon made all the arrangements themselves."

"So they believed too." A smile spread slowly over Frontalis's large features. "But the fact is that it was all settled when *they* were still in swaddling clothes by their mothers. The sad thing is that neither lived to see their plan fulfilled."

Malleus looked as if he were about to say something, but changed his mind.

“I know,” said Frontalis, as if the thought had been spoken aloud after all. “I should like to be able to believe it too, I promise you. But even if I did, there would still be times like this when it just wouldn’t be enough. It’s the actual, physical presence—”

“I know it,” said Malleus quickly. “I know it very well.”

“Of course you do,” said Frontalis.

There was a moment’s silence, and then the priest said:

“What about young Falx? Is he going back to Linea Alba with them, or does he stay with you still?”

“Oh he’s gone back already,” said the Prefect. “The farm is his home as much as Axon’s, and now the household has a mistress again, it should be a bit more orderly than it was when Axon was up there on his own. Besides, Falx is older now by a year or two, and pretty well over the shock of losing his parents. He should be able to behave himself.”

Malleus looked dubious.

“He’s still only ten, isn’t he? And Axon isn’t so much older than him really. Nine—ten years is it? The boy might not be so amenable to his brother’s discipline as he is to yours. And you *are* still his guardian.”

“He’s rising eleven now,” said Frontalis, heaving his substantial bulk into a more comfortable position. “If he gets out of hand again, he’ll have to come back here, of course. But I’d rather he stayed at Linea Alba. I don’t want him to feel ousted from his own home by this marriage.”

“There’s that to consider,” Malleus agreed.

Another lengthy pause opened in the conversation. Malleus strained his eyes to pick out the first star that came and went faintly in the slatey blue at the edge of the dying glow of the sunset. Frontalis cleared his throat.

“What’s *your* lad up to these days?” he asked tentatively.

Malleus clicked his tongue testily and rubbed the top of his bald head.

“I really think I prefer not to know that myself,” he said.

Frontalis raised his eyebrows.

“I thought you were quite happy for him to go off to Ireland. His bishop’s a friend of yours, isn’t he?”

“I wouldn’t have said I was *quite happy* about the way he chased off,” Malleus grumbled. “But I didn’t object too strongly. And I wouldn’t be complaining now if only he’d stayed with Patricius. But it seems that wasn’t exciting enough for him—he must have something more *spiritual*, you see. So now he’s gone swarming down to the south to be a monk in the middle of some bog or other. Poverty, chastity and obedience!” Malleus snorted. “Well, he was always bound to be poor, and I can’t imagine any woman in her senses putting up with him, but obedience—! Never! Not in a thousand years!”

Frontalis shook his head sympathetically.

“I must say I was surprised that he didn’t come to see you installed in your new office,” he said.

“He wrote to me,” Malleus said shortly. “Most charming letter. Said he’d like to be able to congratulate me more warmly, but he no longer believes in the episcopal form of church government, since it has lost the spirit of the apostolic age, and is too much enmeshed with the World. (That’s you, of course, my dear Prefect.) Monastic life is the only pure way, it seems—the way of saintly self-denial—and the sun shines out of the Abbot Gastrocnemius’s earholes!”

“I seem to remember this movement was gaining adherents at a tremendous rate in Gaul when I was a young man,” Frontalis said reflectively. “Always seemed to me then that the thing they chiefly denied themselves was soap.”

“Quite so!” Malleus exclaimed. But then he hesitated and continued a little uncomfortably. “The irritating thing is that I wasn’t too happy about this place having a bishop myself. Too small really—and I’ve served here as parish priest for thirty years, without ever expecting or wishing to be anything else. But we’re getting more and more cut off these days. We’d never get our youngsters confirmed, or priests and deacons ordained, if we didn’t have our own bishop—”

“And you were the only man Iscium would have accepted,” the Magistrate said firmly. “Not even being one of your flock, I don’t presume to know anything about the city’s spiritual needs—but I can see that a bishop of Iscium is an administrative necessity. Calling you the Bishop is like calling me the Prefect and Astragalus the Imperial Legate, or Commander in Chief, or whatever we do decide

to call him in the end. It may not make the slightest difference to what we do, but we shall be doing it under the proper forms. I've said it before: there have to be properly constituted authorities, and if we're going to be cut off from those in the rest of the world, we have to have our own here—otherwise we shall simply disintegrate. It's happened to Roman communities all over the Province already."

The unwilling bishop shook his head violently.

"You don't understand at all," he said impatiently. "The whole point is that a bishop *shouldn't* be just an administrative necessity. There ought to be something peculiarly holy—learned . . . I don't know."

He jumped up from his chair and walked restlessly round the room, stopping by the heavy table at which Frontalis worked. The dark green marble top was scattered with wax-covered wooden tablets for notes, styluses, quill pens and a few sheets of parchment, one of which was closely written on both sides in Frontalis's own neat hand. Malleus picked it up.

"How's the book going?" he asked. "I see you've actually started making a clean copy."

"Ah yes," said the Prefect. "I was hoping I might get down to some serious work on it now I've got the place to myself at last."

"I don't believe Thena ever prevented you from working," Malleus said.

Frontalis chuckled.

"Don't rob me of my excuses," he said. "As long as I've got one or two left to me, I can go on pretending that one day I really will . . . Well, you know what it's like—it's something to occupy the winter evenings. I'd be lost for anything to do if I ever finished it."

Malleus smiled and brought the page he had taken up to the light of the window.

"Let's see what you're going to make of us then," he said.

He read to the bottom of the first side in silence and then eyed the Prefect ironically.

"A young Christian priest and a junior civil servant, being the only representatives of Roman authority . . ." he said. "I notice you don't mention the fact that your priest and your civil servant spent more time arguing about how the place should be governed, than actually governing anything."

Frontalis opened his eyes wide.

“But my dear Bishop,” he said. “If I did that, I should also have to say that the chief cause of their quarrel was that the priest objected to the civil servant calling himself a Platonist.”

“It was not that at all!” Malleus exclaimed indignantly. “It all came out of you insisting on keeping up the old Imperial Cult, in spite of the fact that you neither believed in it nor cared about it—except as a way of upsetting my congregation!”

“Good gracious,” said the Prefect mildly. “Was I really as bad as that? I suppose I was. But then, you were so dogmatic about everything . . .”

The Bishop snorted and turned the page. He read another line or two and then laughed.

“*The legions returned to Britain*, did they? I shall be interested to hear what Astragalus has to say about that.”

Frontalis smiled slowly.

“I remember what he said at the time,” he said. “Once he was sure that the natives were friendly.”

(“According to the official statements, an expeditionary force has been sent to repossess Britain,” Astragalus had said in a deliberately neutral tone of voice.)

“Well that’s all right then—” Father Malleus had begun, but Frontalis had frowned.

“*Official*, you say. But what’s your *unofficial* opinion?”

The commander had shrugged.

“Just what everyone else in the army knows,” he had said. “That there aren’t enough troops in Britain to repossess half a tribal district if it came to the push. It’s a morale-boosting exercise, that’s all. And I’m afraid it’s not even *your* morale the generals are thinking about—it’s all for the benefit of the folks back home. Rome may have been sacked less than five years ago, they can say, but already she’s on her feet again and sending troops off to restore order in Britain. See?”

“Eternal Rome!” said Frontalis.)

Malleus shook his head.

“Poor Astragalus,” he said. “We gave him a very difficult time at first.”

“I imagine it was the only thing that would ever have brought us together,” said Frontalis. “The prospect of the military throwing their weight about and interfering in the civil government.”