

This book is about the life of the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, told in the first person. He was the Roman general who defeated the Carthaginian General Hannibal, leading Rome to victory in the second Punic War.

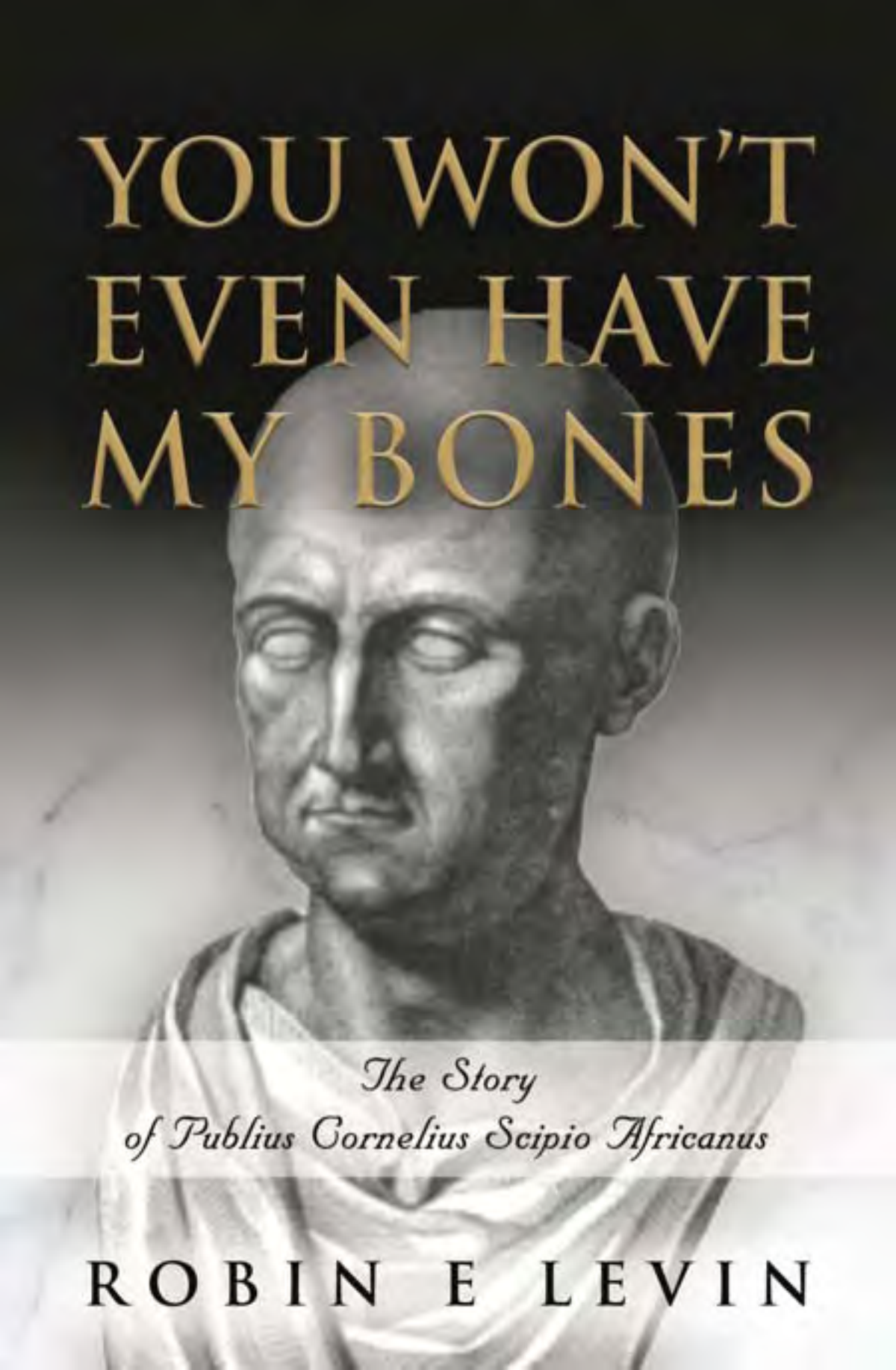
You Won't Even Have My Bones

by Robin Levin

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YOU WON'T
EVEN HAVE
MY BONES

