

## SPRING TIDE

Also by Mary Ray

THE ROMAN EMPIRE SEQUENCE

*A Tent for the Sun*

*The Ides of April*

*Sword Sleep*

*Beyond the Desert Gate*

*Rain from the West*

# *Spring Tide*

by  
*Mary Ray*



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ROMAN BRITAIN  
IN THE SOUTH AND WEST

Verulamium

Londinium

Deva

Isca

Nidum

Caer Taff

Region of  
Dumnonia



Isca: II Legion (Caerleon)  
Deva: XX Legion (Chester)

## TOWNS

**Nidum (Neath)**  
**Caer Taff (Cardiff)**  
**Verulamium (St Albans)**  
**Londinium (London)**

MAJOR ROADS  
CIVIL ROADS  
MILITARY ROADS

AREA OF MILITARY  
GOVERNMENT



# I

## *Deisi!*

THE CLEAR SUN of the first warm afternoon in spring shone down on the small wood growing along the crest of the hill above the estuary. Con walked carefully up the narrow, sun-splashed path that led to the smaller clearing at the northern end; he was pleasantly stiff after a morning cutting beansticks, and now he was trying to make as little noise as possible, because his friend Julius, whom he had missed some time before, was probably just ahead, watching the hole that might be a fox's earth.

Con saw him from the top of a bank through the thin cover where the leaves of the young beech trees were just beginning to split into fans of transparent green. Julius was lying behind a buttress of roots from the great oak tree, his cloak spread among the windflowers. It had rained the night before and the damp would have soaked through by now, but he had probably not noticed it.

He rolled over and sat up as Con scrambled down the bank towards him. He was a red-haired boy with a thin face and brown eyes. Con, a little older and fair, had the square-set Roman bones that were unusual in this far-western province of the Empire.

"Did you see anything?" Con asked, and then, not waiting for an answer, "Julius, I think there's a new warren up on the far side of the hill. Fabius says he'll bring us up here one night and show us how he used to set snares when he was a boy!"

"Oh, good. Is it time to move?"

"Yes, if we're to get the last of the wood loaded and be back in Caer Taff before dusk. The days are still short. Up you come!"

He pulled Julius to his feet; they were the same height almost, though Con was wider across the shoulders. Caer Taff, the fort and the small town around it that was their home, lay behind them now, hidden by the hillside and the trees that grew in the long valley that sloped up from the river and the wharfs on the seaward side.

Up among the trees there was the sound of an axe, and the creaking and muffled thud of a falling tree.

Julius smiled. "Fabius will be stiff tonight; I shouldn't think he's used an axe like that since last autumn!"

"No, but we are supposed to be helping him," said Con. "Our fathers wouldn't have let us spend the day up here without him, so we'd better go and pay for our holiday before we go home. Why do

you have to like watching things more than doing them?”

“I . . . Con, wait!” But Con was running up the path ahead, and into the clearing.

Two pack-horses were grazing on the far side, where a servant was trimming a pile of saplings into poles and beansticks. Close at hand a tall man was resting on his axe, Caius Fabius Aemilius, architect and builder. He smiled when he saw them and pushed the untidy dark hair back from his face, leaving a green smear across his forehead.

“Good! Julius, it’s your turn now. I think I’ve done my share, and my stiff arm’s had enough. Another hour and then we must pack up. I wonder where Lavinia has got to?”

“Shall I find her, sir?” asked Con.

“Oh no, you can help me cord this lot first!” said the man. “She won’t have gone far, she’s sensible for eleven.”

They worked together till the poles were ready for loading, then they gathered round a blanket that had been spread on the grass with the last of an earlier meal.

“Thirsty?” asked Fabius, passing over a leather jug.

Con drank and then wandered across to a break in the trees; the road, that ran west from the bridges below the fort, curved across a stretch of open ground beyond the hillside. There was seldom much to be seen on it except on market day, and now it was empty except for two travelers some way off.

It was too far to see clearly but they seemed to be a young man walking and an older riding a mule. Suddenly, while he watched, Con saw the younger man run to the animal's head and pull it to one side of the road; then he saw why. A horse being ridden hard burst out from the woods on the far side of the valley, galloping east towards Caer Taff. He could imagine what the old man was saying now as he shook the mud thrown up by the flying hooves from his cloak, yet Con half-thought the horse had checked for a moment as it passed the two travelers.

He turned back to the others. "That's strange, I've just seen what looked like a post-horse on the road, and whoever sent the message was in a hurry."

"A horse ridden fast?" asked Fabius. "Let me see."

"You're too late," said Con, as the man joined him. "Wait a minute, though. Before it passed those two were going west, now they've turned round and they're coming this way as fast as they can. Look, the man's running!"

"Get the horses loaded, Publius. No, leave the wood, we can fetch it later." Fabius's voice was suddenly harsh, and Con, turning in surprise, saw that his face had changed.

"What is it?"

Before he answered the man turned and called, "Vinny, come back now, Vinny."

"Shall I go for her?" asked Julius.

"No, wait a minute, I want to tell you something before she gets back. I hope I may be wrong and I don't want to frighten her. What you saw, Con,

looks to me like bad news from further west, news that isn't unexpected either; and those two with the mule must have been upset by it. Look, they're out of sight already."

"I think I see," said Con, his face serious. "You mean it's the Deisi again; but it was quiet last year, they didn't raid this way at all."

"Maybe not, but there are some people who think that was only because they were gathering strength in Hivernia, and that this year they'll mean business. Your father does for one, Con, and he picks up more gossip of that sort in the mess than I do at the bath-house. I should have thought of this before I brought you two up here, but it's been quiet so long."

"Look, here's Vinny," said Julius.

The daughter of Fabius the architect was a thin child with her father's dark hair, that was flying out from under her scarf now as if she had been running; she came into the clearing, her russet tunic held high, with a puzzled look on her face.

"Quickly, Vinny, we're going now," said her father. "Pack up those primrose roots of yours."

But Lavinia did not obey him at once, she stood looking worried. "Father, I saw something strange down on the far side of the wood."

Fabius paused, still bending over the horse panner he was strapping. "How was it strange, Vinny?" His voice was quiet and steady.

"You know where the trees stop and it slopes down to the stream? I think there were men in the fir plantation behind, and they were hiding."