

CHAPTER 1



AUGUST 24, AD 79

1:00 P.M.

THE CITY OF POMPEII

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Within hours, thousands of people would be dead.

The entire city of Pompeii would vanish under more than thirty feet of fiery ash and stone.

But first, it was a bright, sunny summer day. Shops bustled. Kids played ball in a grassy field. Gladiators readied for a bloody match.

Nobody yet knew that the mountain Vesuvius, which loomed over the city, was actually a deadly volcano. The mountain had been silent for centuries, a giant green triangle covered with farms and meadows and forests.

It was impossible to imagine what lurked under the ground — rivers of boiling magma, swirls of poisonous gases. Any moment, the mountain would erupt with devastating fury.

Eleven-year-old Marcus was with his father, Tata. They shouldn't have been anywhere near Pompeii. They were escaped slaves, running for their lives from evil men.

But then:

BOOM!

BOOM!

With two shattering explosions, Vesuvius erupted.

Thousands of pairs of eyes turned toward the mountain, staring in shock and terror. Black, billowing smoke and ash gushed out of the mountain's gaping mouth. Vesuvius roared like a

furious beast, breathing smoke and flames into the sky. And then came an even bigger cloud, shooting out billions of hot, jagged rocks that rained down on Pompeii, filling fountains, crushing roofs, and pounding down on people as they tried to flee, screaming in panic.

“The gods are punishing us!”

“The world is ending!”

Marcus and Tata knew they had to escape. Any minute a flaming wave of ash and gases would rush down the mountain, burning everything in its path. But there were too many people in the streets, too many rocks falling from the sky. It was hard to breathe, almost impossible to see. And then there was the strange whooshing sound that came from above.

“Look out!” Tata shouted.

Marcus looked up just in time to see a massive flaming boulder falling from the sky, a chunk of fiery rock from deep inside the mountain.

It was heading right for them.