*The Story
of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus*

ROBIN E LEVIN

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The Gathering Storm	17
Chapter 2: The War Begins.....	22
Chapter 3: Ticinus, Trebia and Trasimene.....	28
Chapter 4: Disaster at Cannae.....	40
Chapter 5: I Start my Political Career.....	51
Chapter 6: Personal Tragedy.....	57
Chapter 7: I am Appointed to the Command of Roman Armies in Spain.....	60
Chapter 8: The Conquest of New Carthage.	65
Chapter 9: Driving the Carthaginians from Spain.....	74
Chapter 10: Mission to Syphax.....	84
Chapter 11: Illiturgis and Castulo	88
Chapter 12: The Sucro Mutiny.....	90
Chapter 13: Final days in Hispania and Return to Rome.....	103
Chapter 14: In Sicily, Preparing for the Invasion of Africa.....	120
Chapter 15: Invasion of Africa.....	125
Chapter 16: Confrontation with Hannibal.....	135
Chapter 17: Return to Rome in Triumph	145
Chapter 18: Rivalry with Marcus Porcius Cato	153
Chapter 19: The Threat of Antiochus	157
Chapter 20: “You Won’t Even Have My Bones.”	167

Chapter 4: Disaster at Cannae

“What will we do now?” I asked Paullus. “Will Hannibal march on Rome?”

“I don’t know, but we had better prepare for it.”

Another assembly was called a few days later and we elected Quintus Fabius Maximus dictator. The powers of a dictator supersede those of a Consul, but his term only extends to six months. Dictators are only elected during times of dire peril. Marcus Minucius Rufus, a former Consul, was elected to be Fabius’s Master of Horse.

The gens Fabii goes back to the beginning of the Roman Republic. They are thoroughly patrician, and they tend to be conservative and cautious. Unlike Flaminius, Quintus Fabius was meticulous about seeing that religious protocols were followed. He, himself, was a leading member of the College of Augurs. Fabius was not keen on confronting Hannibal on the battlefield. His theory was if we harassed Hannibal’s army and kept them from foraging, we could ultimately starve them out. During the six months after the Battle of Trasimene he took his army out, following Hannibal’s army first into Apulia and then into Campania, always hovering above them on the high ground and frequently attacking his foraging parties. At one point he thought he had Hannibal trapped. Hannibal’s army had exhausted the resources of Falernia and would have to go back to Apulia for the winter or starve. There was only one pass over the mountains which Fabius kept heavily guarded, but the clever rascal had his men tie flammable brush to the horns of a thousand cattle. When night came, they lit the brush and stampeded the cattle. The Romans guarding the pass thought they were seeing something supernatural and ran off. Thus, Hannibal’s army escaped in the wake of the stampede.

Fabius's tactics were not popular with the Roman people, and they gave him the agnomen *Cunctator* (or "delayer") because he kept delaying the confrontation. His Master of Horse, Marcus Minucius Rufus was eager to confront Hannibal in battle, and he got the assembly to make him co-equal with Fabius. He wanted to alternate days of command, but Fabius wasn't having it. So, the two generals separated their camps. It almost ended in disaster. Minucius drove his legions into one of Hannibal's traps, and Fabius, seeing that Minucius's legion was in dire straits, sent his army to rescue them. It ended with Minucius kneeling before Fabius and saluting him as a father. After six months Fabius laid down his dictatorship and the Consulship reverted to Gneius Servilius Geminus and to Marcus Atilius Regulus who had replaced the fallen Consul Flaminius. Geminus and Regulus continued the policies of Fabius, avoiding open confrontation with Hannibal.

As everyone knows, Fabius and I had our differences toward the end of the war. I would not disagree with his tactics, however. Unless you were a military genius of the same caliber as Hannibal, it would have been folly to engage him in battle. Had Fabius's successors followed through on his policies they might well have weakened Hannibal's army in a year or two to the point where Hannibal would have had to concede defeat. Many Romans, however, were clamoring for a battle and there was a populist who responded to their clamor and ran for Consul. His name was Gaius Terentius Varro.

During the campaign for Consul, I accompanied Paullus to the forum for the debate. Varro announced: "It is past time for us to rid Italia of this Carthaginian monster. Regulus and Geminus are doing nothing. Elect me as Consul and I will bring this war to a conclusion the very day I get sight of the enemy!"(Livy).

Paullus took the rostra and responded: "I wonder how any general, before he knew anything of his own army or that of the enemy, the situation on the battlefield, or the nature of the country, could engage standard to standard with the enemy. I, myself, would be inclined to

proceed with due deliberation and caution. Temerity, setting aside its folly, has thus far proved unsuccessful” (Livy).

Unfortunately, Paullus words did not dissuade his fellow Romans from voting for Varro for Consul. Varro came in second in the polling. I wondered how Paullus would be able to deal with such a rash and unwise co-Consul who, obviously, knew little about military strategy.

On Consul Varro’s insistence, the Roman Assembly decided to assemble a huge army of Romans and allies to go out to Apulia and confront Hannibal’s army on the battlefield. Paullus had little choice but to go along. We gathered an army of eighty thousand while Hannibal’s forces numbered only about half of ours. How could we possibly lose?

I was selected to be one of the military tribunes. The evening before we were to leave for Apulia, the officers in Paullus’s legions assembled in his house for a meal to discuss tactics. When the others had left, Paullus summoned me to his tablinum. He looked weary and troubled. He offered me wine, but I declined it having already had more to drink than was good for me.

“Do you know who came to see me last night?” I shook my head.

“Quintus Fabius Maximus, and he tried to persuade me against this venture,” said Paullus.

“He said to me ‘I think you know why I have come to see you, Lucius. If neither Consul had any sense, I would not bother to say anything because I would be wasting my time. If both Consuls had sense, I wouldn’t have to say anything because I could depend on them to do the right thing. In this case, one Consul has sense, and the other does not, so I’ve come to talk to the Consul who does.’

“I asked him ‘what would you have me do, Quintus Fabius?’

“He went on and on,” continued Paullus. “He said ‘Lucius, you know we are headed for a disaster if Varro gets his way. Flaminius only

began to play the madman's Consul when he got to his province, at the head of his army. Varro was raving even before he stood for Consul!

'This man knows nothing about military matters, not even as much as Flaminius did, and Hannibal is a consummate genius. Varro probably doesn't even know that you want to hold the high ground when you start a battle nor that you want the wind to be at your soldier's backs and not in their faces. He has no notion of how to choose a battlefield. Believe me, Lucius, Hannibal will cut our army to pieces. I don't care if we have twice as many men as he does, one of Hannibal's battle-hardened soldiers is worth ten of our raw recruits.

'But Hannibal does not have time on his side. He is in a foreign land, a hostile land, facing all hostile and disadvantageous circumstances, far from his home, far from his country: he has peace neither by land nor sea, no cities nor walls to receive him. He sees nothing anywhere which he can call his own. He lives daily by plunder. He has scarcely a third part of that army which he conveyed across the Iberus. Famine has destroyed more than the sword. The few remaining lack provisions. Do you doubt that by remaining quiet we shall not conquer him who is daily sinking into decrepitude? The only way to defeat Hannibal is to continue as I and Geminus and Regulus have been doing. We must not fight him on his own terms, Lucius. You must put a stop to this madness!'" (Livy).

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked him.

"I think Fabius is right, but there is nothing I can do. I cannot disobey the orders of the Senate and people of Rome. I'm caught between Scylla and Charybdis. If I refuse this command, I'll be dismissed in disgrace and prosecuted. I can only hope that Fabius is overestimating Hannibal. If I don't survive this coming battle and you do, Publius, you have my blessing to marry my daughter Aemilia Tertia when she comes of age; and, as my son Lucius is still in the *toga praetexta*, I commend my household to your care until he comes of age. I have made my will and have named you as my executor. I have filed it with the Vestals."

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, but if it does, I will do my utmost to fulfill this obligation. You have been very good to me.”

“Now, go get some sleep, Publius. We have a long day tomorrow.”

I was troubled and slept poorly on the night before our expedition to Apulia.

The next day Lucius Aemilius Paullus and Gaius Terentius Varro mobilized their legions, and we started toward Apulia. I rode in the vanguard with Paullus. Our party included such notables as the Marcus Minucius Rufus, who had been Fabius’s Master of Horse; Gaius Servilius Geminus, Consul the previous year; the Quaestors, Lucius Atilius and Lucius Furius Bibaculus; Quintus Fabius Maximus, the son of the Cunctator; and the Aedile Appius Claudius Pulcher. Those of my friends from the Campus Martius who had survived Trebia and Trasimene and who had not gone to Hispania were in our legions.

At night I shared a tent with seven other military tribunes. At nineteen, I was one of the youngest. The other tribune my age was my friend Gaius Laelius.

“Do you think we will defeat Hannibal?” he asked me.

“We certainly have him outnumbered, but there have been battles where a smaller force has overcome and annihilated a much larger force, such as the battle of Marathon. My father thinks Hannibal is a military genius, and when you’re dealing with someone like that, anything can happen.”

“Do you think, maybe, we are both going to die?”

“It’s quite possible.”

“Are you afraid?”

“I’m not so much afraid of death as of the pain from the wounds. I think we’ll welcome death if we are in enough pain.” In the dim light of the oil lamp, I could see Gaius’ frown.

“Well, if you don’t like my answers, Gaius, then stop asking me questions.”

After several days march, we reached the Aufidus River and set up camp just south of it. Hannibal’s camp was located a couple of miles to the east of ours. We also set up a smaller camp north of the river.

Several days passed during which there were some skirmishes but no battle. Our soldiers were in high spirits, and everyone was confident we would soon rid Italia of this menace, or I should say, everyone except Aemilius Paullus. I think I was the only one who knew the extent of his doubts. I had doubts of my own, but nothing prepared me for how utterly horrific this coming battle would be.

Very early on the morning of the battle we crossed the Aufidus and the occupants of both Roman camps assembled at some distance north of the river. Some men were left to guard each of the camps.

Our infantry was organized into maniples, *velites* and *hastati* in front, the more experienced *principes* behind them and the veteran *triarii* in reserve at the back. Consul Gaius Tarentius Varro had charge of the auxiliary cavalry on our left flank and Lucius Aemilius Paullus had command of the Roman Cavalry on our right flank. Our scouts reported that the enemy had some ten thousand cavalry compared to our six thousand, and I began to worry that we might be outflanked. The scene from the Battle of Ticinus kept running through my mind.

While we made our dispositions, Hannibal was rapidly deploying to the south of us with the Aufidus River to their backs. He put his Gallic and Hispanian troops in his van and his elite African troops on the flanks. The Gauls were naked from the waist up while the Hispanians wore white tunics bordered with purple. The Africans looked little different

from Romans because Hannibal had outfitted them with spolia captured at Trebia and Trasimene. He deployed his Numidian cavalry on his right flank facing Varro and his Hispanian cavalry on his left flank facing Paullus.

I was on the right flank with Paullus's cavalry. I heard the *bucina* and *cornu* sound, and a great shout arose from our soldiers. First there was skirmishing between our light armed soldiers and theirs; then, the main bulk of the *hastati* surged forward and began to engage the Gauls and Hispanians in Hannibal's van. Hannibal's Gauls and Hispanians retreated very slowly while the Roman van moved forward inexorably.

Our cavalry was attacked by Hannibal's Hispanian cavalry, and we were fighting at very close quarters. My father had started training me in sword fighting long before I took on the *toga virilis* and this was the day it paid off. I don't think I would have survived this battle if I had not been an expert swordsman. One after another, Hispanian horseman attacked me; one after another fell to my sword. I was soon spattered with blood from head to toe. To add to the discomfort, a strong wind blew and clouds of dust filled the air.

Once engaged with Hannibal's cavalry, I had very little sense of what was going on in the battle. All my efforts were expended on staying alive. After a time, I noticed some of our cavalry were dismounting. Consul Paullus had been struck by a stone from the sling of one of Hannibal's Balearic slingers. Although he was wearing a helmet, the impact must have done some damage because he was no longer able to ride his horse. He dismounted and those around him also dismounted. They surrounded him and fought to protect him. I wanted to join them, but I was accosted by an enemy horseman and immediately engaged in a fight to the death. We sparred for several minutes until I thrust my sword point into his neck and severed the jugular vein. Blood poured from his wound, and he fell from his horse. Then another enemy horseman attacked me, and I forgot all about Paullus.

After I had killed about a dozen Hispanian cavalrymen, their fellows began to be aware that I might be dangerous. As a result, they began avoiding me. I was only too glad for the respite and not eager to engage in more duels. I needed to catch my breath and rest my sword arm. The respite did not last long. I must have engaged in another half dozen confrontations. All around me Roman Cavalrymen were falling to the enemy's swords. Eventually the survivors fled the battlefield on their horses, and I went with them. You can't fight the enemy by yourself—that's just suicide. We gathered to confer and decide what to do.

The highest ranking among us, Appius Claudius Pulcher, said "It looks as though we have lost the day. The bulk of the infantry has been enveloped on all flanks by Hannibal's men. They cannot escape. Paullus is badly wounded and has told us to flee. Gneius Cornelius Lentulus is going to try to get to Rome and give the bad news to Fabius Maximus. We need to gather up all survivors and head to the nearest walled town—that will be Canusium to the southeast of here."

Some two thousand survivors took refuge in the village of Cannae, which was not walled, and they were soon captured by Hannibal's Numidian cavalry chief Maharbal. I later learned that Consul Varro escaped with some seventy horsemen and took refuge in Venusia, which was another walled town.

Canusium is a Greek speaking town which is one of the *socii*; it had been allied with Rome for nearly a hundred years. I was one of the first to arrive there, along with Appius Claudius, the younger Fabius Maximus, Gaius Octavius, Gaius Laelius, Lucius Publicius Bibulus, Publius Furius Philus, and Lucius Caecilius Metellus. Except for Appius Claudius, who was an Aedile, we were all military tribunes.

We were met by a woman named Busa who was from a rich and influential local family. "How many of you are there?" She asked Appius Claudius.

“I don’t know. But this is the only safe place for us, so we have been spreading the word for survivors of the battle to come here.”

“What if Hannibal attacks our city?”

“Then we will defend it any way we can; but it’s no easy task to besiege a city like this, and I suspect Hannibal has better things to do. Do you have weapons?”

“Yes, we will open our armory to you, and you can take what you like. I will get all of the women to bake bread and we can set up a hospital for your wounded in the Temple of Asclepius.”

Survivors began streaming into the city, and in a few days, we had gathered over ten thousand including four thousand foot soldiers and two hundred horse who had escaped from the larger camp after Hannibal demanded their surrender.

Busa assigned us quarters in the largest houses in the town. A wealthy merchant hosted me and nine others. Later arrivals would be housed in the temples or in more modest homes.

The matron of the household was very kind. “I can see that the lot of you have been to Hades and back today,” she said in Greek. “Take off your clothes and give them to my washer women. My man servants will clean your armor, and we will provide you clean water and cloths to wash and with some of my husband’s and son’s *himations* and undergarments until yours are clean and dried. We have bread, porridge, fruit, and wine for you in the dining room. It is too late in the day to slaughter a pig or a sheep, but tomorrow there will be meat.”

We were allowed to sleep upon the couches in the *andron*. It was well into the night before I went to bed, and I immediately fell into an exhausted sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, I felt like every muscle in my body was sore from the previous day’s exertions. Worse than my physical

discomfort was my grief. Lucius Aemilius Paullus, who had been like a father to me, was dead. Most of my boyhood friends were dead. And what would happen to my beloved Rome? What would happen to my mother and to Aemilia and Lucius and their mother if Hannibal should besiege Rome? All of them were now my direct responsibility.

Appius Claudius Pulcher called an assembly of the survivors. We met in the agora, and Appius and I were elected to supreme command by unanimous consent.

The next day Appius and I met with a few stalwart men to discuss what we should do and how we might come to the aid of Rome. Publius Furius Philus, the son of an ex-Consul by the same name who had served seven years before, said, "I don't know why we're even bothering to discuss this. Everyone knows that Rome is doomed. Marcus Caecilius Metellus is planning to go to Brundisium and hire some ships to take as many as want to go to one of the Hellenistic kingdoms, Macedonia, Seleucia, or Egypt and offer their services as mercenaries to the king. They are sitting around a table making their plans right now."

I was shocked and appalled. "How can they do that? Rome is our mother. You don't desert your mother in her hour of need! I'm for going to their meeting place and setting them straight. Who's coming with me?"

Everyone present nodded agreement, even Philus, and we went as a body to the place where Metellus was having his meeting. We burst in on them and I unsheathed my sword and proclaimed: "With sincerity of soul I swear that neither will I, myself, desert the cause of the Roman Republic, nor will I suffer any other citizen of Rome to desert it. If knowingly I violate my oath, then, O Jupiter, supremely great and good, may you visit my house, my family, and my fortune with perdition most horrible! I require you, Marcus Caecilius Metellus, and the rest of you who are present, to take this oath, and let the man who shall not take it be assured, that this sword is drawn against him!" (Livy).

Every one of them took the oath.

A few days later a messenger arrived from Venusia. He addressed the assembled survivors of the battle: “As you all know, we have suffered a massive defeat in battle at the hands of Hannibal. Consul Aemilius Paullus is dead, as are such renowned statesmen as Marcus Minucius Rufus, Gneius Servilius Geminus, Lucius Atilius and Lucius Furius Bibaculus. More than half of our military tribunes are unaccounted for. Consul Gaius Terentius Varro has set up temporary headquarters in Venusia. He will be coming here in a few days to bring all of you back to Rome. He feels it would be best to return in as strong a body as possible. All of you must be ready to travel on short notice. Anyone not returning will be considered a deserter. Any questions?”

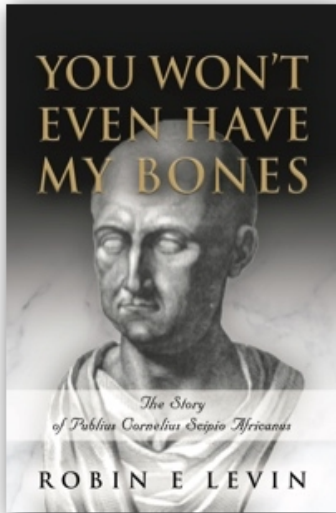
“Is Hannibal going to attack Rome?” asked Lucius Publicius Bibulus.

“We don’t know if or when he will march on Rome,” said the messenger. “Our spies say that he is on his way to Campania. We believe he is trying to make an alliance with Capua.”

“Has he offered us peace terms, and if so, will we accept them?” asked Gaius Octavius.

“He sent an envoy to Rome, but the Senate refused to admit him to the city,” said the messenger. “The Senators have vowed never to make peace with Hannibal on his terms. We will continue to fight to victory or death.”

There were some fifteen thousand survivors who returned to Rome. Hannibal had taken around ten thousand prisoners. Some fifty-five thousand of our original army of eighty thousand were dead, their bodies rotting on the field of Cannae.



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